

# Where is History Going?

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Henry Ford is said to have defined history as "the succession of one damned thing after another." Such a definition, if taken seriously (and Ford would no doubt have been appalled to find it taken seriously), is based on the assumption that history is not going anywhere—history has no ultimate goal or purpose.

This judgment is by no means uncommon in our time. At the American Historical Association's annual luncheon conference in Chicago, December 30, 1962, Arthur Schlesinger (formerly of Harvard, recently of the White House), in speaking on the general topic, "The Historian and History," stated his opposition to all monistic philosophies of history and identified his own position with William James' pluralism. For the kind of question we have posed in the title of this paper - "Where is history going?" - Schlesinger saw a parable in the words of the dying Gertrude Stein; when she asked on her deathbed, "What is the answer?" and none came, she said, "Then what is the question?" An answer was impossible because the question had no meaning.

Schlesinger makes his historical philosophy even more explicit in his latest book, *The Politics of Hope*. A selection from this book appeared under the title "Speaking Out: The Failure of World Communism," in the May 19, 1962, *Saturday Evening Post*. There Schlesinger concludes:

American liberalism stands in sharp contrast to the millennial nostalgia which still characterizes both the American right and the European left—the notion that the day will come when all conflict will pass, when Satan will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, and mankind will behold a new heaven and a new earth... Freedom is inseparable from struggle; and freedom, as Brandeis said, is the great developer; it is both the means employed and the end attained. This, I believe, states the essence of the progressive hope—this and the understanding that the struggle itself offers not only better opportunities for others but also a measure of fulfillment for oneself.

For Schlesinger, then, the idea of history having a single purpose or goal is meaningless and deceptive; one must struggle for maximum freedom in the present, and see in this struggle itself the fulfillment that others have mistakenly attached to some ultimate historical millennium.

But in spite of the pithy quality of Henry Ford's alleged definition and in spite of the appealing elements in Schlesinger's argument, such historical nihilisms and pluralisms ring a bit hollow. Is the question, "Where is history going?" really a question that has no answers? Is it a question that has a multiplicity of equally possible answers? The problem, I believe, parallels—and is indeed a special case of—the basic philosophical problem of the one and the many. The human mind finds it exceedingly difficult to look upon diversity and plurality, in the universe in general or in history in particular, without

seeking for a single explanation that can give meaning to it all. In a criticism of philosopher Paul Weiss' *Modes of Being*, which conceives the universe as having four ultimate dimensions of being, W. N. Clarke perceptively wrote in the *Yale Review* (September, 1958): "Until Professor Weiss moves a little closer to the common insight of all the great metaphysicians of the past, namely, that there can be no many without a One, I fear that his four-fold universe neither is nor can ever really be." Perhaps in history, also, "there can be no many without a One."

Let us begin with some of the representative attempts, since the rise of modern secularism in the eighteenth-century "Enlightenment," to find unity and meaning in the historical process. An analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of these attempts will, I believe, lead us to a solution of a radically different and strikingly more satisfactory kind.

### **Secular Historiography Since the "Enlightenment"**<sup>1</sup>

Symbolic of the modern worldview, ushered in by the eighteenth-century "Age of Reason," was the dramatic rededication on November 9, 1793, of the Cathedral of Notre Dame to the goddess Reason. From then on, human reason, rather than supposedly "revealed" religion, would provide the answers to man's ultimate problems. We shall briefly consider the answers provided by five modern secular thinkers to the question, "Where is history going?" and see how close to a satisfactory solution the goddess Reason has led them. The five Thinkers will span the modern secular era, for we shall take up, in turn, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Spengler, and Toynbee.

The most profound thinker to be influenced by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment was a philosopher who is often studied in the context of the nineteenth century. However, the outlook of Immanuel Kant "was singularly unhistorical, and he remained in this as in other respects a typical product of the Enlightenment rather than a forerunner of the Romantic Age which was shortly to follow."<sup>2</sup> Kant asserted that "the history of the human race, viewed as a whole, may be regarded as the realization of a hidden plan of nature to bring about a political constitution, internally, and, for this purpose, also - externally perfect, as the only state in which all the capacities implanted by her in mankind can be fully developed."<sup>3</sup> Kant, in other words, held that history is a rational process—that reason actually provides the plan and the goal of history. On the surface this does not appear to be the case always and everywhere, Kant admits, but in reality man's "unsociableness"—his "envious jealousy and vanity" and "insatiable desire of possession or even of power"—turns man from "idleness and inactive contentment" to "further development of his natural capacities."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a more comprehensive presentation of the material to follow, see my recent book, *The Shape of the*

<sup>2</sup> W. H. Walsh, *Philosophy of History: An Introduction* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), p. 122.

