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HISTORY AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

On Tuesday 10 May 1983 in the Guildhall of the City of London, Alexander Solzhenitsyn delivered the Templeton Address. It was a profoundly prophetic utterance. Not only does Solzhenitsyn look the part, but his words come with the 'Thus saith the Lord' of the genuine prophet. His theme was the great disasters and dangers of today, indeed of the whole of the twentieth century, and the prophetic word was 'Men have forgotten God - that is why all this has happened'.

The address was essentially a critique of recent history. It told of a twentieth century in which men adopted evil policies, easy options and short-term perspectives. The precipitating event was the First World War when Europe, blind to God, 'fell into a range of self-mutilation'. Later, the West deliberately turned its back on the agonies of Revolutionary Russia, ignored the dismemberment of Eastern Europe after 1945, and chose to evade its responsibility by sheltering under the 'nuclear umbrella'. And what underlay all this was a spiritual failure, the lack of 'a divine dimension', the substitution of 'the pursuit of material success' in place of 'the quest for worthy spiritual growth'. As he said:

"The failings of human consciousness, deprived of its divine dimension, have been a determining factor in all the major crimes of this century".

I do not suppose that any Christian can remain unmoved by Solzhenitsyn's words. It seems totally of a piece with the utterances of the Old Testament prophets, and it would be perfectly possible to gloss the key sentences with up to a dozen biblical citations. What, after all, is the theme 'Men have forgotten God - that is why all this has happened' but a latter day version of 'Because they forsook the Lord . . . therefore hath he brought all this evil upon them'. It also chimes in with the way in which Christians see history, as not only the record of God's dealing with men but the mechanism by which God acts in judgement and purpose. As a religion which asserts the action of a supreme being in the creating, continuance and final destiny of the universe in which we live, and also asserts that this supreme being is engaged in a redemptive dialogue with that universe and with mankind in particular, Christianity must be revealed in giving a meaning to history.

The *Times* editorial seemed to approve of at least the generality of Solzhenitsyn's address, but a historian must be more doubtful. Solzhenitsyn appears to have a decidedly romantic view of the past. He claims that:

"In its past Russia did know a time when the social ideal was not fame, or riches, or material success, but a pious way of life",

and he locates this time before the seventeenth century. But is he correct in saying this, and how do we know? He criticises the changes associated with Peter the Great as:

"favouring the economy, the state, and the military at the expense of the religious spirit and national life".

Perhaps, but it is hard to imagine the story of Russian land mass without a centralising effort by the Tsar; the probable alternative would have been Balkanisation. Solzhenitsyn's condemnation of the West for its failure to respond to the challenge of the Russian Civil War is equally emotional. It only has force if it is possible to suggest in some detail what the West should have attempted and how that could have been achieved. The way the prophet looks at history and the way the historian looks at it are quite distinct. In historical terms the Biblical Kingdom of Israel reached its apogee of political importance in the reign of King Omri who rates only ten verses in the Book of Kings and the damning: 'wrought evil in the eyes of the Lord'.

Confusion about the distinction between history and prophecy underlies much of the popular misunderstanding about the relationship between history and the Christian faith. Believers all too frequently assume - contrary to scriptural evidence - that divine purpose in history is clear. After all, was it not the case that God warned that he would give the Jews over to their enemies if they forsook him? Given that they did forsake God, the prophetic word seems obvious. Yet Jeremiah was a prophet commenting on events in a way opposed by the majority of prophets, and was recommending a course of action which it was politically impossible to follow. Prophecy, as the Bible insists, is a matter of spiritual discernment and divine experience; the word of the Lord 'comes'. This is not synonymous with studying history. If you like to put it this way, prophecy is a matter of inspiration; history of analysis.

Perhaps a modern analogy will help to establish the contrast. I am myself a strong advocate of national defence and of the pursuit of the reduction of international tensions, and the armaments which flow from those tensions, by the process of multilateral negotiation. I make no bones about saying, as a Christian, that such a course seems to me to be the most moral and Christ-like one to take in an immoral world. Equally, as a Christian and a historian I say that, on past evidence, this course appears to offer the best

hope for peace. But so, of course, did Egypt seem the safest refuge for the survivors of Jeremiah's Jerusalem - and they were wrong, and he had told them that they were wrong. The message of history and the message of prophecy were contradictory. I must, therefore, ask myself whether the illogical policy of one-sided nuclear disarmament might not be a prophetic word to me and my generation, despite the dictates of reason and historical experience. My current judgement on that is 'no', that Bruce Kent and his colleagues are, unconsciously, what the Bible terms 'lying prophets' who say 'peace and there is no peace'. Whether I am correct in this is however not the point here. What matters is the example. The allegedly prophetic word is different in kind from the avowedly historical and rational assessment. In the one there may be divine revelation; in the other is human wisdom. God reveals himself in history to the prophet, not to the historian.

