

Historical Event and Philosophical Truth

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The interest in the study of history, in order to see a plan or a purpose behind or in it, is of recent date, in India at least. This lack of interest in history as revealing a pattern, however vague, has been attributed to a lack of the historical sense in our own countrymen. We, in India, have not tried to formulate what in the West is called a philosophy of history. This is rather strange, because we are known or at least reputed to be a people of a reflective nature, ever willing to speculate on the deeper problems of life.

But even in the West, the writing and study of history have developed without leaning overmuch on philosophy. There were, of course, writers like Herodotus and Plato who advanced speculative ideas—that history was a vast Ferris wheel of ups and downs, a succession of cycles or spirals. Thucydides set out to explain how and why his method of writing history differed from those of his predecessors. We find methodological hints and moral or philosophical presuppositions in the works of Sallust, Livy, Tacitus and Josephus. But we do not find anywhere in the ancient world a philosophy of history, either in the speculative sense, as there were philosophies of nature, man and society; or in the analytic sense, as there were logical enquiries into the nature of knowledge in science, ethics, politics, or art. Plato's *Critias* is possibly an attempt to construct a philosophy of history analogous to his philosophy of nature in the *Timaeus*, but it does not get beyond a fragmentary beginning. There is no treatise which deals with the logic of historical knowledge as, for instance, Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* does with the logic of science.

Dr. Meyerhoff in his *Philosophy of History in our Time* says, 'We often hear it said that Israel and Christianity were responsible for the birth of a historical consciousness in the Western world. This is true in one sense but misleading in another. Other ancient peoples, beside the Hebrews, kept historical records and produced historico-religious narratives'. He goes on to say, 'Israel and Christianity, therefore, did not awaken the ancient world from its unhistorical slumber. What they

did was (a) to charge history with a religious significance which it had not had previously and (b) to read the progression of history as a clue to the design and direction imposed upon it by God's will. The historical world assumed a new significance because certain events in it, such as Israel's covenant with God or the temporal existence of Jesus, were imbued with a crucial symbolic meaning. These events and others were interpreted as part of an over-all pattern of history which exhibited a meaningful movement and direction from its obscure origins in the Book of Genesis to a redemptive eschatological goal in or beyond history. In both these respects, the Jewish and Christian tradition expressed a new type of historical consciousness which has become the characteristic conception of history in the modern world.'

We may question whether Dr. Meyerhoff has given sufficient emphasis to the centrality of the Incarnation. To say that 'certain events in history were imbued with a crucial symbolic meaning' is to over-simplify the whole problem. 'The temporal existence of Jesus', which Dr. Meyerhoff refers to, is not just an unimportant, trivial event. It constitutes the very basis of the Christian's faith. Nay even before that, the birth of Jesus itself is not just another event. It is the 'cataclysmic action of God in history'. It is God breaking through into history. It is the Word becoming flesh and dwelling with us. It is this belief which has given a new historical consciousness to the world and it is because of this that the conception of history in the West has become 'characteristic'.

Karl Popper has criticized the attempt to discern a Christian 'meaning' in history as a whole. In his book, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, he writes, 'for although there is hardly anything in the New Testament to support this doctrine, it is often considered a part of the Christian dogma that God reveals Himself in history: that history had a meaning; and that its meaning is the purpose of God. Thus historicism is held to be a necessary element of religion. But I do not admit this. I contend that this view is pure idolatry and superstition—not only from the point of view of a rationalist or a humanist but from the Christian point of view itself'. According to Popper this theistic historicism looks upon history as a lengthy Shakespearean play and its writer is God. He contends that such a belief is 'pure blasphemy', that the play was written 'by Professors of history under the supervision of Generals and Dictators, and not by God'.

Popper does, however, admit that 'our Western aims and ends, humanitarianism, freedom, equality, we owe to the influence of Christianity'. He does not clarify what it is in the influence of Christianity which has changed the whole world. He has nothing to say about the person of Christ, except to draw support from Karl Barth, who writes in his *Credo* that 'the Neo-Protestant doctrine of the revelations of God in history

is inadmissible and an encroachment upon the kingly office of Christ,' that 'Christ does not conquer, He does not triumph, He has no success, He achieved nothing except His Crucifixion'. Popper, however, accepts that 'by His success after His death, Christ's unsuccessful life on earth was finally revealed to mankind as the greatest spiritual victory'. Of course, he has nothing to say about the Resurrection which turned the Disciples into Apostles. He feels that what matters to Christianity is not the historical deeds of the powerful Roman conquerors but (to use a phrase of Kierkegaard's) 'what a few fishermen have given the world'. We are thus led back to the facts of the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of Christ which lay behind the testimony of these fishermen.