<sup>3</sup> This is Kant's eighth proposition in his "Idea Of a Universal History from A Cosmopolitan Point of View"; the translation by W. Hastie is reprinted in Patrick Gardiner, ed., *Theories of History* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959), p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Kant's view suffers from two serious objections; it does not take evil seriously, for it employs the argument that the end justifies the means (in actuality, the means employed always alters the character of the end, so that if an evil means is used, the end becomes evil); and it attempts to say something substantial about the plot of history without investigating the data of historical experience. These objections are sufficient to destroy Kant's proposed philosophy of history, but the importance, of his endeavor cannot be denied; he projected what many would attempt after him: the creation of a philosophy of history on the basis of pure reason.

The great German philosopher Hegel argued that "world history is a rational process,"<sup>5</sup> and that it moves in dialectical fashion through four great "world-historical" epochs (Oriental, Greek, Roman, and Germanic) toward the goal of freedom. In this process, each nation's hour strikes but once, and then it serves as the vehicle of the world spirit of reason and makes its specific contribution to the history of mankind. Great men play their unique roles at crucial junctures—roles which cannot be judged as "good" or "bad" by ordinary moral standards. Hegel's philosophy of history can be (and has been) severely criticized on many counts: it errs (as did Kant's) in purporting to deduce historical substance and goal from reason itself, it suffers from Hegel's Germanic point of view; and its doctrine of the crucial hours of the nations and its meta-ethical evaluation of great men in history can easily be employed to justify national imperialism and unprincipled actions by individuals.

These difficulties in Hegel's system should not, however, obscure its one great merit: the notion of the dialectic and the application of it to history. By dialectic, Hegel meant the tendency both in life and in thought for a position to spawn its own opposite, and for these two extremes to be succeeded by a compromise which partakes of some elements of both of them. Numerous historical examples of dialectic movement will suggest themselves; one illustration is the history of France before, during, and after the French Revolution. The absolute, authoritarian monarchy of the Old Regime can be considered a thesis to which the near anarchy and libertarianism of the Revolutionary period arose as an antithesis; out of both extremes eventually developed a republican form of government which adopted certain elements of both extremes.

It is important to realize that the Hegelian dialectic is really a formal principle which neither discloses the goal of a process nor places any value judgment upon it. The dialectic can describe a continual refinement of good. Indeed, one of the chief errors made by Hegel himself lay in his conviction that the historical dialectic is moving toward the specific goal of freedom. In actuality, the dialectic never requires such a conclusion. Moreover, though Hegel saw reason as the motivating force of the dialectic process in history, the dialectic need not center on ideas. In point of fact, it is the very flexibility of

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<sup>5</sup> On Hegel's philosophy of history, note especially Jean Hyppolite, *Introduction a la philosophie de l'histoire de Hegel* (Paris: Marcel Riviere, 1948).

the dialectic concept that has made it so useful to historians and philosophers whether they have held Hegel's idealistic presuppositions or not.

Marx and his co-worker Friedrich Engels derived from Hegel an understanding of the dialectic process, and also held the positivistic conviction that history follows inexorable natural laws, which, would allow the future to be predicted. However, in taking over Hegel's dialectic, Marx boasted that he "stood it on its head." For Hegel the dialectic represented the action of the spirit of rationality in the historical process, but for Marx such a metaphysic, was completely unrealistic. Marx had been greatly influenced by the German materialist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, who believed that "*der Mensch ist, was er iist.*" (man is what he eats), and consequently he saw materialistic (or more specifically, economic) factors as the determinants of the dialectic. Instead of thought determining nature, Marx maintained that nature determines thought. He built his economic theory of surplus value on this materialistic conception of the dialectic, and became convinced that class struggle, revolutionary action, and, ultimately, a classless society are the inevitable products of the dialectic action. In applying this philosophy to history, Marx recognized four major, stages of development: "In broad outline we can designate the Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal, and the modern bourgeois modes of production as progressive epochs on the economic formation of society."<sup>6</sup> The bourgeois-capitalist phase he regarded as the precursor of the millennial classless society.