Confusion between the role of the prophet and the role of the historian is compounded by widespread misunderstanding of what the historian does and does not do, can and cannot do. Two ideas are widespread. The first imagines the study of history to be concerned with the discovery and accumulation of factual data about the past, and the arrangement of such data into its proper and coherent pattern. Since events either did or did not happen, a completely successful piece of historical scholarship will be one which establishes the truth about the past once and for all. Although limitations of data may make this often no more than a goal of perfection, knowledge of the past can, in principle, be ultimate and final. To the question, 'Did William the Conqueror invade England in 1066?', the answer is an unqualified 'yes'.

The alternative point of view is urged by those who see the force of the qualification 'limitations of data'. Information about many past events and periods is, they urge, scarce and patchy. What is more, it is all suspect in the same way that we regard all contemporary documentation as suspect. Has the gas board read the meter correctly; is the policeman telling the truth about what happened; did the 1979 Conservative government plan to use unemployment to force down wages, as Newspaper A says, or was unemployment a consequence of earlier failure to control wages - see Newspaper B; in the election of June 1983, did Mrs. Thatcher 'cut and run' - or was she driven by newspaper speculation? In none of these cases do we use less than a pinch of salt, so why should our approach to the past be different? Furthermore, we know that accounts of past events differ - Mrs. Thatcher's version of the Falklands' campaign was quite different from that of Tam Daiyell - and personal prejudice and commitment does not diminish as events recede. The Catholic historian and the Protestant historian of the Reformation can appear to be writing about quite different experiences; for Halevy, Methodism in England saved the country from the tragedy of social revolution, while for E.P. Thompson, Methodism mediated industrial work discipline to the masses. Thus, it is argued, not only is history based on sources which are inherently

unreliable, but it reflects the viewpoint of the person who is writing it. The conclusion, therefore, is that a great deal of history - and certainly the more interesting part - is a matter of opinion. As Voltaire said, 'history is a myth which has been generally accepted'.

Neither the extreme 'factual' notion of what history is, nor the extreme 'speculative' interpretation coincides with what historians actually do. Historians are, in essence, engaged in the business of problem-solving on the basis of the proper collection and evaluation of data. In other words, what they do is cognate in kind with much of what is done in the higher echelons of the civil service or business. We do however have one distinction which is both an advantage and a disadvantage. Our material is final, the total of whatever evidence has survived from the past and *no more*. Not for us the luxury of calling for more data. The historian must accept that there will be cases in which he simply will not know. But, on the other hand, this gives him a great strength because he is basing his work on the reality of what is there. The ultimate in history is the evidence itself. Of course we can discuss meanings and interpretations - as one would in any problem-solving exercise - but this is a discussion of what *is* there, not an exchange of opinion and ignorance: does the evidence suggest that our economy is beginning to recover, or does it suggest the opposite; does the evidence suggest that protestantism did give rise to capitalism, or does it refute such a theory? The *data* of history are fixed, final and ultimate. When two colleagues go to the Public Record Office and call for the same file, they see the same documents; provided their technical skills are equal, they read the same words; they may argue about what it all means, but they will be arguing about what is *real*. Those who say that textual evidence is 'nothing but this' or 'nothing but that' - and the point is relevant to Biblical Studies as well as history - do not sufficiently appreciate the fact that, in the last resort, the texts themselves are our knowledge.

It is with the evidence that the historian begins. His first task is to assemble all the relevant materials and then to subject these to detailed technical criticism, assessing first of all their identity and status. That, of course, was the stage at which in the Spring of 1983, Lord Dacre's evaluation of the so-called 'Hitler Diaries' came unstuck: he was deceived and pressured into accepting the provenance of the documents and the authenticity of the handwriting, paper etc, where he should have made sure himself. Once he is certain of exactly what he has in front of him, and of its authenticity, the historian next proceeds to assess its implications and the relationships within his material. Had the 'Hitler Diaries' been genuine, scholars would have gone frantically to work, investigating how they were composed, what was their purpose, how the material in them related to other known Hitler material, and so forth. Finally historians go on to construct a story and explanation of the past on the basis of the detailed assessment which they have undertaken, relating it to existing narratives and interpretations.

