

David Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian Perspective on Historical Thought* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1979, 1990)

The historical thought referenced in the title of this book is taken in a wide sense. It includes philosophies of history, reflections on the obstacles to historical writing and, majorly, the history and evaluation of major schools of history writing (historiography). The book is ambitious in scope, but carefully researched and written, and thus very useful for the acquisition of an overview of these topics.

Philosophy of history includes primarily concepts of history embedded in cultures, that may be unquestioned assumptions more than articulated theories. Within ancient culture reflections on these general views of history are for the sake of the metaphysics of religion, not to understand the course of historical developments. Introducing the first type of these general views, which he terms “patterns of history” Bebbington says: “A sense of history is not natural to man. Societies have existed, and continue to exist, where there is little awareness of the ongoing historical process and no desire to find out what happened in the past.” Instead myth predominates, and being non-historical “Entirely different versions can coexist without causing offence.” (p. 21)

### **Cyclical History**

“Normally,” he says, when history replaces myth people “have seen the historical process as being like a revolving wheel.” It may have only one revolution, or more commonly the historical process repeats itself. He finds this interpretation in China, India, the Middle East and the Graeco-Roman cultures. He thinks this is because of the analogy to the life of an individual which “follows a pattern of growth to maturity followed eventually by decrepitude and death.” The other influential analogy is the cycle of the seasons which was of utmost importance to agriculture. But why is the life of man, from birth to maturity to decline and death, a cycle not a linear view of the biography of an individual to his destiny? It must be due to the succession of one generation after another, each of which repeats the cycle. But what about the nature of history, in the case one revolution cycle view? How much does this really differ from a linear view of history? We will return to this point when we consider what Bebbington has to say about Christian views of history.

The cyclical pattern has three variations. 1) Dynasties or even civilizations rise and fall within history. In this variation is it not universal history that repeats, but key entities within history, particularly political ones. 2) The whole cosmos goes through a cycle “which usually extends over a vast period of time. The conclusion of a cycle may mean the end of all things, or else be the prelude to a fresh cycle of a new earth and sometimes a new heaven.” 3) A golden age is followed by a decline, sometimes through distinct stages. “This view, often called primitivism because it idealises primitive times, concentrates on only a section of a cycle, its downward curve.” (p. 22)

There a connection between the cyclical view, or perhaps the readiness of interpreters to perceive a cyclical view, and a general pessimism. In the repeating cycles there is no way fundamentally to change things because the cycle must repeat forever regardless of what people do within it. If there is an escape it is by escaping the cycle itself, as with Buddhism to realm beyond existence. But the case of 3) primitivism is very odd. Why is a decline from a golden age to a degenerate one seen as cyclical, but a rise from a primitive state of disorder to an organized society and culture seen as linear? Perhaps it is that this primitivist belief of a decline is found in ancient cultures, and the reverse view only in more recent eras influenced by the Christian, linear viewpoint, and thus the

general religious viewpoint is imputed to the historical model? There is some such unexamined assumption behind Bebbington's categories.

He undertakes a more detailed examination of examples of these variations from major cultures. Variation (1) is found in Chinese dynastic cycles, as portrayed in early Chinese histories. These would chronicle a dynasty that received the "mandate of heaven" and would rule until it reached the "bad-last ruler" and then collapse under a series of catastrophes when such a ruler lost the mandate of heaven, which would then pass to a new dynasty. There was a sort of moral interpretation of the cycle in that it was the conduct of the ruler that brought a cycle to an end and the change could have been avoided as long as there was good rule. It was the task of the historian to point up this moral, and to portray the exemplary rulers who should be imitated to avoid the collapses. We should note, however, that the Chinese dynastic collapses in actuality correspond to the grand solar minimums in the sun cycle, which are, of course, worldwide in scope, and not tied to the behavior of Chinese rulers who, good or bad, could not cope with the loss of crops when temperature and rain patters shifted. (The sun cycles may also cause a slight expansion or contraction of the earth's crust, bringing on volcanos and earthquakes.) Of course the belief in a mandate of heaven would affect how the people interpreted the crop failures and thus their view of the rulers. This explanation points up the actual explanatory role of the cycle theory. It may be the wrong explanation, but it is not arbitrarily imposed based on a cosmological theory that required cycles. Perhaps the Chinese case is not the best choice to represent variation (1) if that is supposed to be the imposition of a pessimistic cultural view onto history.

The cosmic cycles of variation (2) are represented by India. These cycles last thousands of years, and include sub-cycles which show the feature of a declining quality of life, recalling primitivism. Most of it occurs before any written history, and when eventually such histories did appear, they had a different agenda than exposition of the cycles, for example with Kalhana in the twelfth century trying to justify despotic rule.

Persia had an idea of four ages of declining quality, symbolized by gold, silver, steel and iron mixed with other materials (suggesting a comparison to Nebuchadnezzar's vision in Daniel). Bebbington thinks that Mesopotamia, next door, was tending toward a dynastic cyclical theory of the past like China. He does not mention the idealization of the pre-flood past with the kings' lives of enormous length, with its suggestion of primitivism. The Greeks also in their early poetry express the view of a declining succession of ages from a gold to a silver, then a bronze (the heroes) and finally an iron race.

With the philosophers more definite speculation on the form of history began, with the Pythagoreans and stoics teaching a recurring cycle. The Greeks did produce the major historians Herodotus and Thucydides, who set out to find explanations for major events, the former "to explain the achievements of the Greeks and Asiatics and to show why they came into conflict in the Persian War" and the later the Peloponnesian War. While they thought an explanation could be provided to major episodes in the life of nations, they did not fit this into a major flow of history whose destiny could be altered by them. (p. 32)

Christianity introduced a different concept of history to the Roman Empire. Augustine, especially, thought about the subject. "Christian faith, Augustine protested, could have nothing to do with the belief that 'the same ages and the same temporal events recur in rotation.'" (p. 34) Was it the need to oppose such elaborated stoic ideas that caused Christians to formulate a view of their own, more than clear ideas generated by the theologians from their own traditions? Bebbington thinks that irregardless "the Christian church would have endorsed the conviction that history proceeds in a

straight line according to the will of God.” (p. 52) Remnants of the old pagan ideas survived to the extent that, for example in the Renaissance, people were expected to recognize ideas such as the golden age in poetic tropes. Indeed we still use the expression today. The four ages, or four kingdoms, represented by the metals, were a common outline of history (but not the principal one) for writers in the middle ages and into the Renaissance because Daniel’s vision appeared to give this model a Biblical endorsement. Bebbington, though, barely mentions this, and only with respect to the kingdoms, not the metals. (p. 57) By the sixteenth centuries writers (Jean Bodin, George Hakewill) were rejecting this model on the ground that they saw an improvement, not a degradation in history. (pp. 35-36)

### **Christian View of History – Old Testament to Lisbon Earthquake**

Bebbington’s third chapter, “Christian history” where he presents Christian views up to modern times, is separated by several chapters from eighteenth and nineteenth century views of history and a chapter on historiography from his chapter 8, “The meaning of history” in which he again takes up the Christian view of history. We find there that problems and objections that he develops in the third chapter are not final, but that he wants to make use of some lessons learned from historical views that he presents in the intervening chapters. For this review the two chapters on the Christian view will be taken together, in order better to keep together the discussion of specific topics.