Marx's philosophy of history, though accepted with religious veneration by large numbers of people in the world today, falls to the ground on many counts. Its dogmatic materialism is really an unrecognized metaphysic which does not bear up under scrutiny. Moreover, "even if we assume that all history is a history of class struggles, no scientific analysis could ever infer from this that class struggle is *the* essential factor that 'determines' all the rest."<sup>7</sup> Historical events since Marx's day have belied his prophecy that only revolution against capitalism will satisfy the proletariat. Labor unions and governmental antitrust and antimonopolistic legislation have given workers such a high standard of living in the West that good television reception is closer to their hearts than a forceful overthrow of society! Finally, Marx held a very ambiguous view of human nature, in that he saw men as evil exploiters of one another, and yet capable of an idyllic, classless existence once a suitable economic environment was provided. The present state of the U.S.S.R. is an excellent evidence that human nature requires the continuing restraint of government, and that a Marxist state, far from "winnowing away," shows great rigidity and a powerful tendency to fall under the control of a new class—not a

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<sup>6</sup> This statement appears in Marx's Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Orthodox Marxist historians usually interpret historical events a priori in terms of these categories; thus the American Civil War is regarded as a victory of the bourgeois-capitalist phase (represented by the industrialized North) over the older feudal phase (represented by the agrarian, slaveholding South). For a good general presentation of the Marxist philosophy of history over against misinterpretations of it, see Georgi Plekhanov, *Essays in Historical Materialism* (New York International Publishers, 1940).

<sup>7</sup> Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Books, 1957), p. 43.

temporary "dictatorship of the proletariat" but a permanent dictatorship of bureaucratic totalitarians.<sup>8</sup>

The two most ambitious twentieth-century attempts to provide secular scientific conceptualizations of human history have been made by Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee. Spengler in his classic, *The Decline of the West*, argued that history moves in cyclical patterns, and that self-contained human cultures follow a life cycle similar to that of living organisms and nature?<sup>9</sup> Thus a culture develops from barbarism to a civilized classical period, and finally stagnates, decays, and dies in a new barbarism of hypercommercialism. Instead of employing the periodization of ancient, medieval, and modern history, Spengler speaks of four cycles: Indian, Arabian, Antique, and Western (beginning about A.D. 900), which go through the phases of spring, summer, autumn, and winter. "Spengler discovers no enduring progress, no guiding spirit, no ultimate goal, merely an endless repetition of approximately similar experiences."<sup>10</sup>

Spengler was so certain of the scientific character of his interpretation that he claimed it possible to predict the future of our civilization on the basis of its present position (thus his book title), and he made the astounding statement in his Preface to his first edition: "I am convinced that it is not merely a question of writing one out of several possible and merely logically justifiable philosophies, but of writing *the* philosophy of our time, one that is to some extent a natural philosophy and is dimly presaged by all. This may be said without presumption."<sup>11</sup>

Although Spengler's predictions of Western decline seem to be especially well fulfilled in the First World War, the Second World War, the Korean War, and the current "cold war," we must not blind ourselves to the serious fallacies in his work. He assumes that systems of relations (cultures) created by organic beings must have the same life cycles as those beings; but this is by no means necessary (philosophies created by men are also systems of relations, and they obviously do not absorb life cycles—though in many cases it is perhaps unfortunate that they don't!). Spengler suffers from numerous unrecognized value judgments: for example, "Instinct is favored as opposed to understanding, the life of the soil as opposed to the life of the city, faith and reverence for tradition as opposed to

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<sup>8</sup> See Milovan Djilas, *The New Class; An Analysis of the Communist System* (New York: Prager, 1957).

<sup>9</sup> The Spenglerian cycle patterns are well set out in diagrammatic form by Edwin Franden Dakin, *Cycles in History* ("Foundation Reprints," No. 7; Riverside, Conn.: Foundation for the Study of Cycles, 1948).

<sup>10</sup> G.P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* (2d ed.; London: Longmans, Green, 1952), p. xxxv.

<sup>11</sup> *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality*, trans. C.F. Atkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1926), p. xv. Spengler frequently claimed that he was not employing the methods of the natural sciences, and that there is no such thing as absolute truth; but it is clear that in practice he operates with positivistic presuppositions.

rational calculation and self-interest.”<sup>12</sup> Why should these values be accepted rather than a host of others? Finally,

Spengler's book is loaded with a mass of historical learning, but even this is constantly deformed and perverted to fit his thesis. To take one example out of many, he maintains that as part of its fundamental character the classical or Graeco-Roman culture lacked all sense of time, cared nothing for the past or the future, and therefore (unlike the Egyptian, which had a keen time-sense) did not build tombs for its dead. He seems to have forgotten that in Rome orchestral concerts are held every week in the mausoleum of Augustus; that the tomb of Hadrian was for centuries the fortress of the Popes; and that for miles and miles outside the city the ancient roads are lined with the vastest collection of tombs in the whole world. Even the positivistic thinkers of the nineteenth century, in their misguided attempts to reduce history to a science, went no farther in the reckless and unscrupulous falsification of facts.<sup>13</sup>

