

Meaning of History

MOTI LAL PANDIT*

The fundamental basis of Christianity is its recognition of the reality of history. It does not see history in a cyclical fashion, nor does it view it as illusory. Christian hope pierces the reality of history. The Christian idea of history can only be grasped if we have some understanding about the Christian doctrine of creation. We shall, therefore, give a brief account of creation.

Creation as an Act of God's Free Will

Creation is a free act of God ; it is not a necessary act in the sense that God's act of creation was determined by some outer force or by inner necessity. God was free either to create the universe or not to create it. Hence, the Bible refutes that doctrine which maintains that the world was a necessary act of God. Those who maintain this theory, that the world is a mere occurrence in the divine process of evolution, conclude that creation is a necessary act of God. There are others who maintain that God, since he is love, needs to communicate his love. Therefore, the very nature of love made God create rational creatures, so that he might share his love with them. To maintain that the creation of the world was a necessary act of God would ascribe eternity to the world. But the biblical understanding of creation is quite opposite to such views. The Bible maintains that the creation of the world is a free act of God. Since God is self-sufficient, he cannot be said to be a Being in whom necessity exists. 'Can a man be profitable unto God, as he that is wise may be profitable unto himself ? Is it any pleasure to the Almighty, that thou art righteous ?'¹

Since God is all-perfect in himself, he needs nothing for his happiness. He is Being precisely because 'of him, and through him, and to him are all things.'²

Creation in Time

When the Bible begins the creation account with the statement 'In the beginning God created the heaven and earth', it is affirming

* Mr. Pandit is a member of the TRACI Community, engaged in research and writing.

¹ Job 22:2-3; cf. Acts 17:25.

² Rom. 11:36.

the fact that the world is not beginningless ; that is, it has a beginning. The phrase ‘in the beginning’ signifies that the world as well as time are created existences : ‘And, thou Lord, in the beginning, has laid the foundation of the earth ; and the heavens are the works of thine hands.’³ ‘Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.’⁴

The world and time have a temporal existence, because they have a beginning. Creation is not a-temporal. Hence creation exists in history, whereas God is trans-historical in the sense that he transcends space and time. Eternity cannot be ascribed to creation, for it is contingent. The God of the Bible is a transcendent God, who exists out of, and before, the world.

Creation out of Nothing

When we say that God created the world out of nothing, we do not mean that it had no cause. The cause of the world is the will of God. The ‘out of nothing’ are the eternal possibilities of God’s will. These possibilities are the source of the world’s actualities. Gen. 1:1 gives us an account of the work of creation. The description of creation, as given in the scriptures, leaves no room for an emanation theory or for a theory of the eternity of substance. ‘By the word of the Lord were the heavens made ; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth.’⁵ St. Paul expresses the same idea when he writes : ‘Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which appear.’⁶ We understand the mystery of creation in the light of faith.

The precise meaning of *creatio ex nihilo* is that God, who determines everything, is determined by nothing. ‘Creation out of nothing’ does not mean that there once was *nothing* from which God formed the world. Such ideas are the sum of all mythical thinking. No one, not even *nothingness*, had any share in the creation of the world. Before the creation of the universe God and his Word alone existed. Christians accept creation as posited by God. The Word which created the world is the same Word who reveals to us the truth that the universe has been created.

Goal of Creation

When we say that creation took place through the Word, we do not mean that the Word is merely an instrumental cause. The very

³ Heb. 1:10 ; cf. Matt. 19:4.

⁴ Ps. 90:2.

⁵ Ps. 33:6 ; cf. Gen. 1:5.

⁶ Heb. 11:3 ; cf. Rom. 4:7 ; Neh. 9:6.

goal of creation is contained in the Word by which God creates. In other words, creation exists because God wills it. Creation is not simply the work of God's omnipotence, but of his holy love. In this holy love God wills to be glorified in his creation ; as the God of love he wills to give himself to the *other*. God wills to glorify himself in that, that which he gives is received in love and freedom. The very revelation of his love is the revelation of his purpose in creation. In the Word is this purpose of creation revealed. Creation came into being through the Word, who became flesh in Jesus ; and it is through the Word that God reveals his love, and in doing so, he also reveals the final end of the world. The Incarnate Word himself is the goal of the world : ‘That in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth.’⁷ Jesus Christ is the end of creation, because it has been created through him, in him, and for him. In short, the purpose of the world is in God. In it God wills his glory to be glorified, and in it he wills to bring man, through his self-disclosure in Christ, into fellowship with himself. We may, therefore, say the fundamental purpose of the world is the Kingdom of God.⁸

