

Models of Historical Interpretation

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Every text has a context. Every vista has a viewpoint. As C. Gregg Singer contends: “It is impossible to understand completely the history of a nation apart from the philosophies and ideologies which lie at the heart of its intellectual life.”¹ What this means, as Richard Weaver has aptly expressed it, is that “ideas have consequences.”²

Various definitions of history reflect the role of ideas and presuppositions. Napoleon, a product of French Enlightenment rationalism, once described history as “a pack of lies agreed upon.” James Joyce voiced even darker sentiments by remarking that “history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.” Both views start with the observer himself, reflecting the idea of man's *autonomy*.³

For the Christian and the Jew, by contrast, history cannot be understood apart from God's self-disclosure as its author. History is a record of God's dealings with man and the rest of creation. Thus, having an author, history also has a direction and purpose. The Christian refers to God's superintending role as His Providence, reflecting the idea of *telos*, or purposefulness.

From a temporal perspective, history displays a dual aspect.

First, there is an objective side to history. In seeking the facts of history, a historian most often encounters two problems. They revolve around questions of *reliability*, such as accuracy and veracity or truthfulness, and questions of *selectivity*, such as personal or cultural bias, value judgments, and presuppositions. Concerning the objective factors that help shape history, D. W. Bebbington writes that “the historian has no direct access to the past. He stands beyond a barrier of time Facts take place once for all and cannot be recovered afterwards in their full integrity.”⁴

1 C. Gregg Singer, *A Theological Interpretation of American History*, revised ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1981 [1964]), p. 1.

2 Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948).

3 On the “myths of autonomy and teleology”, see J. M. Roberts, *The Triumph of the West* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985), pp. 36-37.

4 D. W. Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian View* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p. 11.

Second, history also has a subjective side. Since interpretation and fact interpenetrate, the same questions about reliability, selectivity, and evidence must be raised in the process of interpreting the significance or meaning of events. Here we must consider what Bebbington calls the problem of the historian himself: “Our concepts determine which ‘facts’ we single out for attention.... Our concepts even determine the language in which we state the facts.... To write a value-free account of the past is beyond the historian's power.”⁵

During the brief war between Great Britain and Argentina in the early 1980s, for example, the American press reflected a typical English-speaking bias by calling the disputed islands the Falklands rather than the Malvinas. The typical American nominalist might reply: What's in a name?⁶ Just ask the residents of a former Yugoslav republic who are quarreling with Greece over title to the name of Macedonia. Ask anyone who has lost a lawsuit over copyright infringement, including the former producers of IC Cola.⁷

Inescapable Concepts

Bias may indeed be unavoidable, but it is still useful to put our assumptions to the test. Here we will test the assumption that “ideas have consequences” by examining and evaluating general models of historical interpretation,⁸ some of which have given rise to fully developed philosophies of history. Historians rarely state their presuppositions, but these may be discerned from the methods they use, the facts they cite, and the conclusions they draw.

But it is useful, first, to begin at an even more basic level with a model drawn from the work of R. J. Rushdoony, who contends that our presuppositions—despite all their variety—must still be formulated within and consequently conform in some way to a larger, God-given intellectual framework. Rushdoony maintains that human nature is such that man cannot escape understanding some basic concepts built into Creation. Although they may be distorted or downplayed, these *inescapable concepts*, as he calls them, raise questions that must be answered in any society or culture.⁹

5 Ibid., p. 12.

6 The schism in medieval Scholastic philosophy between the realists, who held that universals have an objective existence, and the nominalists, who held that universals or abstract concepts are mere names, is discussed in Weaver, op. cit., p. 3.

7 The author himself is quite aware that he would not be permitted under current trademark regulations to produce luggage under his family name, even though the name has been used by his family longer than Schwayder Brothers has manufactured suitcases.

8 Each of these is discussed in Bebbington, op. cit., pp. 17-20. Some of the illustrations used are drawn from two works by R. J. Rushdoony: Rousas John Rushdoony, *The One and the Many: Studies in the Philosophy of Order and Ultimacy* (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1978), and Rousas J. Rushdoony, *World History Notes* (author, 1974).

9 The original names given to these concepts have, in some cases, been changed partly to show their interdependence more readily. The appendix brings together excerpts from three of Rushdoony's works in their original form.

1. First comes the question of *sovereignty*: What is the ultimate power or governing authority? More simply stated: Who is in charge? If people deny the sovereignty of God, they are apt to find their answer in the state, the individual self, historical necessity, or impersonal natural forces. The point is that they will vest it somewhere.