The most influential living philosopher of history<sup>14</sup> is by all odds Arnold Toynbee, author of the massive work, *A Study of History*. The title of his book should be observed closely, for it indicates a fundamental difference between his approach and Spengler's: Toynbee is presenting, not "the philosophy of our time," but "a study" of world history; in this sense he rejects the pretentiousness of absolutistic positivism. In a discussion with Pieter Geyl, Toynbee stated:

I should never dream of claiming that my particular interpretation is the only one possible. There are, I am sure, many different alternative ways of analyzing history, each of which is true in itself and illuminating as far as it goes, just as, in dissecting an organism, you can throw light on its nature by laying bare either the skeleton or the muscles or the nerves or the circulation of the blood. No single one of these dissections tells the whole truth, but each of them reveals a genuine facet of it. I should be well-content if it turned out that I had laid bare one genuine facet of history, and even then, I should measure my success by the speed with which my own work in my own line was put out of date by further work by other people in the same field.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Gardiner, *op cit.*, p. 188. It is instructive to contrast Spengler's antipathy to the metropolis with Lewis Mumford's *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961),

<sup>13</sup> R G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York Oxford University Press, Galaxy Books, 1956), pp. 182-83.

<sup>14</sup> Walsh argues that Toynbee should not be termed a "historian," for his interests are not those of practicing historical investigators (*op. cit.*, pp. 167-68). This is a doubtful argument, for it could be maintained that practicing historians would more truly fulfill their function if they demonstrated live concern for the issues Toynbee raises.

<sup>15</sup> Toynbee, in Geyl, Toynbee, and Sorokin, *The Pattern of the Past: Can We Determine It?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), pp. 81-82. The same debate is reprinted in Gardiner, *op. cit.*, pp. 307-19.

Toynbee, then, is not a positivist, but he is a scientific historian, in that he searches for general laws which can give meaning to and assist in the understanding of the historical process.

To what conclusions does he come? He has stated that the "two keys" to his interpretation of history are "civilizations and religions."<sup>16</sup> By "civilizations" Toynbee means "the smallest intelligible fields of historical study," i.e., "whole societies and not arbitrarily insulated fragments of them like the nation-states of the modern West."<sup>17</sup> He isolates thirty-four civilizations, including thirteen "independent" civilizations, fifteen "satellite" civilizations, and six "abortive" civilizations.<sup>18</sup> Each of these is distinguished by a dominant motif; the "Sinic," for example—roughly equivalent to Chinese—is characterized by deep respect for family tradition. These civilizations are analyzed in an attempt to determine their patterns of cultural genesis, growth, and breakdown; and Toynbee presents his "challenge-and-response" theory to explain why so many of them have died. In essence, this theory holds that no civilization dies because of determinist necessity, but because of inadequate response on its own part to the challenges facing it. Western civilization, for example, now faces the challenge of nuclear war, and our response to this challenge can mean the difference between life or death for our society. Here Toynbee introduces Aristotle's principle of the Golden Mean, and states that a challenge of the greatest stimulating power will be neither too severe (so as to discourage response) nor too mild (so as to present no vital issue); it must strike the mean to elicit maximum response.

Toynbee's second "key," which receives increasing emphasis in the later volumes of *A Study of History*, is religion.<sup>19</sup> Its significance lies in the fact that it provides the only creative way to transform society and move beyond a collapsing culture. Therefore Toynbee can say that "the societies of the species called civilizations will have fulfilled their function when once they have brought a mature higher religion to birth,"<sup>20</sup> and can express the hope that, with the higher religions acting as "chrysalises," there will arise a "future ecumenical civilization, starting in a Western framework and on a Western basis, but progressively drawing contributions from the living non-Western civilizations

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<sup>16</sup> In a National Broadcasting Company "Wisdom Series" film discussion with Christopher Wright teaching fellow at Harvard University. The film is distributed by Encyclopaedia Britannica Films, Inc.

<sup>17</sup> Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), chap. 1.

<sup>18</sup> *A Study of History*, XII (*Reconsiderations*) (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 546-61. This represents Toynbee's latest position. "In the course of the first ten volumes of this book I arrived at a list of twenty-three full-blown civilizations, four that were arrested at an early stage in their growth, and five that were abortive" (p. 546).