Again, had the 'Hitler Diaries' been genuine, after about six months one could have expected preliminary accounts to begin to appear showing how the new material modified our understanding of the man, the events, and the issues - first in particular detailed episodes and later in general accounts of the Nazi years.

The historian's pattern of work is, therefore, akin to that of the maker of jigsaw puzzles. The first task is to tip out the box and make sure that any obviously extraneous pieces are set aside - an important exercise, simple for the jig-saw puzzler but, as Lord Dacre and many others know to their cost, one fraught with pitfalls for the historian. The next stage is to sort the pieces and to get some idea of what they are and where they might fit. Then it becomes possible to see how individual pieces join together, then small sections, later those less-defined features which lie between the more obvious patterns. And so one proceeds until an overall design appears. Of course, as puzzle enthusiasts will know, progress does not always follow what is the logical sequence. The appearance of a local pattern can lead to one area being established before another. The same is true of history, where very detailed examination of one obviously important episode or problem can go alongside deep ignorance elsewhere. A jig-saw can also be started with one known or expected feature, and built up from there. So with history. There is no definitive picture of the past to work from, but we do have in the secondary literature a record of what previous history puzzlers made of it. Very often, indeed - life being short - we have to take for granted those parts of the puzzle on which there is an established consensus. It is dangerous, but one has to start somewhere. But however the detail of our research may depart from the classic progression, the logic of what we do is there, unbroken - collection, technical assessment, evaluation, positioning and interpretation.

Like all illustrations, the jig-saw analogy is not completely exact. In the first place, a puzzler can usually establish whether he has the right solution by consulting the picture on the box, even in those advanced puzzles where the pieces have all but identical shapes and can be assembled in different ways. In history, however, the pieces can very often be put together in different ways and there is no box to refer to. The only test of what is the right order is the neatness and congruence of the fit - just as it is in those very advanced puzzles which give you no picture at all. We need to remember, too, that the jig-saw *does* have a pattern built into it, where history may not, or if it does, we may be ignorant of it, or it may be beyond our understanding. The historian thus has often to begin with a possible pattern in mind, and look to see whether it will make sense of the past. The task is further complicated by the fact that important human pieces must be missing. Despite attempts at writing psychological history - was Hitler a psychopath or Luther the victim of chronic constipation - we can never know all that is going on in the minds and hearts of people in the past. Add to that, gaps produced by loss or destruction of

material, and (especially with the oral material) the failure to make any adequate record in the first place; compound this, in the case of recent history, by a weight of evidence which compels a selective approach, and it is easy to see how the methodology I have outlined is difficult to apply in the field, or, rather, in the library, and why as materials are discovered and historical approaches change, the puzzle of the past has to be remade again and again.

There is an obvious connection between this methodology and that of other areas in life. I have already instanced problem-solving in government and industry, but the same can be said of work in the natural sciences. It is not fully the so-called 'scientific method' since the distinctive feature of that is experimentation. I cannot re-fight the Battle of Waterloo to determine whether Napoleon was right when he claimed that he did defeat the Duke of Wellington only to fall himself to a fresh Prussian army which his generals had allowed through. But the progress of the historian from observation through evaluation to interpretation or hypothesis is one which is basic to science, and many scientists will have a fellow-feeling when it comes to the contrast between the cool theory and the actual application of the method in day-to-day research.

All this may seem some distance away from the theme of 'History and the Christian Faith', but I think not. Only by knowing the limitations of the historical process can we avoid the pitfalls. Take, for example, the historical basis for Christianity. My own view - and I will state it bluntly - is that without its historical basis, Christianity is a delusion. It might still contain glimpses of ultimate metaphysical realities but these would be a sediment left when the soda-water of religious fizz had been thrown away. To give but two brief examples. I cannot see that the central rite of Christianity, the Lord's Supper, the Communion, the Eucharist, the Mass, whatever its label, has any meaning at all unless the Last Supper and Crucifixion took place broadly as the New Testament records. If Christ did not say 'Father forgive them, they know not what they do', all we have is a fiction of self-sacrifice on a par with that of Sidney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities* and far less than many real life examples.