Man as an Historical Being

Christianity sees man basically as an historical being, and sees it in the Old Testament clearly testified.⁹ The linear concept of time is clearly biblical. Abraham made history because he obeyed God's commands as well as trusting his commands. It is Christianity which is responsible for eradicating the belief in historical determinism. Man, in the Christian context, is not simply the object of history, but the subject of history. Biblical faith does not share the belief of the Greeks in a sort of false dichotomy between heaven and earth ; rather it speaks of a distinction between the two.¹⁰

The historical horizon is present in the Bible in the very creation account. The creation account of the world suggests that the world has been created by God as an historical world. The Bible is always aware of the fact that the world as it is has been achieved empirically, that is, from that which is available to human perception. The history which is contained in the scriptures is the history of man in relation to God.

The historical horizon of the Bible concerns itself with the fact of human history as a whole. The Bible does not simply speak of Abraham's descendants, that is, of a particular racial type of people, but of the offspring of Adam. Although the particular history, that is

⁷ Eph. 1:10.

⁸ Cf. Is. 43:7 ; 60:21 ; 61:3 ; Ezek. 36:22 ; Lk. 2:14 ; Rom. 9:17.

⁹ Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History : The Myth of the Eternal Return*, (New York, 1949).

¹⁰ Cf. Col. 1:13 ; Rom. 12:1-2.

the history of God's revelation, is set in Israel, yet it is put within the framework of world-history.

From the very beginning the Bible regards man as an historical being, because he not only lives in the world, but also lives in a human community. God created man that he might subject the earth and name the rest of creation.¹¹ The historicity of man is expressed in the fact that all men move towards one goal, which God has intended for them.¹² All the nations have a share in the Messianic goal for which Israel has been chosen.¹³ The universal goal, intended by God, reaches its final point in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, Parousia, and Resurrection, and the End of the World. What was first only given to the Israelites is now freed by Jesus Christ for all nations. Jesus Christ is the Saviour of mankind, because he has come to free and save all men. Whatever currents there are in history have to merge in one goal : the Kingdom of God. In the very proclamation of Christ, history and humanity are seen to be one.

In this proclamation the goal of history is based on the purpose of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ : 'Having made known to us the mystery of his will according to his pleasures, which he purposed in him unto a dispensation of the fullness of time, to sum up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens, and the things upon the earth.'¹⁴

The singleness of human history has been disclosed to us in Jesus Christ, the Crucified. The Cross expresses the inner meaning of history, which consists in the Kingdom of God, and is intended for the whole universe.¹⁵

The God of the Bible is the God of history, for he reveals himself in mighty acts. His greatest act in history is his intervention, through the living Word, in the history of men. Jesus Christ is the revelation of history from the very beginning. The whole of history bears witness to Christ.¹⁶

The whole movement and meaning of history is contained in the phrase 'the fullness of time', which means that the historical movement has reached the point whereby God reveals the meaning of history through his Word. Therefore, history as such tends towards Christ. Whatever development there is in history, it is meant by God as a preparation for that which he will give us in Christ. If we look at history in the light of Christ, then history is a time of promise and preparation. Therefore, the whole historical process has to be understood from an eschatological point of view : a hope oriented towards the eternal fulfilment in Christ Jesus.

¹¹ Gen. 2:19.

¹² See 2nd Isaiah.

¹³ Is. 2:33 ff.; 49:6; 60:3.

¹⁴ Eph. 1:9.

¹⁵ Eph. 1:9-11.

¹⁶ Jn. 5:39.

History in Time

As far as man's temporality is concerned, he is bound up by the historical process. But the one who is born in Christ transcends all temporal processes of time, and therefore of history, because

you have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in the festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel.¹⁷

The ultimate consummation of history is to be found in the 'heavenly Jerusalem', because she is the mother of us all.¹⁸ But she is also the assembly of all the first-born. It is from this Jerusalem that all the streams of history flow forth.

Adam and Eve, who were protected in heaven by their innocence, were soon to form contact with disruption. When this first human pair were in their innocent state, they belonged to the same order as the 'assembly of the first-born'. All these hosts and angels possess the vocation of transcending time,¹⁹ for God chose them 'before the foundation of the world, holy and blameless before him'. This state of being signifies presence in eternity.

All the angels as well as Adam are in heaven, because they have been chosen in Christ, and redeemed in him. The 'last Adam' is on earth because he has been given the time-transcending task of reunion.²⁰ This last Adam bled for the eternal redemption.²¹

The movement of time is contained in the last Adam, who is the Alpha and Omega of all times, and who eradicates everything through the process of time and death. Time is transcended in Christ not only simply as 'over', 'yet' or 'before'; time is transcended in such manner that time is contained in the Christ-event. Time is transcended in the event of incarnation, death and resurrection. The coming down of the Son into the eternally 'beneath' of the earth, in order to go upwards into the eternally 'above',²² is the measure of vertical time.