<sup>19</sup> So strong is this emphasis that Geyl titles his critique of Vols. VII-X of *A Study of History*, "Toynbee the Prophet" (Pieter Geyl, *Debates With Historians* [London: B. T. Botsford, 1955], pp. 158-78).

<sup>20</sup> *Civilization on Trial*, p. 236.

embraced in it."<sup>21</sup> He refuses to believe that any one of the four living "higher religions" (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, has "a monopoly of truth and salvation"; he holds "a belief in the relative truth and relative saving-power of all the higher religions alike."<sup>22</sup> Christianity has a special role to play in the world of today because it is the dominant faith of Western civilization; but this does not mean that it is true while other religions are false, or that it will necessarily remain the most advanced human religious expression.

Toynbee's philosophy of history has been the subject of an amazing number and variety of critiques, and this is one of the best proofs of the importance of his work. However, it must be said that the great majority of evaluations of *A Study of History* have been negative. We could not possibly include here all the critics' arguments, and the following is intended as no more than a summary of several of the more damning evaluations.

1. As Toynbee himself admits, he has used Hellenic civilization (his particular historical specialty) as a model or pattern for the interpretation of other civilizations. But there is no compelling reason why Hellenic civilization should serve as the model, and, indeed, it is so inappropriate for dealing with certain other civilizations that Toynbee is led to pervert historical data by forcing them into foreign categories.<sup>23</sup>
2. Toynbee frequently chooses his examples to fit his a priori theories, rather than modifying his theories to accord with the facts.<sup>24</sup>
3. Because of his interest in obtaining a general, synoptic view of human history in the large, his treatment of particular historical problems is often superficial and misleading.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *A Study of History*, XII, 559. Toynbee makes it clear in his "reconsiderations," however, that he has come to believe that "religion is an end in itself," not just a means to an end (p. 94 n).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99. Cf. His emotively charged statement: "The writer of this Study will venture to express his personal belief that the four higher religions that were alive in the age in which he was living were four variations on a single theme, and that if all the four components of this heavenly music of the spheres could be audible on Earth simultaneously, and with equal clarity, to one pair of human ears, the happy hearer would find himself listening, not to a discord, but to a harmony" (*A Study of History*, VII [London: Oxford University Press, 1954], 428). However, he admits that "as for into the future as we can see ahead" he does "not expect that they will agree to make a merger of their different doctrines, practices, and institutions, in which their common spiritual treasure is diversely presented" (*A Study of History*, XII, 100n).

<sup>23</sup> This is pointed out particularly well by the experts in the history of Islam, Russia, etc., who have contributed to *The Intent of Toynbee's History*, ed. Edward t. Gargan (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1961).

<sup>24</sup> See Geyl's critique, "Toynbee Once More: Empiricism or Apriorism?" in Geyl's *Debates With Historians*, pp. 144-57.

<sup>25</sup> To take a single, but typical example: Gilmore, in discussing European history from 1453 to 1517, shows that "Latin Christendom, far from being the least likely candidate for expansion [Toynbee's view] emerges

4. Toynbee's work evidences "creeping determinism," illustrated by his "hardening of the categories," i.e., "a tendency in the later volumes to treat as established laws what were earlier stated merely summatively or, at any rate, tentatively."<sup>26</sup>
5. "Toynbee still believes that the idea of 'challenge and response' constitutes a magical key to the why and how of human creativity. But is it not after all, little more than a formal principle, like Hegel's dialectic, which cannot provide us with a canon of interpretation?"<sup>27</sup>
6. Toynbee's view of religion is eclectic and syncretic, and as such does violence to the historical uniqueness and particularistic claims of Christianity.<sup>28</sup> The core of Christianity lies in its historical particularity, and Toynbee's neo-Mahayana Buddhist spirituality thus opposes the very essence of the Christian message.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Slough of Despond**

Our rapid overview of five of the major secular philosophies of history of modern times has brought us to a discouraging conclusion: neither Kant nor Hegel nor Marx, neither Spengler nor Toynbee has succeeded in arriving at an answer to the perennial question: "Where is history going" Schlesinger's negativistic attitude to monistic interpretations of history now appears more understandable than it did at the outset of our discussion. Indeed, this attitude is but one variety of a widely held contemporary discouragement with attempts to answer ultimate questions of any kind. The logical positivism movement in philosophy, as represented by the "Vienna Circle" and A. J. Ayer, is perhaps only the clearest manifestation of this tendency.