So Christianity must be based on history, but what can the historian say about it? The answer is, more than might be imagined but less than is often expected. I am not an ancient historian, but my reading of the immediate experts and an application of general historical criteria and method, convince me that the existence of Christ, his execution in Judaea between 26 and 37 AD and the survival of his followers, can all be established from hostile sources in a way which is congruent with the story as told from the Christian side, and at the level of proof which is appropriate for such an event in the ancient world. Christian sources, of course, need to be treated with much more caution and with a recognition, both of the

problem of authenticity, and of the danger that belief in a truth about something or somebody can affect the way in which the evidence of the event or person is preserved. But that said, there is every reason to accept that the New Testament faithfully preserves the record of the life of Christ of those 'nearest to the facts and whose life and outlook had been moulded by them'.

Thus far historical method does bring you, but it cannot go further. In particular it cannot help at all with the supernatural, and particularly with the problems of the miraculous. The reason for this is not that miracles are improbable - if they were not, they would not be miracles - nor that they are alien to science which, in the later twentieth century, is fully aware of the factor of randomness. The reason is that miracles cannot be fitted into the historical method which we have been discussing. The historian examines the sources. He finds that they allege a miracle. His response is to scrutinise the documents to attempt to discover what happened and why men claimed a supernatural event. In many cases he will have no problem in deciding that the miraculous element was in the eye of the beholder; it is not hard to imagine how Halley's comet, appearing as it did at Easter 1066, could be represented as a divine warning of the disasters which would follow King Harold's sacrilegious breaking of the oath he had taken to Duke William of Normandy in 1064. At other times the historian will be left with the unexpected or the apparently inexplicable. But this is as far as he can go; he cannot postulate explanations beyond human experience. History, in just the same way as science, is an autonomous, self-authenticating discipline with a range of explanations which can be demonstrated by its methodology; if the method cannot demonstrate the explanation, it is inadmissible. 'God' is no more a permitted answer to the historian's question: 'how did Germany lose the Second World War?' than it is to the scientific question: 'how do flowers grow?'. The historian can no more prove miracles than the scientist can find the soul.

Take, for example, the central miracle of the Christian faith, the Resurrection. The historian can say a great deal about this which is important. He can point to the strong arguments that Christ's tomb was empty, and to the unsatisfactory nature of naturalistic explanations for this; he can point to the early and vigorous proclamation of the Resurrection in the very place where Christ had been crucified; he can justly claim that there is an overwhelming case for accepting that something so far unexplained did take place. But he cannot positively claim a miracle. He has no criteria to establish that Christ did rise from the dead. Even supposing that we had an eye-witness to the event, there would still be no way in which we could be sure that what was reported was not the result of error, hallucination or pious credulity. The historian can only guard against these dangers by judging against general experience, but there is no general experience in the case of a miracle. Miracles are unique events and there are no comparisons by which the historian can establish that they occur. He cannot exclude them, he may even note an unexplained blank in the story, but

anything more is impossible. Other Christians may condemn him for adhering to what they see as 'secularistic assumptions', but this only displays their ignorance of what history is about. They should consider the alternative. If the historian who is a Christian should admit miracle into his account, by what reason should another scholar not admit extra-terrestrial influences and little green men from Mars? Integrity demands from the historian the answer 'I cannot know'

The strict limitations which determine the sorts of statement which historians may legitimately make, are not only important when considering the historicity of Jesus Christ. In the Bible, the Incarnation is only ever understood as part of a story of divine redemptive purpose which started with the fall of primitive man and will achieve final consummation at 'the end of the age'. The life and work of our Lord is the great lens which concentrates the rays of God's love before Christ - BC - and beams this out over all periods and places so that time itself becomes AD - the year of the Lord. But although this is something which is taking place in history - something, indeed, which is the supreme and central theme of history - it still remains unidentifiable to the historian. There is no way in which the Christian historian can interpret events from a divine point of view. He is simply not in that position. He is in the position of men before the eighteenth century who lived as we do in a world of electro-magnetic and nuclear force but who had no awareness that these forces were at work.

Here, perhaps, it may be objected that men before the Scientific Revolution still had the evidence of natural phenomena around them, and that the historian must, equally, have the evidence before him of God's action in history. Certainly, but the conceptual frame work of the pre-scientific world restricted men to explanations within their own immediate terms, and the student of history, as we have seen, is similarly restricted to explanations which are within, not outside, his conceptual scheme. Nor would it be fair to put this down to the blindness of historians' eyes, on the argument that pre-scientific man could have known if he had looked, and they likewise. Any 'Historical Revolution' we can conceive of, would be the reverse of the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. That was based on the acceptance of the autonomy of science and the authority of the experimental method; for the historian to begin to admit the supernatural into his explanations there would have to be an interruption of autonomy from outside, in other words by divine revelation. There is no way in which God's plan for the world can be established by the canons of history, any more than miracle can be - or, for that matter, a scientific proof of divine creation. We have reached a position of modern scholarship which has been fundamental to the resolution of the religion-versus-science debate. Knowledge exists on different levels. Scientific explanation tells of a painting in terms of pigment, light patterns and the distribution of paint layers; an aesthetic explanation is in terms of subject matter, purpose and

impact. To unlock each level of meaning you need a different key, and they are not interchangeable. In precisely the same way, God's knowledge of the march of his purpose and my knowledge of the march of history are infinitely different.