II

The Incarnation is a unique historical fact. As such it must be accepted and fitted into the pattern which the historian seeks to discern *without distortion*. The Incarnation is a hard reality itself from which there is no escape. But it is a historical fact in another sense of the term also. It is unique, not only in the sense that nothing like it had happened before, nor has anything like it happened since; nor will it happen in the future. It stands by itself towering over time, yet in time.

We are told by several philosophers that facts like the Incarnation have parallels in other civilizations also. In her book, *Philosophies of History*, Dr. G. E. Cairns has developed and illustrated the theme that 'the appearance of a "wonder child" as a redeemer is of central importance in these (ancient East) eschatologies'. These alleged parallels are familiar to students of the History of Religions, and no student of philosophy can afford to ignore them. Yet it is equally true that no student of philosophy can ignore the tremendous impact that the belief of Christians in the Incarnation has had upon individual and even national life.

The kind of speculation we find elsewhere is not, in fact, what the Christian understands by the Incarnation. It has for us a meaning completely different from what others mean by it or something similar to it. It means for us that God has come into history, a history of His own creation, as a fulfilment of His own plan and purpose. Even granting, which the present writer does not, that there are similar ideas in other civilizations, about the 'wonder child' or the 'redeemer', how do the advocates of these similarities explain the life, suffering, crucifixion, death and resurrection of our Lord? Are there similarities for these also? It is not the Incarnation alone on which we take our stand, but the totality of the whole life, death and resurrection. Time and again people have been compared to Christ. But these people were Christ-like only. They were not the 'Christ'. They might have lived and died like Christ.

But it is only a Christian who can boast of the resurrection of his Lord.

It is the impact which the total personality of Christ had and still has upon his followers that makes Christianity the unique religion that it is. The Disciples were Disciples only up to the crucifixion. With all the failings of the Disciples—one of them betrayed him and another denied him thrice—they became Apostles only after the Resurrection, willing to die for the newly awakened faith in Him. For them to live was Christ and to die was gain. A mere figment of the imagination cannot inspire people to lay down their lives for what they believed to be a fact. Even St. Paul, who had probably only heard about the Resurrection after his conversion on the road to Damascus, says, 'If Christ has not risen, then our faith is in vain.'

On the other hand, we must admit that philosophical truth demands an impartial, objective scrutiny of the nature of reality. What do we mean by objectivity as regards the study of a historical fact? The historical fact is 'past actuality'. An event has happened in the past. The only way in which we can know the fact is by indirect evidence through memory, physical remains, verbal reports and written documents. The plethora of material at the disposal of the historian necessitates his selection and evaluation. He necessarily selects those facts only which fulfil his purpose. In the case of the Gospels, therefore, we must remind ourselves that the writers of the synoptic Gospels and the Acts were not biographers. They were influenced by the personality of Christ Himself, they had lived and moved along with Him. What they have written is to be considered in this light. To them Jesus was the Messiah, the Saviour, the Redeemer, and it is from this point of view that they have written the Gospels. Moreover, as Dr. A. E. Taylor writes, in his *The Faith of a Moralist*, 'we are bound in honesty to admit that we really know much less about the Master's life than might be supposed at first sight or than we could wish'. 'It is not too much to say that there never has been, and never will be a trustworthy life of Jesus Christ; we have no materials for such a work outside the Gospels, and the purpose of the evangelists was not that of a biographer.'

Recognizing our limitations, we have to carry on our enquiry within the framework of the Gospels only, and try constantly to be as objective as is humanly possible. 'The Gospel narrative, like all records of human doings', says A. E. Taylor, 'permit of very different interpretations. Even the moral perfection of our Lord's character cannot be established beyond all possible question by an appeal to the records'. 'The actual record *might* without logical absurdity be read as the story of a well-meaning, but gracious, self-deluded sentimental idealist'. But it can also be read as a conviction in full harmony with such conceptions of divine nature and the divine way with men as a sound philosophy leads us to entertain. The surrender to such

a conviction is definitely an act of walking by 'faith' and not by 'sight'.