Bebbington says that the Christian view of history is “markedly different from any version of the cyclical theory” because 1) the Christian view derives “from belief in a God who intervenes in the world” while the cyclical has no necessary tie to God, 2) God guides history in a straight line, and 3) cyclical theories usually place little importance to the end of the cycle “but Christianity holds that the goal of history is all-important.” (p. 43) The second point seems to me often not to be true, and when it is, pretty much because it is an expression of 3) the overriding importance of the goal. With this third point he seems to be reaching the essential issue. It raises its own questions. a) Does the goal overwhelm anything that happens in history so that these events only matter in relation to the goal, i.e. lack meaning in themselves? b) Is this goal in history or beyond history? The answers can produce very different theories of history, which negates the usefulness of grouping them under one label of the linear view of history. Not only the shape of history but the value of the things in it are important to a classification.

Bebbington begins his exposition of the Christian view with the Old Testament.

Israel came to believe not only that God acted at particular points in time, but also that the whole historical process was under his guidance. Events in the past were seen not as isolated occurrences but as successive items in the working out of a divine plan. (p. 46)

God called Abraham with a view toward creating a great nation, and called the people out of Egypt to settle Canaan. The prophets proclaimed the coming Day of the Lord, and apocalyptic literature pointed to a final judgement and ‘last things’ outside of history. “The straight line guided by God would lead to something beyond itself: history would find its end and significance in the new age that would succeed it.”

In the New Testament he sees the same pattern, including the appearance of apocalyptic literature, except that now there is the expectation of an “eruption of evil” preceding the end of history. The experience of persecution gave Christians the perspective of history as “a battleground between good and evil where evil might sometimes win an engagement.” (p. 51)

In the early church a cyclical view of history was almost uniformly rejected, the exception being Origen, who was accused by Jerome of trying to support stoic cyclical view, in which people lived their lives over and over again. There were divergent views of the nature of the millennium. “Various strands of biblical thought seemed to suggest that even before the end of time there would be a bright future for believers. ... Here was the germ of an idea that was to prove fertile in the Christian imagination over succeeding centuries – the belief that there would be, in the future but before the end of time, a millennium of peace and plenty.” (p. 52) Origen had been opposed to this idea. (Since we don’t have Origen’s writings on this but only what was quoted in his critics’s works, we don’t know how this related to his cyclical views.)

The tendency of such millennial expectation was to fan Christian optimism about the future to a white heat. A protracted time of blessing could be looked for within history. This was to expand on the standard view of the early church that God’s richest blessing would be dispensed when history had reached its goal. (p. 53)

Bebbington does not introduce the millennial distinctions between premillennialism and other views. For premillennialism Christ must return before this millennium to rule throughout it, thus introducing a final stage of history that is a mix between normal history and the eschatological final state. A postmillennial view holds that these millennial blessings, however literally they are interpreted, are a culminating phase of normal history, and that Christ’s return after this brings about an end to history. Modern premillennialists have tried to demonstrate that views similar to theirs were held by patristic writers, but Bebbington does not raise the issue.

In addition to developing views about the end of history there was an interpretation of God’s providence over their own times. Some noted that the establishment of the enduring imperial system under Augustus had happened near the time of Christ and was evidence, according to Bishop Melito of Sardis, that Christianity brought blessing to the world, even to the political system under which it existed. This view of was re-enforced from Constantine on with the “imperial theology” which saw God’s blessing on the emperors who supported the church. Augustine at first took this view as well, but broke with it as his views on merit and grace developed. “God, he increasingly felt from the late 390s, deals with nobody according to merit. God’s blessings are free gifts to the undeserving, a matter of grace. There is therefore no exact correlation between human deserts and divine intervention in history.” (p. 55) After the fall of Rome in 410 he wrote *The City of God*, bringing out a more systematic distinction between the political power and the community of believers.

Early medieval writers, often influenced by Orosius, author of *Seven Books of History against the Pagans*, returned to the “close correlations between obedience to God and earthly blessings in the fashion of the fourth-century writers whose views Augustine had repudiated. It was a medieval commonplace to explain how God consistently blessed the good but punished the wicked.” (p. 56) Bebbington, however sees two continuing influences by Augustine on historical writing. The first was the rejection of millennialism. “The thousand years should be understood instead as ‘the period beginning with Christ’s first coming’. This was to become the most orthodox mediaeval view.” Subsequent writers took this further, and moved the emphasis from future hope to present realization, especially with the growth of institutional church. “The result was to decrease the awareness that history is moving towards a goal. Little except the last judgement remained in man’s future. The mediaeval Christian world-view was remarkably static. Clerical chroniclers of the thirteenth century, for instance, markedly lacked a feeling for time.” Bebbington cites a study by W. J. Brandt, *The Shape of Medieval History: Studies in Modes of Perception* (New Haven, 1966). (p. 57) If the last judgement at the end of history remained, and if Augustine had adopted an amillennial view anyway, what exactly was taken away from future hope by these writers? This is

not clear from Bebbington. It seems that some view of history, not of its shape (whether it is cyclical or linear), but of its content had changed, and Bebbington is weak on explaining this throughout his book.

The second big influence of Augustine on historical writing was his scheme of historical periods. He was not the originator, "it had already become a patristic commonplace", but he divided history into seven periods based on the seven days of creation and the seven seals of the book Revelation. These are 1) Adam to the flood, 2) the flood to Abraham, 3) Abraham until David, 4) David to the Babylonian exile, 5) the exile to Jesus, 6) the church militant, 7) the sabbath rest of the church. This should be compared to the Dispensational scheme that has had a vogue among Evangelicals. The dispensations are: 1) Creation to fall of Adam, 2) Adam to the flood, 3) the flood to Abraham, 4) Abraham to Moses, 5) Moses to Jesus, 6) Jesus to the Millennium, 7) the Millennium.

Dispensationalism also has seven periods within the sixth dispensation of the Church Age, based on the letters to the seven churches in chapters two and three of the book of Revelation. While different Dispensationalism owes something to the earlier periodization scheme. Although some of the periods are different, the biggest difference is that dispensationalism based its divisions on the succession of covenants. Another, though less popular, scheme in the middle ages was the four monarchies of Daniel (with its four metals corresponding to the Greek four races).

But what was the difference in the content or quality of Augustine's seven ages that distinguished them from each other? The scheme seems to actually originate in the pagan world from comparison to the ages of man, that is the life cycle of man as an individual. This is argued by Paul Archambault in an article "The Ages of Man and the Ages of the World, A Study of two Traditions" *Revue d' Etudes Augustiniennes Et Patristiques*, 12 (3-4):193-228 (1966). The first age of man Augustine compared to infancy and the first day of creation "when men first began to enjoy the light". "We may consider this age as the infancy of the world ... for the world, in this instance, is to be thought of as a single human being." (Archambault, p. 203, quoting Augustine) "The second age of the world, its *pueritia*, or childhood, lasted from Noah until Abraham" and it might "be likened to the second day of Creation." The third age beginning with the call of Abraham "might be considered similar to the third day of Creation, when God separated the waters from the dry land; for it was during this period of history that the 'dry land' of Abraham and his people, ever thirsting for the 'rain' of divine law ... was set apart from the 'sea' of the Gentile nations." (Archambault, p. 203) "The fourth age began with David. ... *Iuventus*, the summit of life, that revered age among ages, is compared quite rightly to the fourth day of Creation, when God made the stars in the firmament of heaven." "The reign of David is the apotheosis of history ... It is followed by an age of decline, *gravitas*, which extended from the time of the Babylonian captivity until the coming of Christ. As, in the life of man, *gravitas* is characterized by a decline of strength, so, in this period of history, was the strength of the Judaic monarch broken. And, as the fifth day of Creation had witnessed the appearance of birds and fishes, the Jews of the Babylonian exile lived scattered in the sea of alien nations, and, like birds, had no dwelling of their own." (Archambault, p. 204) The sixth age began with the coming of Christ, which Augustine saw as "the *senectus veteris hominis*. The Jewish nation had become like an old man, for its political power had come to an end, *extrema vitam*. Concurrent with the death of the 'old man', however, is the birth of the new, *homo novus*, who has put away the things of the flesh. ... According to the schema of the days of Creation, this is the day of the creation of man." The seventh age is the second coming of Christ, and the last judgement. Because of this, the scheme later often appears as a six age scheme, as the seventh is just the final day that ends history. The eternal state, the eternal Sabbath, follows it. The oddest feature of this whole scheme of ages is that our time, the age of the church, is seen as from the perspective of Jewish history as that of feeble old age, rather than that of the church as the coming of the kingdom, in order to keep his seven ages of man idea going.