It is this which makes the Christian who is a historian cringe when his fellow believers claim to discern the signs of the end of the world - although if he is wise he would be advised to keep his doubts to himself! It must be that the 'signs of Christ's coming' are visible but the historian as historian cannot know. The acknowledged signs are mostly general in character, and wars and rumours of wars are not a peculiarity of the later twentieth century, nor likewise famine, moral decadence or even 'men's hearts failing them for fear'. To be convinced of the need for caution, one has only to remember widespread Christian conviction on earlier occasions that the prophetic signs were being fulfilled - for example, as the year 1000 AD approached. The same is true even when a specific event is alleged such as the post-war return of the Jews to Palestine. This was the third time that the Jews had returned to their homeland, and neither the returns in the sixth and fifth centuries BC nor that of 1948 have been the total restorations envisaged by the prophets. It is also right to point out that among a minority of Jews and a much larger number of Christian supporters was a desire to see prophecy fulfilled so that the episode had in it something of a deliberate human attempt to make God's promises come true. This is not, and I stress this, a denial that 'God is working his purpose out', simply a declaration that being a historian gives no professional qualification to identify that action. We are back to the distinction between the historian and the prophet.

You may, of course, be saying to yourself: 'Well, granted that the historian is not a prophet, does that really allow him to avoid making any attempt at all to perceive God's action in history'? If he cannot observe directly or prove divine participation in events, it is still hard to accept that he can offer no suggestion at all as to what the consequences of divine activity might be. A scientist may not bring God into his hypotheses, but he is able to suggest ways in which God can be understood to be acting in natural phenomena and what the phenomena of nature suggest about God. A very strong tradition in Christian thinking and in individual religious experience would tell us that the involvement of God in human history is direct and detailed. From the words of God about the fall of the sparrow, to the popular song 'He's got the whole world in his hand', Christians have stressed the sovereign command of God over history which they have found so clearly put by the prophets of the Old Testament. Surely something of that should be visible in, or at least congruent with history!

The feeling is understandable, but the historian must point out that there are great difficulties in answering such a call. It is not that it is incredible that God could exercise an immediate

monitoring role in history - the arrival of computers has put paid to that old rationalist argument - nor the admittedly difficult problem of human free will in those circumstances. The difficulty is that if all history is the will of God, then the control of God in history ceases to have any meaning. We are firmly impaled on the horn of fatalism. And we have a moral problem too. If the proper model for history is a chess board on which God moves and disposes of the pieces in order to win the game, every move he makes must be assumed to be part of the game-plan, and this must include the destruction of the righteous as well as the sinners. Nor are we out of the wood if instead we see God's action more as that of a steersman, directing and over-ruling events. That leads to determinism. If God wills the present (even as a stage in directing the future), and also willed the sequence of past events, history is a matter of chronological inevitability.

We have, moreover, to remember how much our ideas owe to the narrow Biblical concern with the Jewish nation. It would certainly be wrong to suggest that the Old Testament shows God only concerned to further his Chosen People. But it is that which sets the whole approach. He is portrayed as disposing of the nations at large, but Israel is his *chosen*. Take away this Old testament context, and one is forced to ask about the whole validity of looking for God's purpose in national history at all. We are told that Paul said to the Athenians that:

"God made of one, every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed seasons and the bound of their habitations".

But are we to take this literally to mean that God has a political map of the world with a chronology for the rise and fall of political communities? And what is a nation? Are we to assume that Ireland is now two nations but that if the Border disappeared this would be because God intended it to be one, and if so, how do we avoid returning to the position that whatever happens to be most recent history is God's will? On this argument, God intended the people of the Low Countries to comprise one nation in 1576, to become two in 1579, to have fluctuating borders in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to be absorbed in the 1790s into a third nation, France, although the Netherlands temporarily appear as a nation for the four years 1806-1810. In 1814 the divine will freed a combined Dutch-Belgium nation from France until 1836, when two separate nations again became what God intended.