III

We made a reference at the beginning of this paper to a lack of attempt on the part of our countrymen to formulate a philosophy of history, i.e. to try to see a meaning in history. There are, however, two philosophers who have tried to formulate what in a loose sense may be called a philosophy of history, viz. Dr. Radhakrishnan and Sri Aurobindo. We have used the phrase 'in a loose sense' because these two philosophers have not formulated a philosophy of history in the sense in which we understand it, i.e. an attempt to see a meaning, plan, purpose or goal in human history. It is more with cosmic history that these two philosophers are mainly concerned.

Sri Aurobindo sees cosmic history as the process of Involution and Evolution of the Infinite Spirit. Aurobindo's characteristically Hindu concept of the Infinite is that of a Being whose reality is manifested only in a partial manner by the cosmos; there is an infinite depth unmanifested. The basic cosmic historical process is not caused through any kind of necessity. It occurs simply because the Infinite One in delight or play (*lila*) manifests a richly creative activity which is a revelation of an aspect of Himself in the Many, the multiple world of concrete existence. The Involution of the Infinite is its descent into the lowest level of Being, Matter. Matter is also called the inconscient level. Then evolution begins and the inconscient rises to the sub-conscient or life level of being. Next evolves the self-conscious or mental level, the human. Beyond this and the final goal of the evolutionary process is the gnostic level, the supramental; but this level has not yet been reached. In defence of his theory of human history, Aurobindo appeals to Western empirical evolutionary theories of man and nature.

Dr. Grace E. Cairns finds that 'this is a one-cycle view of history' and that 'in its main outline it resembles St. Augustine's philosophy of history. In both there is a procession of the world from the Infinite. The Fall is compared to Aurobindo's 'descent into matter'. But at this point the similarity ends. The Fall in Augustine is due to the pride of God's created beings, whereas Aurobindo's 'descent into matter' is due to *lila* or the delight or the play of the Infinite.

There is a danger here for the Christian inasmuch as he might very easily fall into the trap of believing that since there are similarities in the philosophy of Aurobindo and St. Augustine, it does not really matter much what he believes. It is, however, well to remember that the similarities are superficial whereas the differences are essential. For one thing, the descent of the Infinite into matter is the result of *lila*. There is no necessity involved in it. In Augustine's Fall there is a distinct ethical

element. The fall is due to the sin of human pride. Since human beings have erred and come short of the glory of God, it is not within their right to ask for forgiveness. The forgiveness must come from the One who has been offended, not from the offender himself. Hence the logical necessity of a Saviour. Dr. Grace Cairns says, 'The Infinite descends to us from above, we strive through an integral yoga from below; this interplay between the divine and the human resembles Augustine's idea of the grace of God coming to man to redeem him for life in the city of God'. This is hardly what we understand by the grace of God. Grace, for us, is God's free gift to man not because man deserves it but only because he does not deserve it; not because man aspires for it. In any case the whole purpose in Aurobindo is of ushering in the age of the new Gnostic Being. There is not atonement, simply because there is no sin in the Fall. Since there is no sin, there is no forgiveness and no need for a saviour. Dr. Cairns is not justified in assuming that there is any similarity between the Christian idea of grace and Aurobindo's idea of the Infinite's descent into matter. In fact there is no comparison anywhere between the two. The Christian believes that it is the

'. . . loving wisdom of our God,
When all was sin and shame;
A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came.'

This 'loving wisdom of God' is nowhere to be found in Aurobindo's idea of history. The most that we might be able to find, not in Aurobindo but in the *Gita*, is that 'whenever evil increases in the world, God comes down in it to destroy evil'. This God again is not a personal God, he becomes a person only after his *Avatar* (coming down), not before. The idea of a suffering and dying God is conspicuous by its absence in Hindu thought. There is, of course, the instance of Siva when he drinks (*halahal*) deadly poison which comes out as a result of the churning of the cosmic ocean. But Siva does not perish even after taking the poison. He cannot; he is God and no God can die. Only his throat becomes blue and henceforward he is called *Nilkanth*, 'Blue-throated one'. It is an exhibition of tremendous power, such as only God can exhibit, but it is power to save oneself, not to save others. About Christ, on the other hand, the mob said, 'he saved others, himself he cannot save'. This whole idea of God sacrificing His only Son for the sins of the world is alien to Hindu thought.