A concrete example is provided by the celebrated mathematician E.T. Deli's posthumous work, *The Last Problem*, in which he hypothesizes that our atomic age will end in disaster, and asks: "What problems that our race has struggled for centuries to solve will be open when the darkness comes down?" He rejects ultimate philosophical problems, for "realists may be pardoned for suspecting that some are pseudo-problems incapable of solution," and determines to "leave them aside and look for others on an understandable

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as the candidate most likely to succeed." Myron P. Gilmore, *The World of Humanism* (New York: Harper, 1952), p.34.

<sup>26</sup> William Dray, "Toynbee's Search for Historical Laws," *History and Theory*, I (1960), 49; F. H. Underhill, "The Toynbee of the 1950's," *Canadian Historical Review*, XXXV1 (1955), 227.

<sup>27</sup> Gerhard Masur, Review of *A Study of History*, Vol. XII, in *American Historical Review*, LXVII (1961), 79.

<sup>28</sup> To disregard the testimonies of Jesus and of the primitive church concerning the uniqueness and finality of Christianity (e.g. John 146; Acts 4:12) is to do no less than abrogate one's position as a historian.

<sup>29</sup> See Will Herberg, "Arnold Toynbee—Historian or Religious Prophet?" *Queen's Quarterly*, LXIV (1957), 421-33. Heiberg also takes Toynbee to task, as have so many others, on his negative evaluation of Judaism.

level."<sup>30</sup> The result? His "last problem" is the still unsolved mathematical puzzle, Prove or disprove that if  $n$  is a number greater than 2, there are no numbers,  $a$ ,  $b$ ,  $c$  such that  $a^n + b^n = c^n$ .

Comparable rejection of the larger questions of ultimate meaning and purpose characterizes the work of a number of prominent historians and philosophers of history of the present century, who have seen in the failures of the previously discussed historical generalists an absolute prohibition against - single answers in history. Thus Charles A. Beard and Carl Becker became historical pragmatists, and Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood rejected "objective," "scientific" history and stressed the artistic nature of the historians' work—the need for subjective, imaginative re-living and re-enactment of, the past.<sup>31</sup>

The inevitable consequence of this subjective reaction can be seen in the contemporary French existentialist historian, Raymond Aron, who argues that history, instead of having a single meaning, is legitimately capable of a "plurality of systems of interpretation" and that the only way for the individual to "overcome the relativity of history" is "by the absolute of decision," which arms "the power of man, who creates himself by judging his environment, and by choosing himself."<sup>32</sup> Such individualistic, anthropocentric relativism—which, incidentally, likewise characterizes Bultmann's theology of history—is in reality an admission of philosophical lassitude and malaise in the face of repeated failures to discover an ultimate meaning for the historical process.

Coupled with this twentieth-century intellectual "slough of despond" is a desperate emotional need to find significance in man's historical enterprise. This is nowhere better illustrated than in modern man's changed conception of time itself. The great art historian Panofsky, in his *Studies in Iconology*, has shown how the figure of Father Time has radically changed from ancient to modern times. In the ancient world, time was depicted in positive terms. "In none of these ancient representations do we find the hourglass, the scythe or sickle, the crutches, or the signs of a particularly advanced age," writes Panofsky after analyzing early depictions of time; "in other words," he continues, "the ancient images of time are either characterized by symbols of fleeting speed and precarious balance, or by symbols of universal power and infinite fertility, but not by symbols of decay and destruction."<sup>33</sup> Panofsky shows that the humanistic Renaissance was responsible for fusing a personification of dynamic classical time with the frightening figure of Saturn—thus creating the image of Time the Destroyer. And today? Today the drawings of Father Time retain virtually none of the creative force of their

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<sup>30</sup> New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961, pp. 9-10.

<sup>31</sup> On Beard, Becker, Croce, and Collingwood, see my *Shape of the Past*, pp. 89 ff.

<sup>32</sup> Raymond Aron, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. G. J. Irwin (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961), pp. 86 ff., 334.

<sup>33</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (2d ed.; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), p. 73.

ancient counterparts; for us, time is seen as a debilitating agent—a symbol of the decay to which all life is subject. Thus the figure of Father Time reminds us of the bankruptcy of our modern attempts to infuse meaning into history, and yet, by the very persistence of the personification, recalls the continuing need of mankind to think of time in personal terms—in terms of intelligent, purposeful will.