We need to remember too that the idea of history as a divinely-ordered scenario raises even more difficult problems once we go outside the Judaeo-Christian context. Before the coming of the Europeans, the civilisations of Central and South America were entirely isolated from those of the Old World. Given those circumstances, in what terms can we conceive of a divine purpose in that history? And without an answer to that, how do we interpret

divine purpose in the comparatively little we do know about Pre-Columbian history? We reach much the same position, even in better-documented lands, if we consider the implication of the fact that divine action in history is supremely directed to the final triumph of God. It follows, then, that within the life span of a single individual or even longer, there may be no significance to observe. And once the scale of magnification goes beyond what can be resolved by the human eye one is left with what may be a truth about God, but is hardly a truth for me.

The idea that the events of history are moving inexorably under the direct control of God to its final dénouement thus presents real difficulties to the historian. How are these difficulties to be resolved? The answer is, painfully and not completely, but I think some progress can be achieved. Clearly we are never going to end up with a complete blueprint of divine activity and we can never presume that divine sovereignty will not allow God to act in ways which are entirely unexpected. The essence of both the Incarnation and the Parousia is the unique intervention of God in human history. But the issue for the historian - and what he has to explain to those who are not historians - is the way in which we are to convey of a normal divine activity in history. Part of that problem, I would suggest, is that we approach the issue from a wrong position, trying to project forward from the New Testament a vision of God's activity which is derived from the Old, with God disposing the nations to his will, and especially to the development of his Chosen People. Is that actually the New Testament emphasis? I think not. What we find is Paul's proclamation of a new Israel which smashes through all barriers of race, education, class and gender. The idea is taken up in *The Revelation* in the vision of the Bride of Christ, while Peter writes of 'a holy nation, a people for God's own possession', using one noun, 'nation', which traditionally meant 'Gentiles' and another noun, 'people', which was especially associated with Jewish identity - Gentile and Jew together making a new Chosen Race. This new Israel continues and transcends the divine purpose of the Old Israel and that must mean that we should henceforward be looking for God's primary initiative in the world in the advance of the Christian community, 'the manifestation of the Sons of God'.

For the historian to turn from the alleged macro-purposes of God which he is in no position to observe, to examine the micro-activity of God in his people is at once to make progress. It is not easy. We are not tracing ecclesiastical developments which are well evidenced in the archives, but the story of real religion which is manifested in the hearts of men and has its full record in 'the Lamb's book of life'. Nevertheless, Christian experience does produce documentation in this world, and with documentation the historian at least has something to work on. Wills, diaries, letters, charities, art, music, all witness to Christian perception, indicate spiritual values and proclaim the faith we lived by - or denied. It is hard to quantify spirituality, but the more we become familiar with the tools of social anthropology, the deeper and

richer our awareness of the growth of the kingdom will become. It will, as K.S. Latourette saw very clearly, be a story of earthen vessels, cracked, chipped and dirty, in which the treasure of the spirit is nevertheless found. But it is a story which the historian can tell. He can proclaim God in history.

It must, however, be evident that in getting thus far I have still only offered a partial solution to the question: 'how does God work in history?' This formulation will explain his *purpose* in the period since the life, death and resurrection of Christ, but there remains that macro-area where, as I have argued, ideas of purpose do not seem very helpful. What can we say there?

We need, I believe, to recognise that history as presented in the Bible is not just a story of God pursuing a grand plan of human and global redemption. It also operates according to moral principles. One has only to remember that text beloved of moral reformers that 'righteousness exalts a nation but sin is a reproach to all peoples'. No-one will need to be convinced of the weight of the evidence in both Old and New Testaments in favour of the view that God's sovereignty is deeply concerned with morality. Since this is so, I would suggest that here is an alternative to the idea of a detailed divine manipulation of history which, at a macro-level, had presented us with so much difficulty. Perhaps our formulation of God's action in history should be in three parts - first in miracle, second in a sovereign direction of the growth of the believing church, and third, in providential action, to preserve and enforce morality in corporate human behaviour. Such a formulation would certainly reflect the fact that God's redemptive purpose is consequential on his moral character and the moral character of the world he has created. It would equally meet the objection to the 'chess-board' hypothesis that since we cannot see the board, the moves of the game must, to all intents and purposes, appear arbitrary.