The question of sovereignty is a foundational issue that embraces all the others. It is prior to the others because it is a question about the nature of reality itself. Once the locus of sovereignty has been established, we may address the other questions, which deal with the relationship of means and ends, truth and consequences, causes and effects. As a reality question, it raises ethical as well as practical issues: Who or what creates that reality or controls the circumstances, establishes the rules or standards, initiates the action or sets the agenda, devises the appropriate procedures, determines the outcome, and judges success or failure? Although sovereignty is a question about ultimate things, it is usefully applied to mundane concerns. This may be illustrated by using some examples from constitutional politics.

Centralization and Decentralization During the formative years of the United States, rival assumptions about or claims to sovereignty threatened to shatter the constitutional union. Some contended that the source of power in the federal system was the states or the people of those states. Others believed it to be the American people collectively. Some pointed to the specific provisions of the Constitution while others sought to adapt it to changing circumstances. The resulting argument over the legitimate exercise was finally settled by war in favor of a more highly centralized national political system.

The push and pull between centripetal and centrifugal tendencies may be seen everywhere. To some extent, international organizations such as the European Economic Community and the United Nations assert claims to ultimacy. On the other hand, the Anglo-American tradition of local self-government remains important. Here and there local governments show considerable initiative. Totalitarian dictatorships such as the Soviet Union are giving way and permitting new accommodations between competing interests. Russia is now struggling with the problem of decentralization, as is the now fragmented Yugoslavia.

The One and the Many This tug of war between the One and the Many takes many forms: individuals versus groups, unity versus diversity, private goods versus the public interest.

Law is a reflection of the religion, morals, and culture of the community. The formative principles of the original American political, moral, and religious culture include the value of individuality, self-government, integrity of character, the claims of conscience, limited government under the rule of law, local initiative, and a voluntary unity or consensus based on common values.¹⁰

10 Rosalie J. Slater, *Teaching and Learning America's Christian History* (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1965).

2. What then is the goal or object of the exercise of this power? What are the benefits? In business, politics, and law, what *ends* are being sought? What purposes and whose purposes are being sought?

At bottom, these are questions of value. Here Rushdoony uses the term *salvation* or religion. But in a broad sense it is the whole question of ends: our vision of the good life, health, wealth, or salvation. Once again, the way we answer the question reflects our view of reality and, as we shall see, truth. Is history moving inevitably toward some final resolution, as Christians believe and, in a different way, Marxists? Is life simply a struggle for survival (Herbert Spencer)? A will to power (Friedrich Nietzsche)? Is its great object to eat and not be eaten? Is it “the war of all against all”, as depicted by Thomas Hobbes? It is part of our human character to seek a purpose in life.

3. If there is a goal, how do we get there? If there are ends, what are the appropriate *means*? These are practical issues.

Human beings act according to some kind of game plan, set of blueprints, or rational method. If ends represent our vision of “the good life”, means refer to the whole ensemble of our ways of doing things. But even “the best laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft a-gley [go often awry]”, as Robert Burns wrote. In part, the reason for this is that our plans are never entirely our own. By the using the term *predestination*, Rushdoony asserts the priority of God's plans. Thomas Sowell has spoken in a similar way of the “constrained vision”, which emphasizes the imperfection of human institutions.

4. Then there is the question of how we know what we think we know and how we respond to the claims that consciousness makes upon us? Being aware, we should beware. This is a matter of judgment. Here we must consider the rules of evidence. What standard or measure do we have for determining *truth*, justice, or morality?

In philosophy, this question is dealt with in epistemology, the theory of knowledge. It raises the issue of *infallibility*, understanding, or discernment because again and again we must entrust our lives to people and circumstances that are beyond our control. After all, what do we *really* know? Errors in judgment often prove fatal, and yet, whatever the risks, we must act. It is a question of whom we trust, to whom we may turn as a court of last resort. Indeed, the concept of truth also raises moral questions about personal character and conscience that apply equally to those who exercise authority and those who acknowledge it. This concept points straight to the question of consequences and raises the issue of responsibility.

5. Whether we heed the truth, or violate it, there are *consequences*. Once we have weighed the evidence, or been weighed ourselves, what is the verdict? What are the costs or the benefits of the actions we take or neglect to take? In the case of costs, who bears or suffers them? In other words, who pays the bill and, just as importantly, who should pay it?

Here we are dealing with applied ethics as it relates to the means and ends we choose. We are always faced with the necessity of making judgments and the demand that we do justice. In law, we talk about *liability*. In business administration we talk about accountability.