And the modern response to a supposedly incurable historical meaninglessness? Denis Baly perceptively describes the contemporary reaction as two-pronged: the creation of myths to "explain" history, and the effort to subjugate history to man's totalitarian control:

In such a disintegrating situation man reacts in two contradictory ways. On the one hand he tries to take some aggressive action which will provoke events, and thereby demonstrate at least his partial control over them, and on the other hand he submits to events, retreating into a protective and self-effacing camouflage, thereby hoping to escape the brutal attention of the fates. Neither of these reactions in the long run, however, is effective, and both are indeed humiliating . . . . A curious custom in the villages of the Middle East may perhaps be quoted as illustrating in some sense both these reactions. There, at the time of an eclipse, the children come out into the streets banging pots and pans together to "frighten away the whale that is swallowing the sun." What has now become a childish game is, however, the last relic of one of the most ancient beliefs in the world, the belief that at the Creation the gods vanquished the dragon of chaos, and as a symbol of order set the sun and moon in the sky to perform their regular and appointed functions. But men lived ever under the fear that chaos could return, and when the chief symbols of order seemed to them to be being attacked, they took up arms against the dragon, fearing that he was not dead after all. It was not enough for them to have explained history; they must always be on the watch to control it, lest chaos and meaninglessness return.<sup>34</sup>

This double response to lack of meaning in history, so patently illustrated in our by Marxist communism and by the "American way of life," brings us back with renewed concern to our original question: "Where is history going?" Can we find genuine meaning and purpose in history, and thereby avoid the consequences of unrealistic myth-making?

### **Invasion From Outer Space: The Christian Conception of History**

In order to reach solid ground in the problems before us, we must obtain a clear picture as to why the secular philosophies of history discussed earlier fail to achieve success. The attempts of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Spengler, and Toynbee—and of all the great secular philosophers of history, for that matter—are, even when they fail, of inestimable value; for, by inversion, they can lead us to the conditions without which all attempts to achieve a valid interpretation of total history must likewise fail.

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<sup>34</sup> Denis Baly, *Academic Illusion* (Greenwich, Conn.: Seabury Press, 1961), pp. 66-67.

What are the major deficiencies in the philosophies of history which we have considered? First, the goals they set for history (e.g., Kant's reason, Hegel's freedom, Marx's classless society, Toynbee's ecumenical civilization) cannot be demonstrated to have a necessitarian character about them. Secondly, in choosing their respective goals, the secular philosophers of history continually make judgments as to what is significant and what is valuable (e.g., Hegel's idealism, Marx's materialism, Spengler's favoring of instinct, agrarian society, and reverence for tradition); but in no case able to justify these value judgments in absolute terms. Thirdly, the secular philosophers of history always enter upon their work with an unjustified, unprovable concept of human nature (e.g., the optimistic view of man held by Kant, Hegel, and Toynbee, the ambiguous view held by Marx, and the pessimistic view held by Spengler). Fourthly, these philosophers gratuitously presuppose ethical principles (e.g., Hegel's exempting of history's "great men" from the ordinary standards of right and wrong; Marx's willingness to let the end justify the means in bringing about the classless society through revolution).

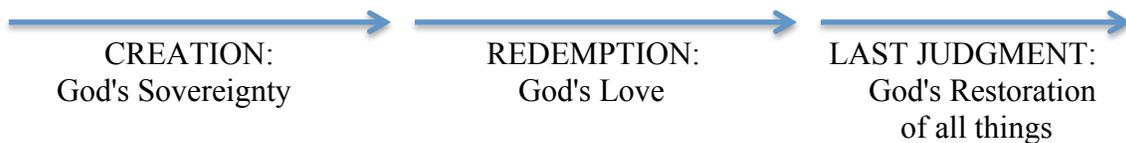
And what do these four crucial deficiencies have in common? They all reflect what has often been called the "human predicament—the lack of absolute historical perspective on the part of finite, man. Consider: because man stands in history at a particular place and cannot see into the future, he cannot possibly demonstrate that his conception of total history will have permanent validity. For the same reason—lack of perspective on the human drama as a whole—he cannot in any absolute sense know what is more or less significant or valuable in the total history of mankind. Moreover, because he is able to acquaint himself personally with only a fraction of all the members of the human race, past, present, and future, his conception of human nature can have only limited value, and is certainly not an adequate basis for historical generalization. Lastly, the secularist's ethical ideals will also reflect his stance in history, and will not be capable of justification in absolute terms.

Now perhaps we see why, to take an especially clear example, Hegel's concept of four "world-historical" epochs (Oriental, Greek, Roman—and Germanic as the goal of the process) appears so ludicrous to us, but was regarded in all seriousness by him. From his early nineteenth-century position in history, the Germanic peoples did seem to be on the side of destiny. From our present historical stance, such a view retains little appeal. The basic problem thus becomes clear: Since no historian or philosopher—or anyone else for that matter—sits "in a house by the side of the road and watches all of history pass by," no one, from a secular, humanistic viewpoint can answer the question, "Where is history going?" All of us are—to use Jack Kerouac's phrase—"on the road." Our historical searchlights are incapable of illuminating all of the path we have traversed, and they continually meet a wall of fog ahead of us. In this human predicament, secular philosophers of history have often, unwittingly, served as blind men leading the blind.