The formulation, I would suggest, also has the advantage that it is possible to conceive historically of a way in which morality does operate in history. The Christian historian is not left, as he is with ideas of macro-purpose, in the difficult position of asserting divine action at the same time as admitting that it is impossible to say what that divine activity is or might be. And the gain which that would bring should not be underestimated. The 'chess-board' hypothesis imposes on the Christian historian a piece of moral lengerdemain, all too like the schoolboy definition of faith as 'the power to believe to be true what we know to be false'!

The assertion that it is possible to conceive historically of a way in which morality operates in the world is a high claim to make. How can it be justified? It must, of course, be clear, both from scripture and from experience, that judgement in this life does not operate as an immediate system of sin and reciprocal punishment. Indeed, if we were inclined to think of that as the right

formulation we would run immediately into difficulties. Would it really seem convincing that divine sovereignty intrudes into the complexity of human affairs to punish this wrongdoer or that; is that not rather like the man who pushed a screwdriver into a watch in order to alter the hands? What is more, the evil very often do not appear to be punished at all. They die in their beds; it is the good who die in misery or on a cross.

For most people - including the Psalmist and other Biblical writers such a fact can only be squared with God's justice in a future life. But is that the only form of retribution? Is it not the case that evil carries with it its own punishment? The perception was put most powerfully by the sixteenth century poet and courtier Thomas Wyatt who wrote of men who set their hearts on satisfaction:

"No other pain pray I for them to be
But when the rage doth lead them from the right,
That looking backward, virtue they may see
Even as she is, so goodly fair and bright;
And whilst they clasp their lusts in arms across,
Grant them, good Lord, as thou mayst of they might,
To fret inward for losing such a loss".

Desire brings its own penalty. The perception has also clear support in scripture. Paul specifically speaks of the ungodly whom the Creator has abandoned to the consequences of their ungodliness, and the notion of 'dead in trespasses and sins' must imply the same - 'eternal death' must be much a real, current condition as 'eternal life!' We may also discern the same implication in the condemnation of the Pharisees by Christ as 'whited sepulchres' and in the spiritual burden which the self-righteous Pharisee took home with him - unlike the penitent publican.

If I am correct in suggesting that retribution is in part inherent in wrongdoing and not merely something that will take place at some future bar of judgement, the way is open to an understanding of the sovereign judgement of God in human affairs which escapes many of the traps which beset simpler versions of crime and punishment. God can be seen not as making interventionist raids into history but as having built into his human creation a series of norms and consequences which act as moral regulators. If a nation acts in a proud and exploitive manner, God has so decreed it that the nation will have to bear the consequences of its pride and self-seeking. It is not hard to find examples from Scripture which support this view, notably from Isaiah and Amos, nor examples from history itself. The disasters which befell Germany at the latter part of the 1939-45 war can easily be understood as a consequence of Hitlerite militarism. The argument is akin to the way in which we understand God's regulating action in the natural world. If I fall off a cliff, I shall be killed - not because God has specifically arranged my death, but because he has built the principle of gravity into the universe and I have defied it. Indeed, it may be that we

should see the pattern of natural consequence and the working of consequence in human affairs as a continuum of divine providence which maintains the equilibrium of existence.

One problem which needs to be fitted into this hypothesis is the fact that punishment of the kind I have described is very often delayed beyond the generation responsible. But that, of course, is something which is well attested by scripture. The punishment of David fell on a later generation and there are many other examples. The perception of the Old Testament that the sins of the fathers are visited on generations yet unborn, is difficult for modern individualistic egalitarian minds to take. We are far more at home with the vision of Ezekiel that every man should die for his own sin. But suppose we take the 'sins of the fathers' notion literally. Do we not find examples of this in history? Is it not true to say that racial tension in Britain and the U.S.A. is the consequence of the evil of the slave trade? Is it too far-fetched to see it also as punishment for it? Is Solzhenitsyn not correct on at least some of his history when he sees the tragedies of the years since 1920 as a consequence of the sins of 1914? Europe has been very thoroughly punished for the *hubris* and adventurism of that era. Can we not imagine the sorrows of Ireland today as the latest chapter in the penalty for centuries of exploitation and neglect?