The comparison of the ages of the world to the ages of man, as transmitted by Augustine, was a theme known to the innumerable readers of the *De Civitate Dei* and of other Augustinian works. It would be safe to say that most if not all of the medieval writers who made use of the metaphor did so in imitation or under the inspiration of Augustine. (Archambault, p. 206)

Where Archambault differs from Bebbington is that Archambault, in dealing with the mediaeval period, constantly refers to this as a metaphor, rather than a scheme for a historical periodization of history. He says that the “two purveyors of the Augustinian tradition to the Middle Ages were Isidore and Bede.” The bulk of his article traces this tradition, or this use of the metaphor through various writers. It was not just a rhetorical embellishment, but reflected an attitude toward history. “the theme of the senescence of the world adapted itself quite well to a fundamental pessimism which impregnated much of mediaeval thought and mediaeval sensibility. The theme of ‘*mundus senescit*’, bequeathed to primitive Christianity in the midst of the tribulations of the late Empire, was still alive in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.” (Archambault, p. 207) The legacy of Augustine’s scheme of historical periods seems to be the transmission of late classical pessimism to the Middle Ages.

Archambault sees the decline of the six age view with a decline in interest in universal history in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when writers in the vernacular were writing of their own local regions and governments, often under the patronage of a local ruler. With the Renaissance, the metaphor of the ages was again used, but now with a recognition of the classical sources of the image, and also a return to the cyclical views of history that inspired it. With the emergence of the idea of progress as the dominant view in the Enlightenment, the image of old age and decline no longer suited the historical writers, but returned with Spengler and Toynbee. (Archambault, p. 225)

The most important periodization scheme to arise during the Middle Ages was that of Joachim of Fiore, a twelfth century monk who based his periods on the Trinity, though not entirely. He also found seven periods of conflict in the Old Testament and again in the New Testament. But his overarching periods were based on the Trinity; but in their identification of the periods they were weird. The first, that of the Father was from Adam to Isaiah, the second period of the Son was from the messianic prophecies of Isaiah to Benedict, and the third the period of the Spirit began with Benedict and monasticism. This scheme, then reflected the perspective of a monk and his values. Its importance was that it saw a new breakthrough in history beyond the time of the New Testament and the fall of the old pagan world, and an expectation of improvement following that point. “It was to restate a strong form of the Christian hope. Attention was directed back from a preoccupation with the church as the realization of God’s promises to what God would do in the future.” (Bebbington, p. 59) Joachim’s idea caught on sufficiently that from then on movements could appear claiming the arrival of a new spiritual age. Bebbington concludes that “Joachim of Fiore constituted more of a turning-point in historical thought than did the Renaissance or the Reformation.” (p. 60)

## **Millennialism**

In the modern period apocalypticism broke out again in the Lutheran reformation. Luther agreed with Augustine in his amillennialism, but thought that the end of history had almost arrived. But this expectation was combined with pessimism. Things would get much worse as the apocalyptic judgements described in Revelation must rain down just before God brought history to a close. Bebbington says the other major reformers agreed with Luther, but the “radical groups” took up

Joachim's "optimistic" expectations. "By the early seventeenth century, however, such hopes began to be entertained by widely respected scholars." He does not try to trace the adoption of millennialism in England by the Puritans and later other dissenters, nor provide an account of the various types of millennialism and how these might constitute views on the pattern of history. He does say it "was to be the starting-point of a trend that did much to foster the idea of progress." (p. 61) His mere distinction between millennialism and non-millennialism does not bring out the views of history that were to develop theologically on the millennial idea.

The Lutheran pessimistic apocalypticism was retained by the Dutch Reformed in their amillennial theology. As the expectation of an imminent end to history waned by the end of the sixteenth century, the apocalypse cataclysms were expected but at a possibly remote end of the world. But this still meant a downturn at the end of time so that as far as history itself extends it resembles a single cycle version of the cyclical view. This is partly a matter of definition. As with the seven age or six age view of history, the difference is only whether the last day is considered an age of history or beyond history. The actually expected course of the future remains the same under either description. For the millennialist, history enters a long time of blessing and then transitions into the final eternal blessing. The text of the book of Revelation might indicate a last brief assault by satanic forces just before the end. Eventually premillennialism was to emerge and become dominant in Evangelical groups. This modified the millennial view by a number of complications. Its main feature was that the return of Christ precedes the millennium, and this caused a number of further adjustments. First, there must still be the prophesied time of rebellion before Christ comes, so there must be a downturn before the beginning of the millennium, and then there is a prophesied time of rebellion before the last judgement at the end of the millennium with renewed cataclysms. Furthermore, the millennium itself is not in normal history, but exists under Christ's direct presence and rule where everything is exceptional to the normal course of history. As far as history goes, and again is a question of definition of terms, premillennialism is like Lutheran/Dutch amillennialism until normal history ends at Christ's advent, with its pessimistic view of where history goes until then.

On the other hand, millennialism is not a single view, but a gradient of views with one extreme looking toward great material and moral progress within history to a point approaching utopia, and at the other extreme seeing the promised blessings of the kingdom in spiritual terms applying to the church and differing from amillennialism only in not foreseeing a downward trajectory to the end of history. In fact the term 'amillennialism' is much more recent than the ideas and since its coinage a century ago had been applied to both types of views.

Complicating things still further, the arrival of the progress idea of history and the Enlightenment (covered in Bebbington's next chapter) did not end millennialism. Very opposite to the French and even Scottish Enlightenment thought, English dissenters such as Price and Priestley combined a rejection of orthodox forms of Christianity and a strong commitment to progress on the foundation of reason, with a continued expectation of a millennium which took the Biblical prophecies fully seriously.

Bebbington, though, does not want to grant that millennialism gives the shape to history. History's hopeful trajectory has to come from something else.