Very often this last question brings us back full circle to the first: “Who is in charge?” In other words: “Where does the buck stop?” As president, Harry Truman had a sign on his desk that said “the buck stops here.” It was an implicit claim to sovereignty. Although Truman erred by claiming too much authority, the opposite error of claiming too little is just as prevalent. When we refuse to take responsibility for our sins of commission and omission we tacitly agree with Cain, who said: “Am I my brother's keeper?:”

Such questions must be answered by every political, legal, philosophical, and ethical system. To repeat Richard Weaver: “Ideas have consequences.” These questions will be raised repeatedly, though usually implicitly, as we examine some of the larger issues of history.

Two Early Views Of History

All the great Cultures plunge their roots deep into some form of religious outlook, and it is in their religious attitude toward history that they differ at the outset from one another.¹¹

The ancient Hindu mystics rejected the idea of historical time and believed in the essential oneness of all things. The time-bound Chinese, on the other hand, lacked a sense of eternity. Still other attitudes toward time and eternity are evident within the traditions of the West.

1. Let us begin with the classical myth of autonomy adopted by the ancient Greeks and Romans, who adopted a *cyclical* view of history and placed the concerns of humanity at the center of things.

According to the cyclical view, civilizations go through stages of growth, maturity, decay, and death in the unconscious flow of history. We may picture this process as a spiral or corkscrew. The popular image is that of a wheel turning. One complete turn of the cycle is what we call a *revolution*. The cyclical view also seems to imply the political meaning that the word revolution has subsequently acquired.

This perception that “history repeats itself” was prevalent among the ancient pagan cultures, notably those which celebrated the changing seasons of the agricultural year through elaborate cult rituals. Indeed, the words cult, culture, and agriculture indicate the close historical relationship between tilling the earth and religion. Pagan worship that is connected with the cycle of life is often called a “fertility cult.” In practice, the religious

11 Amaury de Riencourt, *The Coming Caesars* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1957), p. 345.

rite is often a means of appeasing or asserting control over natural forces, as in magic. In other words, what J. M. Roberts calls *autonomy* is the assertion of sovereignty or mastery over nature and humanity. This very pragmatic, do-it-yourself form of religion achieved its greatest sophistication in the classical Graeco-Roman tradition. But slavery, torture, and human sacrifice long continued to be pervasive features of that tradition.

Sacred Calendar In the pagan as well as the biblical tradition, sacred history is memorialized—and thus can be memorized—through a festal calendar highlighted by feasts and holidays. Pagan celebrations are designed to invoke a periodic return to the original source of things. Rituals may vary in character from cannibalism to animal or human sacrifice to sexual license and perversion, as with the Roman Saturnalia.

The reason for such barbarism, according to R. J. Rushdoony, is that civilization is regarded as an artificial order built upon a seething cauldron of chaos. Chaos precedes and is the wellspring of order and life. Time itself is something that must be renewed, revitalized, energized, or sanctified periodically through making contact with the eternal rhythms of the cosmos—by tapping into the primordial chaos. Humanity must give chaos its due and periodically return to its roots.¹²

By contrast, the biblical calendar—which also marks the seasons of the agricultural year—is both a remembrance of providential events and a revelation of the advent of Christ.

Cyclical historians have often looked back to a past *Golden Age*. Perhaps this is a dim memory of Eden.

In the Bible we may detect a *paradise motif* running through much of its symbolism. Its repeated references to rivers, mountains, and the New Jerusalem serve to remind the careful reader of God's Creation and Providence.

Many pagan cultures also preserve an ancient tradition or legend involving a perfect place, a *utopia*. But because pagan cultures do not acknowledge a Creator, they adopt ideas about religion, law, and morality that are at odds with biblical teaching.

The cyclical view tends to be polytheistic or to see history as the product of many unrelated causes or forces. The cyclical view also tends to see history in terms of *eternal recurrence*, as noted by the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. All civilizations seem to go through the same cycles of change. In other words, history is thought to repeat itself as it follows an original - perhaps divine - pattern or prototype. But this idea of a divine prototype may also be found in biblical teaching. The tabernacle and temple, for example, are built according to a heavenly prototype. Mircea Eliade contends that the belief in eternal recurrence was originally a source of hope, but added that "repetition emptied of its religious content necessarily leads to a pessimistic vision of existence."

¹² See Rushdoony, *One and Many*, pp. 36-53.

At least two major historians in recent times have accepted a cyclical view.