As that last example shows, we have also to recognise that individual innocence is no barrier to the operation of judgement in history. That, of course, is inherent in the fathers and children idea, and it is suggested also by the notion of punishment being worked out in the operation of sin itself. Once evil has been sown it will bear fruit. Or, to alter the metaphor, once the toxin of sin has been loosed into the bloodstream it will liberate the poison somewhere. So good men, and quiet, humble communities go down before the brutality of the conqueror and the quiet and humble descendants of that conqueror may find themselves falling prey to aggressors whom they have never injured. And the connection may often be many times more complicated. Of course, it may be objected that such a contingent interpretation of judgement involves a highly-attenuated view of morality; a reviewer once remarked that it allowed me 'to side-step the problem of evil in a way that is too neat to be true!' The reply must be that we have to start with what actually takes place in history. Since the world is God's world, history must, if no more, at least be what he allows to happen, and contingent judgement can plausibly be argued where direct retribution rarely can be. And is there a greater moral problem in the idea of moral infection in human history than in physical infection or the operation of natural law? And is it not precisely congruent with the prophets who show Jewish pride provoking Assyrian invasion, Assyrian military frightfulness being punished by the revolt of Babylon, and Babylonian imperialism falling before the even greater power of Persia?

It is important, certainly, that such a formulation should not be extended into a doctrine of *Karma* - inescapable cause and effect. If God's judgement operates in history, so must his grace, and again the idea of a continuum of providence allows us to see a way in which such grace could operate. Butterfield pointed out that time after time in history, tragedy has had a quite unexpected beneficial outcome. And no Christian can but marvel at the infinite resilience of the human spirit; man, though fallen, simply will not lie down and abandon himself to fate and chance. This is not to argue that 'progress' is the law of history, simply that evil has, in the long term, been sufficiently often confounded to make it possible that this is grace, not luck. Thus the argument for a world of consequences is not for a kind of disguised inevitability in history. The suggestion, rather, is that just as historians are familiar with political and economic cause and effect, so we may well argue for moral cause and effect.

The purpose of this paper has been to range widely over the relationship between history and the Christian faith, and it certainly has ranged widely. It has touched on the relation between historical study and prophecy, on the nature of historical method and the limitations of that method in commenting on the Christian Faith. It has raised deep questions about the action of God in history, noting the problems which lurk in certain common formulations and the possible advantages of alternative approaches. But there is one final interface between history and Christianity which must be raised, and this is the relationship between a Christian commitment and the practice of history.

Once again we need to clear away popular misconceptions. The test of good history is often supposed to be objectivity, neutrality, or the most frequently used term, lack of bias. By that test a Christian is ruled out; he is committed. The only hope for him is to suppress his convictions while he pursues his scholarship. Value judgements and good history simply do not mix. But, let us pause. Are we really saying that in writing of the Jewish Holocaust the historian should preserve a strict impartiality? Certainly he must work with professional integrity, but is he obliged to become a eunuch? And if he does examine the episode with clinical detachment will he not be accepting the attitude of an Eichmann for whom the exercise was no more than a technical problem of disposing of x million carcasses? And do we want history written by a man who can suppress the sickness in the stomach which comes from a serious inspection of the loathsome episode?

We must also doubt whether any historian actually could be as cold and calculating as objectivity requires in this case, and even if he could apparently be so, he would have a whole range of sub-conscious responses which he may not even be aware of. The truth is that every historian, not just the Christian, comes to a subject with a framework of values recognised and unrecognised. Indeed,

without such a framework, it is impossible to be a historian. By what criteria otherwise do you assess your evidence and, even more, arrive at your interpretation? Certainly a historian must be faithful to his evidence, diligent in his application, as self-critical as possible, and willing to listen to criticism and alternative interpretations. But he has no obligation to bend over backwards to assume an artificial neutrality which he cannot achieve any more than others can. We must, indeed, go further. The life which the historian breathes into the past is the life of his own experience and imagination. He depends on an empathy between himself and the past, and empathy is a thing of warmth and commitment. A neutral detachment, in other words, will make him less able to bring the past to life. Sterilised history is sterile.

Two consequences flow from this. First, the Christian embarking on, or engaged in, the study of history has no cause to conceal his faith or operate some form of intellectual apartheid between what he believes on Sundays and what he practises on Mondays. Certainly he is constrained by the methodology of the discipline, which as we have seen, limits the answers it is proper for him to give. But his personal commitment no more invalidates him as a historian than the various commitments or rejections of commitment characteristic of all other historians. The second consequence is that there is such a thing as Christian history - not the history of Christianity nor history written from a teleological point of view, but history written on Christian presumptions. A history which shows men and women responding to their environment as creatures fallen, but made in the image of God. A moral history, full of passionate awareness of injustice, of evil, of war, of apathy and ignorance. A history of hope, sensitive to the strivings of men after divinity and to their capacity for virtue. As we pick up our pens we must always have in mind that we are telling the story of the creature God made, to live in the world God made, in the way God intended.