A Christian understanding supplies something that historicism [see discussion of chapter 5, below, for the definition] lacks: confidence in the future. Its keynote of hope is grounded in the twin beliefs that God is guiding history forward in a straight line and that it will in due time reach its goal. Millennialism may well be an unwarranted interpretation of biblical

imagery. Yet belief in the divine superintendence of history and expectations of the end of time provide ample grounds for the Christian hope. (p. 169)

Toward what does this straight line of history extend? Absent a millennial age, history just moves along, until it is brought to a sudden end coming from outside history, in which there is a final judgement and the time beyond history begins, in which the triumph of God, justice and the reward of the righteous takes place. These are the objects of individual hope for those living through history, but they arrive beyond history. For almost all it even will be discontinuous with their historical lives, as they are dead by then and have to be resurrected on the last day. And in many amillennial theologies, there isn't even a straight line to that point, but a decline, perhaps even through the whole Christian era. The confidence in the future in this model is not a confidence in an historical future, but in a future beyond history. Bebbington thinks that the Enlightenment faith in progress in history grew out of the Christian view of history, and that given that the progress view failed "in the face of the evidence", the Christian view can accomplish what the idea of progress could not. "The Christian faith, like the idea of progress, holds out the promise of a bright tomorrow. It contends, however, that it possesses stronger grounds for its promise than the idea of progress. The future is guaranteed not by man, but by God." (p. 170) But it is the millennial idea, particularly in England, that developed into the progress view of history, and amillennialism has no hope *in history* with which to replace the idea of progress, no bright tomorrow, but a bright eschaton beyond all tomorrows. Klaas Schilder stated the amillennial view when he explained history as the extension of time necessary for the full number of the elect and of the damned to be born. (Klaas Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, §18.) What is evident is that a view of the shape of history, such as cyclical vs linear and its periods, as well as millennialism vs non-millennialism, do not suffice for a typology of the views of history. What is more important is the different views of what happens within history and what makes those things happen, the content rather than the shape. This point will be revisited and explained further below.

## **Providence**

Bebbington next considers Providence. There is a concept of general Providence in the idea that the course of history is headed toward a goal, and that God controls the course of history to that end. There are also claims about particular, or special, Providence—interventions in history to create outcomes for specific events. Bebbington supposes that these two ideas of Providence are in conflict. "More acute problems for the Christian view arise over the idea that God intervenes at specific points in history. Why is such intervention necessary if he controls the whole process? Belief in particular providences seems incompatible with a conviction that there is a general providence." (p. 66) Why? He does not make an actual argument here. This is analogous to the objection to miracles inasmuch as they are said to be violations of God's general laws of nature. This turns on a literal interpretation of the analogy to law in the regularities of nature. If there is a general Providence it means that God controls all the events. How does this contradict the idea that God controls some events in notable ways or in response to prayers? The implied argument seems to be that if God controls all events, there can be nothing distinctive to make his control of any particular event stand out. It is therefore unknowable, so cannot be part of an historical account. Therefore particular Providences are not historical.

Bebbington addresses the problem of knowing more explicitly and calls it a "further problem", though it seems to be behind the first objection. "If God does intervene in specific events, how can we discern what is happening? God's way must be complex, and human beings are fallible. ... The problem is accentuated by the difficulty that if cases of God's interventions cannot be put forward, the claim that he does intervene seems to become vacuous. This element in the Christian view risks

turning into a formal assertion without content. If no instances are cited, the whole idea of providence is robbed of plausibility.” (p. 66) On the same page he has gone from arguing that the idea of general Providence makes particular providences impossible to arguing that the idea of general Providence makes particular providences necessary.

He next raises the problem of suffering as an objection to Providence. The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 especially shocked Europe and raised the problem in the minds of Enlightenment thinkers. He does not notice that this objection took hold at a particular point of history, and reflects an alteration in human expectations. Why did people previously not believe that God had to shield history from evil? Why did they instead see catastrophes as evidence that God was involved and executing judgements?

These objections are not final, though, as in chapter 8 he takes up the problem of Providence once again. There are two reasons to believe that “divine intervention is integral to a Christian perspective on the world.” One is that God is concerned with the small details. As Jesus said “But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.” The second reason is the incarnation. (p. 172)

He takes up several examples of a Christian approach to history for more detailed examples. The first is Herbert Butterfield author of *Christianity and History*.

It has been said that if a lamb should die in May, before it had reproduced itself, or contributed to the development of the species, or provided a fleece for the market, still the fact that it frisked and frolicked in the spring was in one sense an end in itself, and in another sense a thing that tended to the glory of God. This view may serve to typify the attitude of the historian, as distinct from that of the biologist, only interested in such history as relates to the development of the species as a whole. (H. Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (London: Collins, 1949) p. 16)

History, then, takes an interest in what things are intrinsically, not merely what they mean for other goals or ends. This has a practical implication for historical practice. He complained about those who held to a “schematized, depersonalized map of the course of social development” who needed to return to web of ordinary human history. “It seems particularly true of those who never entered into the fullness of the Graeco-Roman traditions or of Christian culture that they can contemplate human life in time—they can actually envision the course of history—without our customary sense of the all-importance of personality. ... I am not sure that there exists a firm barrier against this kind of error save for those who hold the Christian view that each individual soul is of eternal moment.... Human souls are in this view the purpose and end of the whole story, so far as the world is concerned—not merely the servants of the species and not ever mere means to some other mundane end. (Butterfield, pp. 42-43)

Butterfield has a chapter on judgement in history. This interests Bebbington who notes that the book “does place to the fore another characteristic element in a providential framework, belief in divine judgements. The events of 1918, 1933 or 1945, or all of these together, are explained as a judgement on the militarism of Prussia.” (Bebbington, p. 177) What Butterfield has to say is more paradoxical. “In the case of Prussia the time-period [of judgement] was undoubtedly extended as a result of the prudence or the virtue of Frederick the Great and Bismarck themselves; for instead of becoming Napoleons they provided perhaps the two most remarkable examples in modern history of men who called a halt to a career of conquest, precisely because they had a curious awareness of the importance of the moral element in history. They so realised the danger of nemesis that for long decades in the latter part of their lives they stood out as conservative statesmen, not only pacific

themselves but anxious to see that nobody else in Europe should disturb the peace.” But then he adds, “I do not think that we are interpolating anything fanciful into the structure of history, however, if we say that, whether in 1918 or in 1933 or in 1945, or in all these together, a judgment has been passed on the militarism of Prussia – a judgment which we have no reason to believe that she would have had to suffer if she had avoided an actual excess. ... And how happy might Germany not have been to-day-how many errors might she not have saved herself – if even in 1918 she could at least have taken the verdict as the judgment of God and set out to discover what it was that she had done to offend heaven.” (Butterfield, pp. 69-70) (On page 86 he seems to take it all back.) So why the judgment fell on Germany, and not on any number of other aggressive powers, such as the British Empire that has set out to dominate the whole world, seems to have no other explanation than that Butterfield, being English, saw it that way. He does address this later, when he says that the loss of the American colonies “taught this country so to change her attitude to the question of overseas dominion that we were led to present the world with a new idea of empire.” (Butterfield, p. 180) He goes on to the judgement on Russia, “a doom more terrible, more swift, more assuredly permanent than that of Germany herself.” And he has doubts about the French, too. But why wasn’t Napoleon punished? He was twice removed from power but given miniature kingdoms in which to pose. France, which had been eating away at neighbours for centuries, was carefully kept intact. Butterfield’s general conclusion is that “we can hardly avoid the conclusion that moral defects have something to do with the catastrophes that take place.” (Butterfield, p. 72)