Oswald Spengler, the author of *Decline of the West* following the First World War and a noted “cultural pessimist”, contrasted what he called the “Faustian” culture of the West (a dualistic fusion of classical and Christian elements) with the “Magian” culture of the East. In his choice of names, Spengler identifies the half-Christian, half-pagan West with the legendary medieval figure of Faust, a physician who sets himself at odds with the world and makes a bargain with the devil. The struggle between heaven and earth, good and evil, that this legend represents is just one of many depictions of the double-minded yearning for truth and power that, for better and for worse, characterizes western civilization.

Arnold Toynbee, the author of *A Study of History*, wrote in a more hopeful mood of the progress of civilization through cycles of “challenge and response”.

The cyclical view is also evident in mythology. Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth* represents an effort to revive mythical thought forms.

2. Linear View For the Jew, Christian, and Muslim, by contrast, history tends to move in linear fashion: either in an uncomplicated straight line from the Creation to the Last Judgment or in some combination with the cyclical view. James Jordan even finds evidence of a set pattern repeated throughout the Bible: creation, fall and decline, judgment, and re-creation.¹³

What distinguishes the linear from the cyclical view is that history manifests a *teleology*. Everything moves according to a divine plan toward a final goal or purpose (*telos*). The linear, teleological view of history is uniquely an outgrowth of the biblical tradition. The purpose of history is *both* the restoration of creation to its original purity before the fall of Adam *and* the restoration of man to communion—communication and fellowship—with God, the Creator and Provider.

History as a Story From the biblical view, history tells a story. It is the setting for a great drama of paradise lost and regained, or—in terms of a familiar literary theme—love, rejection, and reconciliation.

Let us examine some of its specific aspects. As the Creator, God has established the flow of time and reveals Himself irreversibly and infallibly in historical time. Consequently, time is not an impersonal, natural process. It is a result of God's creative act. The idea of a self-sustaining and self-regulating Nature is pagan, not Christian.

Instead of autonomy, everything is seen to be totally under God's government— under

¹³ See, for example, James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1988). On the other hand, Bebbington rejects any suggestion that the Old Testament philosophy of history is cyclical (Patterns, pp. 46-47).

God's *Providence* - rather than determined or destined by Nature or by man. God intervenes in history personally, as we may see in the numerous examples of *theophany*—a visible appearance of God - in the Bible. God is the unifying link that gives meaning and direction to history. As the Provider, God sustains His Creation and intervenes in our lives.

The Bible tells what has been called the Greatest Story Ever Told. The story begins with God's creation of the world out of nothing. Man (the word is used generically here) was originally appointed to supervise and protect God's creation and was placed into a pure and perfect environment. Here again we may detect the paradise motif. But man's pride led him to prefer to be the master of his own destiny. So man rebelled, fell from God's good graces into the unrighteousness of sin, and was banished from God's presence. Separated from God, man found himself in bondage to sin. Nevertheless he still hungered for this lost communion or fellowship with God, who is the source of all life, value, and meaning. But only God could heal the breach between them and restore man to his former position. So as an act of mercy God took upon Himself the likeness of man. As Jesus, he was born, the scion of kings, into humble circumstances in order to live a life of perfect righteousness and thus fulfill the requirements of the law. By dying innocent of all sin, the God-man Jesus Christ thus personally paid the death penalty for sin (called the “vicarious atonement”). As an innocent victim, Christ broke the bonds—the cycle—of sin and death, thus cancelling the debt of sin once for all.

Salvation by Grace Through Faith The gospel or good news is that God offers—as a free gift - to make man as good as new again if he will faithfully partake of and depend upon Christ's sacrifice so that his life might be transformed by God's Spirit. Only by repudiating sin and taking refuge in Christ can man be saved and restored. History is thus regarded by Christians as the story of God's victory over sin and death whereby He creates a new people—a “new nation”, the Church—to populate His kingdom.

By the fourth and fifth century AD, the early Church began to replace the dying paganism of the Roman Empire. A number of important historians, including St. Augustine, who wrote *The City of God* soon before the fall of Rome, and Herbert Butterfield, who wrote *The Whig Interpretation of History*, have worked within a specifically Christian framework of understanding.