IV

Dr. Radhakrishnan, like Aurobindo, offers a metaphysical system grounded in a typically Indian idealism, but with full and critical knowledge of the best achievements in Western philosophy. Both of them think that Indian thought is in many

ways superior to that of the West because of the major emphasis of Indian philosophy upon the life of spirit as man's goal. They believe that in Western thought intellect rather than spirit is given the place of the highest category.

Dr. Radhakrishnan posits being as the primal reality: being is the Absolute, the source of all that exists, although it is not itself any existent thing like an animal or an individual: The Absolute is pure spirit and freedom. Why the Absolute chose to realize the particular possibility which is this world is to us a mystery which we can only acknowledge as the 'will of God'. The Absolute has two aspects: the impersonal, timeless, spaceless Brahman in eternal calm and peace; the personal *Ishvara* which is the Absolute in action as the Lord and creator. The Absolute, says Radhakrishnan, has chosen to enter 'into the world of non-spirit to realize one of the infinite possibilities that exist potentially in spirit'. 'History is not a cyclic movement. It is full of new things because God works in it, reveals Himself in it'. 'The splendour of the spirit, which in Greek philosophy was identified with the transcendental and timeless world of Ideals, or in Christian thought is reserved for the divine supernatural sphere, is making use of natural forces in the historical world. Spirit creates the world and controls its history by a process of *perpetual incarnation*. Spirit is working in matter, that matter may serve the spirit' (*The Religion of the Spirit and the World's Need*). The goal of man's life according to Dr. Radhakrishnan is *mukti* or liberation into the spiritual plane through prayer and meditation which opens the self to communion with the eternal spirit. The meaning of history, for Dr. Radhakrishnan, 'is to make all men prophets, to establish a kingdom of free spirits'. The goal of the individual is *mukhti*, but the ultimate freedom cannot be attained until the entire human race achieves the level of spirit'.

From all this it is clear that in Dr. Radhakrishnan also there is still no idea of sin and salvation. Why the Absolute 'chose to realize the particular possibility which is this world' is a mystery at the worst and the 'will of God' at the best. Dr. Radhakrishnan also uses the Absolute and God as synonymous and interchangeable terms, the impersonal, sometimes the personal, *Ishvara*. One is not sure which 'God' Dr. Radhakrishnan refers to when he speaks of Him as revealing Himself in history.

The reason for which the Absolute or God or *Ishvara* has chosen to enter into the world of non-spirit is also not very clear. One fails to understand what Dr. Radhakrishnan means when he says that the Absolute in entering into history 'is realizing one of its infinite possibilities'. In another place he says, '*Ishvara* is Absolute in conscious active delight, pouring out its powers and qualities'. This looks like Aurobindo's Infinite's 'descent into matter' out of the sheer *lila* or sport (delight). Radhakrishnan further says, 'Man's role in history is to find liberation into the spiritual plane'. The human will

is free but is subject to the mechanical forces of *karma* when dominated by selfish motivation. But it is still man's will which is to achieve liberation. There is hardly any room here for God to mediate and to bring about this liberation. Again, why man should seek liberation is not quite clear. It may be to avoid rebirth. But if *karma* is accumulated in every birth, such a liberation seems hardly possible. Of course, Dr. Radhakrishnan says that 'saints and sages have achieved liberation', but such a liberation can hardly be called liberation since the individually liberated person has to wait until the entire human race achieves the level of spirit. 'Complete liberation implies not only harmony within the self but also harmony with the environment, complete freedom is therefore impossible in an imperfect world'. 'The highest product of cosmic evolution is spiritual freedom, slowly disclosing itself. Spirit creates the world and controls its destiny by a process of perpetual incarnation'. This perpetual incarnation is quite in keeping with the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Only in the case of man, it is rebirth; in the case of the Absolute it is reincarnation. Those who find a resemblance between Radhakrishnan's ideas of history and the Christian idea of history do so on a very superficial study of Radhakrishnan's philosophy and of Christian religion. The Christian idea of incarnation is that God entered into history once for all in the person of Christ. This is the consummation of history which cannot be repeated. Of course there is to be a second coming but it is not reincarnation. The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us. It will not become flesh again. In fact there is no necessity for Him to do so. In the birth, life, suffering and death, and resurrection of Christ, history has reached its culmination and consummation. In this case at least history will not repeat itself. Attempting to find resemblances with the cataclysmic action of God in history implies a kind of universalism of religions; to say nothing of a very shallow study of both Christianity and of the other faiths.