Judgement, he thinks, comes upon orders and systems as a whole. But at “bottom it is an inadequacy in human nature itself which comes under judgment; for in the course of time it is human nature which finds out the holes in the structure, and turns the good thing into an abuse. A particularly rapid example of this process is afforded by the French Revolution, where, within three or four years a liberal movement had turned itself into a totalitarian autocracy; while only ten years after the outbreak in 1789, the establishment of democracy led to a new corruption – the modern type of dictatorship based on a popular plebiscite.” (Butterfield, p. 76)

That this form of judgment exists in history is a thing which I believe can hardly be denied, though it is important to note that its verdicts are an interim affair and not a final judgment on anything. What many would deny of course is the view that this form of judgment is a judgment of God. It is embedded in the very constitution of the universe, but those who do not believe in Christianity will hardly admit that it is there by any providential and purposeful ordination. (Butterfield, p. 78)

Judgements, then, for Butterfield, are an objective feature of reality, and as such are to be recorded by the theologian, but that the judgment was something implemented by God is an interpretation of Christian faith. The sense in which the judgments are objective is that of cause and effect, which works in a moral manner. Even though these judgments fall on systems, that is not where the meaning of history is. “If there is a meaning in history ... it lies not in the systems and organizations that are built over long periods, but in something more essentially human, something in each personality considered for mundane purposes as an end in itself.” (Butterfield, p. 90)

As Butterfield develops his idea of Providence he sounds more and more like a Greek expounding on hubris.

It was the fault of the Germans in two wars that they repeatedly gambled everything on a colossal system of policy which, if it had been a hundred per cent successful, would have been brilliant in its results, but which challenged time and circumstance too boldly in that if it only ninety per cent succeeded – or even ninety-nine, apparently, sometimes – it utterly

failed. All, in fact was dependent on the ability to calculate all possible contingencies and absolutely hit the bull's-eye; and if the object were missed, if it were only nearly achieved, this was irretrievable tragedy, since everything was then worse than before. This is too great a challenge to offer to high Heaven and it has the weakness of the academic or professorial mind which sometimes erects policy into colossal systems, carefully calculated and accurately dove-tailed – all without sufficient allowance for the unpredictable things that happen, and all liable to be ruined if a single link in the chain proves unexpectedly weak. (Butterfield, p. 136)

Bebbington's next example is Reinhold Niebuhr, who didn't seem to have much to say so we will skip on to the third example, C. S. Lewis. He in 1950 published an article "Historicism", which he considered "the belief that men can, by the use of their natural powers, discover an inner meaning in the historical process", and in which he opposed attempts to identify Providence in history. "The mark of the Historicist is that he tries to get from historical premises conclusions which are more than historical; conclusions metaphysical or theological or [...] atheo-logical." (Quoted in Phillip Irving Mitchell, (2020) "'Written by the Finger of God': C.S. Lewis and Historical Judgement," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 38 : No. 2 , Article 2. p. 6) This sounds like a repetition of Lessing's "ugly broad ditch" that "accidental truths of history can never become the proof for necessary truths of reason." Bebbington explains Lewis's position this way:

First, to read all calamities as judgements is to claim without justification to be as inspired as the prophets who so read certain Old Testament calamities. Secondly, passages in Scripture such as the book of Job, Isaiah's picture of the suffering servant and Jesus' answers about the disaster at Siloam are rebuffs to understanding suffering as punishment. ... Lewis goes on to deny that we can extract the meaning of history from the fragmentary evidence of the bit of the past that is left to us. (Bebbington, p. 180)

According to Mitchell in the cited article, Lewis's concern was to protect human freedom. "Lewis feared a science of history was a threat to human free agency and to the foundations of human moral decision-making."

Lewis's argument from the existential and personal raises many points of tension. Formulated, thusly, 1) autobiographical history becomes the ideal shape and end of history; 2) the study of the larger past seems limited to what immediate truth it can provide the reader or scholar; 3) the purpose of history becomes the self (before God, of course) rather than any genuine love of the other; and 4) as a result, history as a discipline is relegated to the Platonic shadows. (Mitchell, pp. 8-9)

Lewis used the idea of eschatology against scientific, predictive history. In Mitchell's explanation, "The final parousia is 'a sudden, violent end imposed from without,' an end to the play that we cannot read, being that we are in it. Our not knowing what the future holds offers us dramatic freedom: 'The playing it well is what matters infinitely'." (Mitchell, p. 9) Here we again see the idea that the meaning of history comes from its end outside of history.

Bebbington next gives an example of the adoption of the idea of progress by a Christian historian, which he sees as "damaging to a Christian worldview." Shirley Jackson Case in *The Christian Philosophy of History* (1943) had written:

History to date is also reassuring. Even the casual observer realizes the tremendous spread of moral and spiritual interests over the earth during the last two thousand years. A gradually enlarging circle of mankind has learned to cherish ways of living that exemplify honesty, justice, and brotherly kindness. (Case, p. 217, quoted in Bebbington, p. 181)

Bebbington notes that this statement was made at the height of the holocaust.

### **Principled Providence**

As a contrast to anything Bebbington is willing to consider, we can look at the idea of law governed, principled Providence. In 1955 Frederick Nymeyer, founder of Libertarian Press and editor of *Progressive Calvinism* engaged in a controversy with Bruns Slot, editor of *Trouw*, in the Netherlands, that was essentially about the existence of Providence in history, but of a particular type of Providence. Slot had written:

First we would like to call attention to the fact that this magazine [*Progressive Calvinism*] wishes to establish that it is typically American. It surrounds the “free enterprise” idea with a sort of American mysticism, whereby “unrestricted prosperity” and “free enterprise” are viewed as two sides of the same coin. This idea that unrestricted prosperity and free enterprise are inseparably tied together is prevalent in certain extreme Republican circles, without there being recognition of the fact that the relationship was possible by a combination of circumstances in a particular country [United States], in a particular era of enormous expansion potentialities for everybody, without there being thereby any necessity to resort to the violation of the legitimate interests of others.

Further, but an understandable American self-consciousness, some Americans come to accept, as if it were a universally valid dogma, a system which in a specific set of circumstances did not work out badly. (Quoted in *Progressive Calvinism*, December 1955, p. 360)

“In short”, Nymeyer notes, in Slot’s view “America has been prosperous by *luck*, under special circumstances which as an exception permitted freedom from government interventionism. Bruins Slot clearly indicates that if luck had not been with us, then in order to have had prosperity *and also justice*, we could not have retained a free market society, but we would have required an interventionist society...” (*Progressive Calvinism*, p. 361.) To this Nymeyer opposed his own view.

1. We are confident that God through the universal validity of His moral law *does* reward the good and punish evil. There are exceptions, but they are exceptions and not the basic pattern. The exceptions are caused by the unpredictable events in the natural world, and by violation of the law of God by individual men and by men collectively (especially governments).
- 2) The basic characteristic of a society organized according to the law of God is the absence of coercion (in other words, obedience to the Sixth Commandment), except that there be that coercion which is used to keep men from open evil – violence, theft, fraud, adultery (the Second Table of the Law).
- 3) That is the kind of noncoercive society (avoiding coercion as forbidden by the Sixth Commandment) that the Founding Fathers of this country set up. Probably it is the most noncoercive society, and certainly it was one of the most noncoercive societies that has ever existed.
- 4) The prosperity of the United States is, we believe, *exactly because that kind of society was organized*. We consider that original American society to be based on the law of God far

more than the government of the Netherlands was at any time under the premiership of Abraham Kuyper, because Abraham Kuyper promoted an interventionist society (involving coercion) and not a free society. Read his works if you doubt it. The man had confidence in bureaucrats and laws beyond the Decalogue. (*Progressive Calvinism*, p. 363.)