Two Modern Views Of History

3. **Progressive View** The idea of progress, which we may picture as a line or plane inclined upward, reflects the influence of Christianity but suggests a movement away from biblical Christianity toward religious skepticism or theological liberalism. Those who claim the name “progressive” tend to question those basic (fundamental) Christian doctrines that cannot be understood independently from God's revelation. James Malin has observed that the “Illusion of Progress”, a faith in “the unlimited perfectibility of man,... was in direct contradiction of the Christian plan of salvation possible only through

divine intervention.”¹⁴

Double-Mindedness Our prevailing notions of history today are full of contradictions. As Michael Lienesch notes about America's founding era (1776-1787): “It is true that certain evangelicals would remain loyal to providential history, and that some secular thinkers would adhere to an almost exclusively rationalistic interpretation. But an even larger group, combining religion and rationality, would create a conception of American history in which piety and pragmatism were inextricably bound together. The result would be a paradoxical interpretation of the past, comprehensive but contradictory, inspiring feelings of enormous self-confidence and enormous self-doubt.”¹⁵ So let us examine the specifically progressive or rationalist component of this hybrid.

Reason as the Standard of Truth Generally speaking, the progressive view of history, which originated in the seventh century, is a variety of secular humanism that rejects divine revelation and makes man's reason the standard of truth.¹⁶

Although the idea of progress took the place of a belief in divine intervention, or Providence, it continued to mimic Christianity by holding onto some of its chief tenets: its ultimate optimism, its sense of inevitable victory, and its linearity. In place of the God of the Bible, an impersonal cause of all things was substituted. Christianity was rejected by many thinkers in favor of a rationalist religion called *Deism*, which substituted the mechanical image of the world as an elaborate clockwork for the idea of Creation. According to this new program, man must scientifically mold Nature like clay to give it unity and direction. So men in effect become like gods and write their own script: “I am the master of my destiny, I am the captain of my soul,” as William Ernest Henley expresses it in the poem “Invictus.”

Under the influence of Charles Darwin, whose *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859, later progressives came to see history as the story of man's evolution from brute existence to civilization. Science permits man to discover and command natural laws that enable him to lift himself up by his bootstraps. Like early paganism, progressive rationalism takes a very pragmatic attitude toward life. If there is direction to history, it is only because human reason recognizes and builds upon the lawful natural order.

The idea of rational progress was popularized by the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century French Enlightenment and further developed by nineteenth century social science as a means of revolutionizing or reforming society. Contrary to St. Augustine's "City of God", its object was to create the universal “City of Man” or “Cosmopolis.”¹⁷ But the

14 James C. Malin, *The Contriving Brain and the Skillful Hand in the United States: Something About History and Philosophy of History* (Lawrence, KS: James C. Malin, 1955), p. 14.

15 Lienesch, Michael, *New Order of the Ages: Time, the Constitution, and the Making of Modern American Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 18.

16 See Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

17 These phrases are also the titles of intellectual histories of the Enlightenment program by W. Warren Wagar and Stephen Toulmin respectively. The title of the first volume of Peter Gay's *Enlightenment*—

prevailing skepticism of the twentieth century has weakened the idea of inevitable progress and, with it, the belief in a natural law that gives structure and meaning to history.

Borrowed Capital To summarize: the progressive view reflects the Christian view in a distorted fashion. First, it substitutes the sovereignty of man, or Nature, or the State for the sovereignty of God. Second, it substitutes scientific planning for God's providential control over history. Finally, it substitutes salvation by a new political order for salvation by grace through faith. The progressive view borrows its basic assumptions from Christianity but generally lacks an intellectual basis for doing so. Indeed, secular progressivism parasitically lives off the accumulated capital of a Christian civilization that it has long since forgotten.

Even so, some progressive historians of the nineteenth century professed Christianity, like Thomas Lord Macaulay and John Lord Acton, two major exponents of what Herbert Butterfield called “the Whig interpretation of history.” More clearly secular examples of the progressive view may be seen in Thomas Jefferson's belief in the triumph of republican values and in John Dewey's use of public education to promote a religion of democracy.

4. Progressivism's emphasis on the natural oneness of humanity is counterbalanced by the emphasis in *historicism* on the uniqueness of times and cultures. Unity gives way to diversity. History from this vantage point may be pictured as a mixed forest in which each tree follows its own distinct pattern of growth.

Historicism in the eighteenth century began as a reaction against the perceived atheism of the French Enlightenment by German *pietists*, evangelical Christians who emphasized intuition over reason. Blaise Pascal made a similar point earlier when he wrote: “The heart has its reasons that reason does not know.”

But historicism moved away from orthodox Christianity into idealism, Romanticism, and finally materialism. It rejected the linear concept of history in favor of a cultural relativism or *multiculturalism* that made each era and each nation responsible for its own standards. The individualism and internationalism that characterize the progressive view have led toward a different set of values, another myth of autonomy, which seeks to celebrate ethnic and racial identity—as well as class and gender identity. As the saying goes: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” This view treats a culture—with its own language, history, and customs—as a distinct entity that defines its own highest authority. All cultures are seen as products of their history and must be understood in relation to their past. Different languages and cultures develop different sets of values. Since they lack a natural basis for unity, each becomes its own source of authority and authenticity.

