

History and the God of the Second Chance

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The Dynamics of World History, by Christopher Dawson, edited by John J. Mulloy. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956.

NONE OF THE disciplines has been more adversely affected by the increasing fragmentation and social dissolution which has afflicted our liberal civilization than has the study of history. The pursuit of the Fact, isolated from tradition and devoid of social meaning, has degraded history from the position which it held in the nineteenth century as the queen of the sciences to the study of "one damned thing after another." The lectures of the historian are increasingly deserted; and the student has turned to those of the anthropologist, the sociologist, and especially those of the psychologist. It has seemed to many that history may be on the brink of slipping into the oblivion which the trivial merits and always suffers.

For the present predicament of history, the historian has no one to blame but himself. Lord Acton wrote, "The process of civilization depends on transcending nationality. Everything is tried by more courts, before a larger audience—comparative method is applied, influences which are accidental yield to those which are rational." Fifty years after this, the vision of most historians is still circumscribed by

what Oswald Spengler described as a "Ptolomaic view" of historical reality. This "pre-Copernican" viewpoint locks us within our particular cultures and leads the historian to the patient and tireless collection of parochial facts which in our expanded world of cultures and civilizations in conflict are largely meaningless.

This conception of the historian as a kind of glorified stamp-collector is a recent idea. The Judeo-Christian historical tradition is entirely opposed to the view that the values of history are at best humanistic or those of contemplative wonder at the variety and chaos of experience. Judaism and Christianity are not only historical religions but both assert that God is revealed through time and that His actions are justified by time. Time and eternity, nature and grace, are aspects of one reality; and prophet and historian interpret the meaning of events in both the natural and the supernatural order. Prophet and historian alike are engaged in the task of reading the "signs of the times." "Watchman, what of the night? The watchman said, 'The morning cometh, and also the night: if ye will enquire, enquire ye' . . ." "Now learn a parable of the fig tree; when his branch is yet tender and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh." The prophet and the historian are not nearly so concerned with divining the future as with discovering the implications of the past and present.

The Renaissance, rationalism, and liberalism all tended to ignore the prophetic

mission of the historian; and it was not until the French Revolution swept away the certainties of European experience that men turned once again to reading the signs of the times. Tocqueville wrote: "The whole book. [*Democracy in America*], which is here offered to the public has been written under the impression of a kind of religious dread produced in the author's mind by the contemplation of the irresistible revolution that has advanced for centuries in spite of such amazing obstacles, and which is still proceeding in the midst of the ruins it has made. It is not necessary that God Himself should speak in order to disclose to us the unquestionable signs of His will; we can discern them in the habitual course of nature and in the invariable tendency of events." Conservative historians and social thinkers, confronted with the dissolution of European society, once again asked what was the pattern and direction of history. It is to this Christian and Conservative tradition that the English historian Christopher Dawson belongs.

Christopher Dawson, in *The Dynamics of World History*, offers us no modern *City of God*. Nor is the book an historical *Summa* in the sense of the work of Spenger and Toynbee. This collection of previously published essays establishes, rather, Mr. Dawson's claim to a position as a great and original historical critic. If the exposition of his own system is tentative and at times uncertain, his criticism of other systems is nothing short of brilliant. His tests of soundness are not philosophical or logical consistency, but the demand that every philosophy of history live up to the facts of historical reality. It is because of this position that he can assert the absolute need of historical system and at the same time criticize with such telling certainty the systems of Marx, of Spengler, and of Toynbee. Mr. Dawson's real service is that of the man who poses the right questions and rejects the wrong conclusions.

For all the insistence upon system, a limited determinism, and a clear cut ma-

terialism, Mr. Dawson does not belong to the ever-growing school of historical pessimists. He does not pretend to read the future. He is the diagnostician of the present. The future is in the hands of men whose free choices in part transcend the determinisms and limitations of the present. Above all the future is in the hands of Providence. His philosophy is pervaded by the Christian virtues, and Faith and Hope rather than Tyche are the handmaidens of the future. He might have said, as Lord Acton did in his inaugural lecture as Regius Professor, "But I hope that even this narrow and disedifying section, (the modern period), of history will aid you to see that the action of Christ who is risen on mankind whom he redeemed fails not, but increases; that the wisdom of divine rule appears not in the perfection but in the improvement of the world; and that achieved liberty is the one ethical result that rests on the converging and combined conditions of advancing civilization. Then you will understand what a famous philosopher said, that history is the true demonstration of religion."

Mr. Dawson speaks with assurance when he tells us that history must renew itself and that this renewal can come only through a new conceptualization of the purposes of history. "Hence the essence of history is not to be found in facts but in traditions. The pure fact is not as such historical. It only becomes historical when it can be brought into relation with a social tradition." The time for "operational definitions" in the field of historical study is past. We must look beyond facts to meaning and to purpose.

Meaning and direction, however, are not apt to emerge in the parochial study of one culture, one civilization, or one religious tradition. And the work of the sociologist and the social anthropologist must serve as the springboard for any genuine historical study. They constitute another dimension of social experience. It is only when the historian makes the comparative method the tool of his studies that he can move

beyond the provinciality of national, class, and religious prejudice. The meaning of Western civilization emerges only when it is confronted by another civilization. It is in these dramatic historical confrontations that the meaning of culture, civilization, and religion emerges.

It is in these confrontations, too, that cultures and civilizations are enriched and expanded. It is because of this that every period of crisis is a period of hope, that the periods of cultural dissolution can be, and frequently are, periods of great innovation and harbingers of a new cultural era.

The God who dominates Christian historical thinking is not the God of inexorable fate; he is the God of the second chance. For this reason Christopher Dawson quotes Joseph de Maistre with enthusiasm when de Maistre writes, "Man in his ignorance often deceives himself as to ends and means, as to forces and resistance, as to instruments and obstacles. Sometimes he tries to cut down an oak with a pocket-knife, and sometimes he throws a bomb to break a reed. But Providence never wavers, and it is not in vain that it shakes the world. Everything proclaims that we are moving towards a great unity which, to use a religious expression, we must hail from afar. We have been grievously and justly broken, but if such eyes as mine are worthy to forsee the divine purpose, we have been broken only to be made one."