Here, in the instance of economics, is view of patterns *in* history (not the shape of history as a whole) and that is an account of the working of general Providence that is regular and discoverable. It does not rely on an overall shape given to history by its arriving at a judgement day when history is over. Neither does it depend on the millennial idea. Historical developments get their meaning from the people who take part in them, not from a future era they will never live to see, that imparts a shape to history as a whole. This type of explanation does work as a replacement for the idea of progress, as it depends on the nature of human action, not the inevitable flow of history, yet also explains progress in history, and its opposite. If we take Bebbington's example against Shirley Jackson Case, the catastrophe of the WW II concerned major powers which had consciously and publicly repudiated the standard of God's law as having any relevance to them and set about systematically to act contrary to it. Matters ended just where believers in general Providence should expect. Bebbington does not consider any theory of Providence of this sort, only of judgements by the historian based on moral law of a vague sort. He does say, against historicism, that "Christianity offers a standard on of evaluation outside history. God himself is the source and revealer of values." (p. 171) But we are not allowed to see this as God's Providence in history, but only in our judgements of history. Nymeyer's interpretation seems closer to Butterfield's idea that judgments are objective in history as cause and effect, working in a moral manner, than it is to something with which Bebbington would be comfortable.

Bebbington uses the idea that individuals have value in themselves to judge historical theories. The idea of progress in history fails because it sacrifices the value of the lives of individuals for the sake of a future improvement. What value do the collective entities such as nations, peoples, language groups and cultures have in relation to history? He criticises nineteenth century historicists because their "belief in God allowed them to entertain a cultural pluralism." But with "the decline of theism, at least in intellectual circles, there was no longer any reason to suppose that cultural differences have a justification." But God "on the Christian view" (i.e. on Bebbington's view) does not "encourage a *congeries* of contradictory values to grow up on the soil of history." ... "Yet at the same time a Christian view shares the historical conviction that human beings have value in themselves. No human beings are dispensable for the sake of posterity. Human fulfilment is possible in the present." (p. 171) But he seems to mean individuals. The collectives are brought up only to call them a *congeries* that offend God. That being the case, Bebbington would not be able to see a Providence at work in relation to them, which goes part way to explain his problems with the idea.

Bebbington has some passages where he talks about Jesus solving the problem of suffering in historical interpretation by his own suffering. But, besides a reference to this also guaranteeing his own triumph at the end of history by his victory on the cross over the powers, that is about all Jesus seems to do in history until he ends it. Missing is an explanation of why Jesus came in the midst of history and how that changed everything. Also, why is there a long before as well as a long after? If Bebbington is going to make something out of the shape of history, why ignore the most important feature, that it has a middle? As far as we can learn anything from the amillennials, the first and second advents might as well have happened together at the end of history, because the intervening periods don't mean anything. But the meaning of history does not arrive suddenly from outside at the end of history, but enters into history in the very midst of history, and takes hold of history. (See,

for example, chapter 5 “The Missionary Endeavour as a History-Making Force”, of Hendrikus Berkof, *Christ the Meaning of History*.)

### **The idea of progress**

“The idea of progress that emerged in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century was a secularization of the Christian view of history. ... It is linear, offers confidence in the future and entails acceptance of unchanging moral values.” (p. 68) This line was no longer from creation to the judgement, but from some arbitrary cultural starting point into the future. The origin had depended on man’s initiative and the future was also up to man. Nevertheless, Bebbington says that in “the eighteenth century and sometimes afterwards there was a strong conviction that the course of history was predetermined.” He sees a third element of the idea of progress in the existence of an enduring criterion to determine what is progress. What the criterion was could vary according to the theory and might be rationality, or happiness. How the criterion was understood might indicate that progress would reach an ideal state, or it might go on into an indefinite improving future. But either way the criterion was understood as objective and valid for everyone everywhere.

Bebbington traces the origin of the idea of progress to various late seventeenth century writers, particularly those engaged in a controversy over whether modern writers could equal the ancients. But this applied only to literature, whereas a more important influence came from “philosophically-minded theologians” who were incorporating a future millennial state into their conceptions of history. Also these theologians shared the confidence in reason which was the foundation for later Enlightenment thinkers.

In looking only at the future orientation of these theologians, Bebbington misses a previous century of development with regard to the rise of civilization from the primitive human condition. This is another type of theory of history with roots in Roman law. It is the myth of the origin of society with the social contract, which was even mentioned by Cicero. The basic scheme is that of an original primitive disordered human condition, wherein a solution is found by people coming together and surrendering their liberty to form a shared government. This government establishes order, justice and predictability and enables the rise of culture. The move from primitivism to culture was a widespread theory of the shape of history from a century before the Enlightenment until the end of the Enlightenment. Richard Hooker gave it a substantial development in *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie* (1594), at the same time trying to fit it onto Biblical history. The authority of reason was also a major component of his project. Thomas Hobbes in *De Cive* and *Leviathan* (1650) also depicted society arising from a primitive state, which he famously described as a condition where life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”, to a state of culture through the social contract. The idea of human society emerging from primitivism through a rational human arrangement created a foundational view of the past upon which Enlightenment projections about the future could be built.

As an historian, Bebbington is interested in a change in historiography that was part of the Enlightenment. There was criticism of earlier history focused on accumulation of detailed facts about the past and a demand for an explanatory narrative called philosophical history. Among some there was also increased scepticism about what could be known. In making history more appealing the Enlightenment writers, such as Voltaire, concentrated on the things that mattered to them. Voltaire wrote in his introduction to the history of the age of Louis XVI:

In this history we shall confine ourselves only to what is deserving the attention of all ages, what paints the genius and manners of mankind, contributes to instruction, and prompts to love of virtue, of the arts, and of our country. (Quoted in Babbington, p. 75)

Bebbington finds in these writers an animus against Christianity which gave the attraction to the alternative values they promoted.

Enlightenment ideas about history were supported by the new science. “If (following Newton) the external world is subject to consistent laws and if (following Locke) human knowledge is given by the external world, then people will everywhere and always be formed by experience of a single order. The result was belief that human nature is constant.” (p. 77) This accounts for the element of the theory of progress that progress is the same for everyone, but how could a static human nature be compatible with progress? The answer of some was that the desire and capacity for progress was intrinsic to human nature. But any real explanation required a basis in the external world. Adam Smith found the key in the division of labor. Rousseau emphasized the need to control the experience of the external environment through education. Finally there was the need to remove the breaks to progress. Bebbington quotes Condillac, “The progress of reason is never retarded save by the vices of government.” (p. 79) These elements are very much still with us in the political agendas with environmentalist theories such as behaviorism, manipulation of the population through control of state education, and political revolution as the way to open the gate of progress. Therefore the assumptions of the Enlightenment are still in place, and claims by the postmodernists to be against them are more posturing than reality. It is a shortcoming of the sort of analysis that Bebbington does that as he moves on to newly arriving historical movements he tends to miss how these augment rather than replace the earlier ones, because it takes too seriously the newcomers’s claims to have exploded the credibility and authority of its predecessors.