The Rise of Modern Paganism— is very revealing. But a wholesale rejection of Christianity did not take place at the time.

Taken to an extreme, this view leads to *existentialism*, in which everything is reduced to meaninglessness because there are no constants, no absolute standards. It leads to a moral relativism that gives no ground for preferring one custom or ethical code to another. The battle cry of the 1960s counterculture was “Do you own thing.”

Yet in practical terms, this easy toleration simply means that the stronger power or the loudest voices soon hold sway, and what often begins as a movement to break the chains of oppression becomes a new orthodoxy imposing its will and identity on all.¹⁸ In the process, individual uniqueness comes to be regarded as dangerous or counterrevolutionary and the dissenter is denounced as “an enemy of the people.” The great ideologies of this century - socialist as well as nationalist—hate independent-mindedness. Thus does multiculturalism give way to ideological single-mindedness and a new “political correctness” results.

Nationalism During the last two centuries, historicism has been adopted by various nationalist movements, including National Socialism, that reflect both the progressive and the historicist view. The unifying factor is usually provided by a visionary charismatic leader, who personifies the cause and becomes an integral part of a national mythology, even while alive. National orthodoxies change with the times. Changing national priorities can be charted fairly accurately by noting changes in festivals and holidays. Rather than marking the seasons or sacred events, the modern calendar celebrates its pantheon of heroes and national events.

Representative historicists include Leopold von Ranke and Wilhelm Dilthey, two nineteenth century German historians. But historicism has also left its mark on American historiography, including the “progressive historians”. One hundred years ago, Frederick Jackson Turner's lecture, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”, maintained that the American character had been shaped by an open frontier. Soon the geographical determinism of Turner found a counterpart in the economic determinism of the Charles Beard, whose *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* sought to explain the motives of the founders according to their economic interests.

Two Historical Syntheses

5. **Hegelianism** The philosophical idealist Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831) was the first major philosopher of history to fuse the idea of progress with historicism. Hegel sought to reconcile the progressive emphasis on a rational order with the historicist respect for custom. He sought to rescue what he considered the most positive elements from the French Revolution which came under attack by the major European powers

18 Jean-Jacques Rousseau began one of his essays with a trumpet blast: “Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains.” Two generations later, Karl Marx wrote: “Workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains.” Later he wrote: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it.” The myth of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods and then being chained to a rock was a popular Romantic image.

following Napoleon's defeat in 1815.¹⁹

Dialectic Hegel believed the dynamic of history is indirect or dialectical. By moving indirectly toward greater freedom, the course of history suggests a jagged rather than a straight line. It moves in ratchet fashion past the conflict of opposites (thesis and antithesis) to a new unity or synthesis.²⁰ For example, the competing loyalties of the family (thesis) and the commercial individualism (antithesis) of civil society eventually yield to a greater loyalty, the state (synthesis).

Hegel also believed history reflects a definite but evolving scale of values that is more sharply revealed as history advances, as what he called the *World Spirit*—his expression for collective humanity—becomes more self-conscious. People are merely the instruments of this divine reason, whether as heroes or, most often, as victims. "History is the slaughter bench at which the happiness and welfare of each individual is sacrificed. The individual constitutes but a moment in the vast general sweep of world history. He remains historically unimportant."²¹ Even so, Hegel was optimistic about the future. As D. W. Bebbington comments, "the supreme value being generated is freedom understood in a thoroughly romantic way as *self-realization*."²² Certain elements of Hegel's theory of history continue to influence political movements of both the Left and Right.

Francis Fukuyama has recently updated the Hegelian thesis by arguing that we have now reached the "end of history" and what Friedrich Nietzsche called "the last man." Nietzsche believed that man would eventually be superseded by overman (superman). In Hegelianism, the driving force of history is a "struggle for recognition" which causes competition among states and results in the evolution of liberal democracy. History is characterized by this struggle to give birth to something higher. Fukuyama maintains that this historical process culminates when each citizen gets equal and reciprocal recognition. Then society moves beyond ideology and the inspiring fiction of a historical purpose.

6. Even more influential is another fusion of historicism and progressivism known as Dialectical Materialism or *Marxism*. Unlike Hegel's philosophical Idealism, Marxism is a form of Positivism.

Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), two 19th century German radicals who lived in England, believed that the direction of history is shaped or determined by environmental factors, particularly economics, rather than ideas. They merely gave form to the Epicurean notion that "you are what you eat" and called it

19 See Paul Edward Gottfried, *The Search for Historical Meaning: Hegel and the Postwar American Right* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), pp. 9-10.

20 Henri Bergson favored the image of a swinging pendulum or a spiral. Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, [1935]), p. 292.

21 Frank N. Magill, ed. *Masterpieces of World Philosophy in Summary Form*, vol. 2 (New York: Salem Press, 1961), p. 596.

22 Bebbington, pp. 119-20. Emphasis added. "Self-realization" is placed high on the scale of Abraham Maslow's "hierarchy of needs." It is the touchstone or talisman of modern humanism

historical materialism.

Economic Determinism Marx claimed that a new society of abundance and freedom would arise if private property and every form of individualism or selfishness were abolished. The state itself would eventually disappear once people shared the wealth voluntarily. Marx labeled his philosophy “scientific socialism” because of his belief that the advances of science inevitably [predestination] would work the necessary changes in human nature to assure a new order of things envisioned by the international socialist movement.

Like the founder of a new religion, Marx believed he had unlocked the secrets of the universe in the form of “scientific laws”. Among these laws were the following:

1) **Atheism** The first is atheism, which denies the existence of God. Marx referred to religion as “the opium of the people”. Marx's rationale for asserting atheism is very simple. The sovereignty of God makes it impossible to scientifically reshape man and nature because final control would then lie outside of man's reach. According to atheist humanism, the universe came into being by accident. In fact, Marx's system *requires* this presupposition because it means that standards of value and morality are changeable rather than fixed, relative rather than absolute. As a consequence, men—specifically the ruling classes—are free to determine their own rules. It is no wonder that a prominent existentialist philosopher like Jean-Paul Sartre was also a Marxist.

2) **Materialism** Second, from this first premise, it then follows that man cannot have a soul or spirit. Everything is material. Marx believed that “there is nothing in the world apart from matter in motion.” Thus men's thoughts and emotions, seen as by-products of matter in motion, may properly be scientifically controlled by those who seek to further human progress. Society and human nature may be improved by reforming the environment, including childhood habits and lifelong education. John Dewey's progressive education system fits this model, even though Dewey himself was an outspoken anti-Communist.

3) **The Class Struggle** Third, progressive new technologies meanwhile create new environments which, in turn, create new economic and social classes. The dialectical struggle between a new working class (the proletariat) and the old capitalist ruling class (the bourgeoisie) results in the creation of a new kind of human being—a new man—and in turn produces the inevitable triumph of the new class, which then establishes its dominion over the whole earth. The victory of the proletariat is supposed to lead to a classless society. This is the Marxist equivalent of salvation. In the absence of absolute values, it becomes an end that justifies almost any means.

Postscript

History is written and rewritten by every generation.

As Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy noted in *Out of Revolution*: “Anyone who looks back on his own life knows how completely a new love, a new home, a new conviction, changes the aspect of his past. How, then, can history remain a piecemeal confusion of national developments after a conflagration of the dimensions of the World War? A race that was not impressed by such an experience, that could not rewrite its history after such an earthquake, would not deserve any history.”²³

What we are witnessing, indeed, is the continuing “creation of humankind.” Rosenstock-Huessy counsels us to “try to read world history as our own autobiography.”

If a man or a generation confess that they have lived and sinned perhaps they can arrive at knowledge. History is perhaps dark and confused only if we stare at it from outside, without solidarity, without having first lived and sympathized.²⁴

Too often history is treated as a lifeless relic, as an odd museum piece like the tiny mummy in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* that lay in the display case in the zoo at the center of the city. If the center is dead, no wonder it can no longer hold. The historical models we formulate, like the hypotheses scientists develop, represent just so much intellectual scaffolding. They may be indispensable for the task of investigation, but too often they become indisposible by substituting for a conclusion. How ironic it would be to find the scaffolding still standing even after the building itself had collapsed.

We should be casting our intellectual nets ever wider and wider to recollect the crucial experiences—a sense of the real dilemmas—that are so often neglected by historians. We caricature the past by failing to recall the passions that have shaped and reshaped us in God's crucible.

Time-bound human beings that we are, we are also time-binders: active as well as acted upon. It is this dynamic aspect of history that is so hard to capture. Rosenstock-Huessy addresses this difficulty through his imaginative attempt to depict the centrality of the Cross, by arguing that we are pinioned (or pilloried) on “the great space and time axes”—inside and outside, past and future—that define “all men's life on earth, forming a Cross of Reality.”