The Word, by becoming flesh, that is, by becoming present in time, brings plenitude into a void by projecting it into the future time.

¹⁷ Heb. 12:22-24.

¹⁸ Gal. 4:26.

¹⁹ Cf. Eph. 1:13-14.

²⁰ Cf. 1 Cor. 15:44 ff.

²¹ Heb. 9:12.

²² Eph. 4:10.

Christ's incarnation does not destroy the present form of time ; it makes the root of emptiness, that is, of sin, a thing of the past. This is the meaning of God's descent into the 'underworld'.

That which is of the past is not chosen by God ; it is evil. This being alienation, it cannot turn back, and therefore ends in darkness.²³ That which is not completely lost can be brought back. If Israel repents, she will be restored to her original condition.²⁴ However, we must keep in mind that the 'future of God', by descending into the stream of time, is not swept away. Although God is in time, that he may suffer and die, he is eternity in himself. God, by incarnating himself, brings eternity into time. This does not mean that temporality has been transformed into eternity. Time retains the temporality of that which is to come.

Today is the present of vertical salvation in time, which is suspended over the horizontal now. This 'today'²⁵ can be understood only when we transfer our hearts to that 'where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal'.²⁶ Hence time and history are reversed in the sense that man now is renewed in the practice of God's love ; it is in this practice of love that the heavenly Jerusalem lives.

History was reversed in time by the grace of God in Christ. However, Christ is not a principle, but God-man.²⁷ The Word, by descending downwards, entered into the realm of sinful time, which is characterised by vanity. The futility of time did not only affect Christ's life and work, but, being obedient unto death, he descended to the abyss of time. He achieved the reversal of the whole historical time by taking upon himself the total passage of time of the past. Thus both the creation time and sinful time, through the grace of God, become the instruments of the manifestation of eternal life. The incarnation, therefore, has given a new dimension to history, in that history is now made a vessel for the manifestation of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we state that Christ's presence in time-history has to be viewed from the perspective of incarnation, in that he always *is*. 'Before Abraham was, I am.'²⁸ The presence of Christ in time means that eternity has been planted in the heart of time. Time in itself runs towards death, towards nothingness. This presence of Christ in the working of history is a freedom which cannot

²³ Matt. 8:12.

²⁴ Jer. 15:19.

²⁵ Heb. 3:7 ; 4:7 ; cf. 2 Cor. 4:2 ; Is. 49:8.

²⁶ Matt. 6:20.

²⁷ 1 Tim. 2:5.

²⁸ Jn. 8:58 ; cf. Jn. 8:24 ; 8:28 ; 13:19.

be comprehended ; it is freedom in love, in which he ‘poured out’ and ‘gave’ his being in sacrifice.²⁹ Christ’s sacrifice disposes the sinner’s past through forgiveness of sins. He places the sinner in a new present time. At the same time, Christ, through his own death, disposes of his past through the resurrection to ‘take his life again’.³⁰

Thus the Kingdom of God is on its journey. Historical time presupposes that that journey is towards a land which is new. In its journey the Kingdom of God is gathering the harvest. It is this dimension of hope for the eternal which makes history, within the Christian perspective, meaningful.

Christian faith fills the nothingness of the present with the future of eternity in such a way that the present moment of time is not abrogated. Christian faith shows the void of the present in history, because of the ‘fullness of time’ which is promised to it in Christ. Christ, through his resurrection, has given an eternal foundation to temporal history. This vision of history is given to us in the revelation of the Word of God.

One who has been able to see that there is no resurrection without Gethsemane, no understanding of God’s love without the cross, has reached the end of history. Such a person is not seeking hope ; he looks at the silent halo of the Word ‘as the lightening comes from the east and shines as far as the west’.³¹

Faith alone can hope, because, in the process of time, it grasps its fulfilment. Faith projects itself towards that goal which has already been reached.³² Faith does not fly from time into an eternal moment ; it exists in time and grasps the whole in time. The mission of faith unfolds itself with the unfolding of time. And this mission is fulfilled in prayer : ‘Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’ It is through faith that we know : ‘Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed ; the night is far gone, the day is at hand.’³³ The Christian doctrine of history has to be understood in terms of salvation.

²⁹ Lk. 22:19-20.

³⁰ Jn. 10:18.

³¹ Matt. 24:27.

³² Phil. 3:12-13.

³³ Rom. 13:11-12.