Once the means have been attended to and the obstacles removed a future of unlimited opportunities is opened up. “History is moving towards a goal, ‘glorious and paradisaical, beyond what our imagi[n]ations can now conceive.’ The phraseology of this description by Joseph Priestley, English dissenting minister as well as chemist, reveals a debt of such teleology to its Christian background. But by the last years of the eighteenth century the millennium had been shorn of its Christian overtones and firmly incorporated in a body of thought that was often militantly secular.” (p. 80) But Gertrude Himmelfarb presents Richard Price and Joseph Priestley as major Enlightenment figures but making a stark contrast to the French type, because of their religious commitments.

Priestley himself wrote a critique of *Age of Reason*, agreeing with Paine in rejecting the Trinity and divinity of Christ, but ardently affirming the Bible as the product of divine revelation. Indeed, both Price and Priestley were obsessed by religion, not in the sense that an aggressively anti-religious thinker may be said to be obsessed by it, making a religion of irreligion, but in a truly religious sense. They were as passionate in pursuing scriptural evidence for the millennium—a spiritual and temporal millennium in one—as they were in their opposition to any established church. William Hazlitt called Priestley “the Voltaire of Unitarianism.” But Voltaire would have been appalled by Priestley’s apocalyptic millenarianism based on a literal reading of biblical prophecies as revealed truth. (Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004) p. 103)

Himmelfarb is driven to postulating three Enlightenments, the British, the French and the American (she ignores Germany) in order account for all the extraneous elements that don’t fit the definition

based on the French *philosophes*. But even these Enlightenments tend to fragment, with the British Enlightenment including figures such as Price and Priestley who shared the French enthusiasm for the authority of reason, but also the Scottish moralists (including Adam Smith) who instead relied on a moral sense.

The idea of progress moved past the Enlightenment through the strange characters of Henri de Saint-Simon and August Comte. Saint-Simon dropped the idea that since the present age was enlightened, what came before must have been an age of darkness. "He showers praise on every period of the past on the ground that each was necessary for the achievement of the present." Bebbington sees this as a move toward a relativistic historicism, but it could also be viewed as a more scientific attitude toward history, that progress must necessarily have involved stages which must be understood instead of denigrated. Also there was an appreciation of a broader view of man, and even the recognition of the need for a religious element for which Saint-Simon proposed his New Christianity. Comte tried to be even more scientific with his philosophy of positivism. He wanted to apply the method of observation, experimentation and extracting laws to the study of society through a social science.

Not only sociology but literature, including the writing of history, were captured by the idea of progress. Historians interpreting the past as progress favored those events whose outcomes led to the present and those persons whose values resembled the present, the present having been vindicated as the fruit of progress. But Bebbington sees the view declining in the twentieth century. And the variations in the theories produce different ideas of progress and different levels of confidence in its future.

## **Historicism**

Historicism evaluates history relative to its particular context. "Customs and beliefs are like flowers that will flourish only in a particular soil. Historicists placed stress on the nation as the ground where particular values take root." (p. 93) Whereas the idea of progress proponents in the Enlightenment thought we could understand all times because people are all alike, historicism holds that they are all different, and raises the problem of whether historic understanding is possible. The solution to this was a sort of sympathetic intuition.

Some historicist historians existed in the seventeenth century. Bebbington mentions Jean Bodin, La Popelinière and Giambattista Vico. Vico, he says, was reacting against Descartes. Here things get a little peculiar. Bebbington says: "The only opinions worthy of the title 'knowledge', according to Descartes, are reached by deductive reasoning from undoubted premises. Certainty is attainable only in disciplines that can be made to approximate to mathematics." (p. 95) In contrast, Vico, at one time a Cartesian, opposed its rejection of history:

[Vico] defended history as a truth-finding discipline in his *New Science* of 1725 (revised 1730 and 1744). He emphasized, just as the historicists were to do, that history has a method different from other disciplines. He began with the common-sense principle that the maker of an object is best placed to understand it. Man can understand something of nature by experimenting on a part of it, but only God, as its creator, can understand the whole. Natural science can therefore discover only partial knowledge. The whole of mathematics might certainly be understood by man since he invents the premises, but the resulting knowledge is of an artificial abstraction. Mathematics can therefore reveal knowledge that is merely fictional. History produces knowledge of reality.... (pp. 95-96)

About a decade after Bebbington published his, new evaluations of figures such as Descartes began to appear. The role of voluntarism in intellectual history began to be appreciated. Descartes's starting point "I think, therefore I am." came to be seen, not as an undoubted premise, but a self-authenticating act of reason. (See the chapter on Descartes in Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (University of Chicago Press, 2008)) In his *The Ethics of Geometry* David Rapport Lachterman describes a change from the ancient, Euclidian approach to mathematics by a series of proofs of theorems, to an orientation to problem solving and constructibility. Man could only have confidence in the products of his own reason. Only then could he be sure of their reality.

Vico's role in the history of post-Cartesian thinking is of considerable interest here, not least because of contemporary efforts to make of him a genuine *alternative* starting-point for modern philosophy, attempts in which his rhetorical-topical style of understanding the history of human institutions is contrasted with the analytical and mathematical method of Descartes. These efforts are, in the main, misguided inasmuch as they overlook the essentially mathematical roots and orientation of Vico's conception of human knowing. To put the matter as synoptically as possible: His most famous (and most controversial) proposition, *verum et factum convertuntur*, "the true and the made are convertible [that is, have identical denotation]," abbreviates this mathematical conception of knowing while at the same time disclosing its source in one and the same modern understanding of mind, of mind as the source of making, shared by Vico's Cartesian interlocutors. (David Rapport Lachterman, *The Ethics of Geometry: A Genealogy of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1989) p. 7.

Vico approaches all of "the human things," the "customs, laws and ideas of the gentile nations," as constructions or *poiēmata* that must be understood by tracing them back to their originative elements. ... His science retrospectively "makes" the truth by arranging and sending forth the elements and the guises they assume from their birth to their dissolution and recurrence. ...

"Ingenuity is given to man for the sake of knowing, that is, of making [*ad sciendum seu faciendum*]" (pp, 8-9)

"Vico accepts this startling conclusion." Isaiah Berlin explains, "The truth is what is made: and because mathematics is 'operatrix' ('productive') it is a science. We do not create the things in space, hence physics is not, for us, *verum*." (Isaiah Berlin, "Vico's Theory of Knowledge and Its Sources", *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* (Princeton University Press) p. 123)

Yet our knowledge of our own ideas and volitions, individual and social, including past experience – both that which man have individually and that which they share with others – is not simply given us as a brute fact: we can understand ourselves as we cannot understand stocks and stones. Men are finite and fallible creatures and so cannot understand even their own mental processes wholly. To understand other men, and what they were and the worlds they 'created', is to recognize – imaginatively grasp – their experience within the potentialities of our own human consciousness: '*dentro le modificazioni della nostra medesima mente umana*'. What is wholly unlike ourselves we cannot hope to understand. We can understand only that which is potentially our own, which men can be or become without ceasing to be men. That is why it is not utterly impossible, although agonizingly difficult, to enter into the outlook – the thoughts, feelings, fears, hopes, ambitions, imaginative experience – of beings very different and remote from us, like our first ancestors, the 'horrible' *bestioni*, Polyphemus in his cave. (Berlin, pp. 125-126)

Vico distinguished sacred history from ordinary history. In sacred history, as related in the Bible, there were special providences, but in general history only general providence. Bebbington, suggests that this is a consequence of Vico's philosophy of knowledge. "According to the Christian view, God is the maker of history. But if God is its maker, Vico supposed, man cannot be. A mental affinity for people in the past would become impossible, and so Vico's defence of historical knowledge would crumble. Divine control of history is minimized in order to guarantee that man should be the maker of his own history." (Bebbington, p. 96)

The main current of historicism appeared in late eighteenth century Germany. Bebbington's explanation is itself very historicist. There were unique cultural patterns in Germany that only allowed the Enlightenment to enter in modified form. "Religion of a markedly other-worldly type had put down deep roots in German soil, and historical research characteristic of the age of erudition had become normal. Hence the *Aufklärer* were dismayed by the scorn for revealed religion evident in the writings of Voltaire and his contemporaries. And they feared that philosophical history in the French or Scottish manner paid too little attention to the detail of the past." (p. 97) Also, for their understanding of the past and other cultures, the historicists relied on a peculiarly German idea of understanding, called *Verstehen*, a term that cannot be translated.