... All men are men are men because they face backward and forward at the same time. We are crucified by this fact. Nobody lives in one time.²⁵

23 Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Out of Revolution: Autobiography of Western Man* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1938), p. 6.

24 Rosenstock-Huessy, pp. 7-8.

25 Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Christian Future: or the Modern Mind Outrun* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 167. The great semanticist, Alfred Korzybski, regarded man as first and foremost a “time-binder.”

Appendix: Rushdoony on Inescapable Concepts

Man is inescapably religious. He may deny God, but all the categories of his life remain religious, and all are categories borrowed from the Triune [Three-in-One] God. Since the only world man lives in is the world God created, his thinking even in apostasy is inevitably conditioned and governed by a God-given framework. They may deny God's *sovereignty* [ultimate authority], but they cannot stop believing in sovereignty; they merely transfer it to man or to the State. Total law and planning, i.e., *predestination* [the means], is inescapable; denied to God, it is simply transferred to the scientific socialist State which predestinates or totally governs or plans all things; if deity be denied to the God of Scripture, it merely reappears in man or the State. And if the church ceases proclaiming the Gospel, then religion does not perish; it reappears as politics or economics, and salvation [the end or goal] continues to be offered to inescapably religious man.

Salvation is a necessity of man's being, and the goal of *salvation* [the end or goal] is new life and freedom. If salvation be not accepted in God through Christ, then it is accepted in man, or in an order of man such as the State.

...

The concept of *infallibility* [truth], when denied to God and His word, does not disappear; instead, it is transferred to another area. Historically, as Christendom turned to Aristotle and to natural law, the concept of infallibility came into a new prominence as church, state, and school claimed it for themselves

The modern doctrine of the divine right of kings was used to rule any and every act against the crown as morally, religiously, and legally wrong. Related to this idea of the king's divinity was the belief in the healing power of "The King's Touch." After 1688 [the overthrow and exile of England's James II] this concept of divine right was transferred to Parliament.

[J. L.] Talmon has cited the opinions of [Giuseppe] Mazzini [mid-19th century Italian revolutionary] and others to illustrate the belief in the infallibility of the people:

"The spirit of God can only descend upon the gathered multitudes. It is for them to say what they believe or do not believe." "We believe in the infallibility of the people," but "we put no trust in men." Only the totality of the individual people is God's Church. Rulers, party leaders, parties themselves may err. "The mass can never err."

After [Jean-Jacques] Rousseau, the belief in the infallibility of the people also meant the infallibility of an elite who can incarnate the general will of democratic society. This elite can know the democratic consensus better than the ballot box and thus are the supposed

expression of the infallibility of the social order.

...

In reality, living with the fact that the universe and our world carry always unlimited *liabilities* [consequences] is the best way to assure security and advantage. To live with reality, and seek progress within its framework, is man's best security.

The purpose of limited liability laws is to limit responsibility. Although the ostensible purpose is to protect the shareholders, the practical effect is to limit their responsibility and therefore encourage recklessness in investment. A limited liability economy is socialistic. By seeking to protect people, a limited liability economy merely transfers responsibility away from the people to the state, where "planning" supposedly obviates responsibility... In reality, payment [of the costs] is simply transferred to others.

...

Failure to render aid was once a serious offense, and to a limited degree, still makes the man who fails to render aid liable to serious penalties.

Formerly, all bystanders had a legal duty to render aid to a hue and cry. The expression, *hue and cry*, is a legal term; formerly, when a criminal escaped, or was discovered, or an act of crime was being committed, the summons to assist was legally binding on all.

If the bystander has an obligation to render aid "with all lost things" of another man, he has an even more pressing obligation to help rescue the man. Thus, the principle of responsibility appears in Deuteronomy 22:24. A woman assaulted in a city is presumed to have given consent if she does not raise a cry, the origin of hue and cry in common law. At her cry, every man within sound of her voice has a duty to render immediate aid; failure to do so was regarded as a fearful abomination which polluted the land and, figuratively, darkened the sun.... It is significant that this offense is rated [in rabbinic tradition] as worse than giving false witness; the false witness misrepresents the truth; the non-interfering bystander becomes an accomplice to the crime by his refusal to render aid.²⁶

26Rousas John Rushdoony, "The Society of Satan", *Biblical Economics Today* (October/November 1979), p. 1; *Infallibility: An Inescapable Concept* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1978), pp. 8-12; *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (The Craig Press, 1973), pp. 463-65, 664. Italics, brackets, and other emphases have been added.