V

The Bible, in the case of the Christian, is the only resort which he has to fall back upon. This is due to the peculiar problem the Christian faces. On the one hand he has to take into account what the philosophers have to say about history and on the other hand he has to accept what the Bible says. Faced with a dilemma like this, the tendency of most of us is to accept either only the philosophical method or to become dogmatic about the truth of the Bible. Of course, it can be contended that the Bible does not supply us with a ready-made philosophy of life. In fact it is not the business of the Bible to do so. Yet a different method has to be employed to study Biblical history. The reasons for the use of such a method are stated by Dr. Bernard Ramm in his article on 'Biblical Faith

and History' in *Christianity Today* (March 1, 1963). The reasons given are:

- (a) Biblical history is a mixed history. Some events fall *within* the scope of scientific historiography, others *outside*. This is due to the special character of Biblical history in which God is represented as historical Actor and Agent. Scientific historiography does not accept the phrase, 'God acts in history'. Thus all events of Biblical history which involve God as Actor or Agent are outside the scope of scientific historiography. 'This', says Dr. Ramm, 'ought to be conceded by theologian and historian alike'. A pious uncritical faith, therefore, has no right to supernaturalize all of Biblical history. Nor can we, on the other hand, deny the event-character of all events which represent God as Actor and Agent.
- (b) Biblical history is interpreted history. Biblical history is that which is written with a divine interpretation. This includes both the events *within* and those *without* scientific historiography. The life of Christ, which is the product of the Act and Agency of God, is known only through divine interpretation. That Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate is a historical fact. But it is also a hard datum of Biblical history that on the cross he died for the sins of the world. Both the historical fact and the revealed interpretation are firm realities of Biblical history.
- (c) Biblical history is theological and eschatological history. If we postulate creation, we must also postulate a purpose. If we postulate a redemptive history, we must postulate a redemptive conclusion. Biblical history is also a history of hope. It is not only a history of hope for the future. God acts in the *present* according to the Biblical history of the past. Redemptive history calls for my believing response, my obedience to this Lord of history and for my personal involvement in the on-going of history.
- (d) Biblical history is Christological history. The redemptive activity of Yahweh flows towards Christ. John Marsh writes some telling lines in affirming that the Christian finds the transcendent clue of history in the Life, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ (*A Handbook of Theology*, p. 109). Karl Lowith says that Augustine saw the meaning of the end and the meaning of the beginning in the central event of the Advent of Jesus Christ (*Meaning in History*, p. 169).

(e) Biblical history is credible history. There are, of course, problems of Biblical history and we do not ignore these. But we must remind ourselves that the methods of historiography of the ancient world differ widely from ours. Therefore, we need not be unduly alarmed when we come across events recorded which seem strange to us. Von Hoffman (*Interpreting the Bible*) is right in saying that we don't have any Holy History unless it has solid historical props under it. These main props remain unaffected in spite of the advance of historical and critical knowledge of the scriptures.

Though the revealed interpretation of history has achieved a new relevance through the obvious inadequacies of modern interpretations, we as Christians must be careful in presenting the Christian view without also, at the same time, accepting the errors which have crept into the interpretation. Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr says, 'It is necessary to subject Christian interpretations of life and history to constant re-examination in order to detect the errors which become compounded with its truth' (*Faith and History*, p. 196). The love of Christ is a symbol of the norm of man's historical existence. Man must realize himself not within himself but in a reasonable and loving relation to his fellow-men.

Herein lies the answer to the question why we should accept the Christian interpretation of history, rather than, say, the Marxist. It is, that the Christian way will make a practical difference in the history of the individual and of mankind. The kind of life which follows from accepting the Christian way becomes the means by which the attitude can be judged. Why we accept one view rather than another is a matter of commitment to an attitude and a way of life.

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