Bebbington locates the origin of this idea in the idea of spiritual illumination of German pietism. "Special intuition, especially of the Bible, is the method of discovering important truths. The contrast was an assumption that lived on in the minds of the many thinkers of the German Enlightenment who had received a pietist upbringing. ... The historian, they came to believe, has a direct, non-rational understanding of historical evidence that enables him to know what happened in the past." (p. 98) Pietist illumination, however, was the work of God in the mind. The historian must rely on some sort of imaginative recreation such as Vico had in mind. Bebbington suggests that this took the form of Kantian idealism, according to which the phenomenal world was a construction of the mind anyway. (p. 101)

The most archetypal historicist was Leopold von Ranke. He is thought of in English speaking countries as the "exemplar of value-free objectivity."

His dictum that the historian must concern himself only with 'what actually happened' has become the most common of commonplaces on historical thought. But this is a distorted image of the man, founded on a mistranslation. Ranke's phrase, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, contains an adverb, *eigentlich*, which certainly means 'actually' in twentieth-century German usage. In Ranke's own nineteenth-century usage, however, it usually meant 'essentially'. His phrase, then, should properly be rendered 'what essentially happened.' Ranke was not saying that the past must be accurately recorded by a historian whose mind must penetrate to the inwardness of events. He was expressing the normal historicist belief that intuition enables the historian to divine the essence of the past. (pp. 107-108)

Wilhelm Dilthey tried to give more substance to the account of this intuitive understanding. "The process of 'understanding', according to Dilthey, is not so much an irrational jump of feeling as an intelligible method, guided by principles that can be laid down – principles that Dilthey called 'hermeneutics'. Dilthey found in the early nineteenth-century theologian Schleiermacher principles for interpreting the Bible ... and recognized that they can be applied to any documents. Further, according to Dilthey, human beings can be studied as though they were documents." (pp. 109-110) Once again we find the move from Biblical interpretation to historical interpretation.

Romanticism also contributed to historicism with its idea of the active presence of the divine in the world.

There was a strong sense of the divine underpinning of the historical process. Each group, historicists held, is shaped by history. But history is in turn working out the purposes of the God who is present in it. The variety of customs that have emerged over time do not suggest that God is at work in the history of some peoples, but not in the history of others. On the contrary, the variety of customs gives evidence of the manifold wisdom of God. (p. 102)

The most important exponent of the ideas that went into historicism was Johann Gottfried von Herder, who thought that “each culture has values that cannot justly be compared with the values of other cultures. ... He did not entirely reject the notion of progress, but held that it can take place only within a given nation and cannot be measured on any single scale. ... Language is the characteristic that divides one nation most clearly from another. The language gives each nation a corporate identity, a personality.” (p. 104)

Bebbington faults historicism because it “holds that the flux of history eliminates any constancy in man. There is no such thing as human nature.” But we have seen that it is the common human nature that makes the historicist act of understanding possible, so a common human nature is the foundational historicist doctrine. But there is also a variability in human nature, a capacity for creating and responding to a variability of society. The French Enlightenment had denied this variable nature, and despised the variation of places and eras. The actual views of historicism seems closer to the view that Bebbington wants to accept, than his characterization of it. He also faults historicism with a focus on the German nation, and therefore boosting German nationalism. He never faults the rabid French nationalism of the time, which took France into conflict with Germany, so this seems to be due to his English prejudice as was the case with Butterfield. In the end he most faults historicism’s “lack of foundations.” “Historicism collapsed into historical relativism. There was no ground for preferring one custom to another, one moral code to another or even, most crucially, historicism to another view.” (pp. 115-116)

### **Marxist history**

Bebbington devotes a whole chapter to Marxist historical theory, even though the main support of this theory was the readiness of Marxists to shoot those who would not accept it. At the time that Bebbington wrote, however, the Soviet Union was still a thing, and malcontents world wide idealized it, hoping that Soviet power would in some way contribute to the destruction of the societies that they hated. This use of Marxist theory has contributed to the problem that Bebbington notes at the start of his chapter. “The problem is that Marxism has been distorted both by its friends and its foes.” (p. 117) Bebbington set out to distinguish Hegelianism from Marxism, the young Marx from the mature Marx, Marx from Engels, Marx from the pre-Revolution Marxists, these from the Soviet Marxists, and the Soviet Marxists from the late Western Marxists, particularly those of the Frankfurt school. The Frankfurt school is especially interesting as it has been particularly influential, but also has departed furthest from Marx, tending toward a pessimistic view of history. History had not worked out according to the expectations of Marxist theory and they blamed history.

As for actual historical writing by Marxists, in the Soviet Union, of course, that was all that was allowed. The best known of those writers was M. N. Pokrovsky, though even he came under attack after his death from the changing party line. In France where he says Marxist influence on historical writing has been strongest, Bebbington’s account suggests that they have mainly concerned

themselves with reinterpreting revolutions. On the whole Marxism does not seem to have contributed much to the craft.

This is followed by a long chapter on historiography comparing the positivist, idealist and Marxist approaches to historiography. He concludes it with a section on the Christian philosophy of historiography. The positivist theories emphasize evidence, causality, lawful explanation and determinism; idealism the uniqueness, interiority and freedom of history. He thinks that the positivist and idealist approaches can be combined as complimentary views. Christianity, in Bebbington's view, embraces these irreconcilable perspectives, so this synthetic perspectival view of history can be considered a Christian historiography. The relevance of the Marxist historiographies is that they grew out of Hegelianism, which was an earlier synthesis of the idea of progress and idealism. Bebbington looks in some detail at the mid-eighteenth century historian Johann Martin Chladenius as an example of Christian history that succeeded with this idea of combining perspectives and also by insisting the historian wrote from a point of view.

## **Conclusion**

In the Afterward added to the 1990 edition Bebbington reviews the most important trends of the previous decade. This principally are the postmodern writers. He gives a brief summary of the conclusions of Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Hayden White, Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty and dismisses them because he does not like their conclusions. He does not try to explain and refute their analysis.

Bebbington's idea of Christian history comes down to three things. The first is an idea about the overall shape of history, namely that it must be linear. This, along with the millennial ideas which he rejects but which sometimes accompany it, does not really get at what is going on in history that make a difference to a theory of historical activity, and is sometimes merely a cliché. The second is a sort of syncretism that hope to obtain the best of other historiographies by combining them as perspectives. The third is that the Christian writes from a point of view, which includes his moral opinion of what takes place in history. Against this we suggest that a Christian view of history has to present the coming of the Kingdom, in and through history, and not merely at the end of it.