Is there, then, no way out? Is there no answer to the question of history's meaning—a question that has cried for an answer in every epoch of human history and particularly demands an answer today? There is indeed an answer; but, as we have seen, it cannot arise from the human situation itself because of man's limited perspective on the historical process. What is needed is, in space-age lingo, an "invasion from outer space."

Specifically, let us suppose that the historical process were known in its entirety by a God who created both the process and the people who take part in it. Now if this were the case, and if that God entered the human sphere and revealed to men the origin and goal of the historical drama, the criteria for significance and value in the process, the true nature of the human participants in the drama, and the ethical values appropriate to the process, then, obviously, the question, "Where is history going?" could be successfully and meaningfully answered. A gigantic *If*, you say. True, but this is precisely the central contention of the Christian religion: that God *did* enter human life—in the person of Jesus the Christ—and *did* reveal to men the nature and significance of history and human life, and *did* bring men into contact with eternal values. "God was in Christ," says the Christian proclamation, "reconciling the world unto himself."

What is this Christian conception of history, and how can it be validated? The conception can perhaps best be understood in terms of the threefold work of the Christian God, as manifested in His trinitarian nature. The God of the Christian faith presents Himself as "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier of man's historical life. The Christian understanding of history can be visualized as a line which begins with creation, centers on the redemptive act of God in Jesus Christ, and finds its termination in a sanctifying final judgment:



Karl Löwith has well characterized the Christian view of history as "linear but centered"<sup>35</sup> in contrast with the ancient Greek belief in the hopeless cyclical repetition of the ages.

Because God is the creator and preserver of history, every act of the historical drama is meaningful. Jesus assured men that though five sparrows are sold for two farthings, "not one of them is forgotten before God. . . . ye are of more value than many sparrows." No historical act is too insignificant to be outside the Father's care. Indeed, as the Reformer Calvin asserted on the basis of clear biblical teaching, God is the sovereign Lord of history. He is "not such as is imagined by sophists, vain, idle, and almost asleep, but vigilant, efficacious, operative, and engaged in continual action."<sup>36</sup> The Christian doctrine of creation is thus a remedy for all forms of historical nihilism.

The Christian God is also a God of redemption. The Christian revelation teaches that the entire human race is subject to self-centeredness, and that this basic selfishness cannot be cured by human beings themselves. As Luther well put it, man is *incurvatus in se*, "curved in upon himself" and therefore views his own interests—whether personal or

<sup>35</sup> Op. Cit., p. 182.

<sup>36</sup> Institutes, I, xvi, 3.

national—as more important than anyone else's. It was on the basis of this Christian realism that the great Cambridge historian Lord Acton formulated his axiom:

"Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely." But the God of the Christian faith saw man in his desperate need, and entered the human situation in the person of Jesus Christ expressly to solve man's egocentric dilemma. By living a life of complete selflessness, Jesus was able to do what no mere human being could ever do: take other men's wrongs upon Himself, along with the death penalty that these sins deserved. By His death and subsequent resurrection He conquered the powers of sin and death, and freed all members of the human race who recognize their need and accept what He has done for them. This great act of self-giving love becomes the center of history and the criterion of significance for interpreting all other acts. It creates an absolute ethic of love, and binds all men together in the bonds of love, since Christ died for all without exception.

G. Kitson Clark comments as follows on Jesus' words from the Cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do":

That last sentence ought probably to be printed at the beginning of all history books, both as a prayer and as a statement of fact. It is not a denial of the existence and power of evil: at that moment such a denial would have been impossible. Nor is it a denial of the pain, mental and physical, which evil causes. To deny that would also at that moment have been impossible. But that pain was not carried over to the account of those who had caused the evil: it was accepted, absorbed and cancelled by the Judge. By such an action the cords of sin which bound the world were cut away.

I cannot tell you what that means, but I can say this. This is not only an event of eternal importance: it is also plainly an example which must be followed...It is necessary to connect oneself with the common lot of humanity till the mind, like Pope's spider, "feels at each thread, and lives along the line." Yet the effort and the pain are, with divine assistance, the way to freedom.<sup>37</sup>

The Christian Scriptures also speak of God's judgmental work: His Holy Spirit reproves the world "of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:8). Throughout human history God has judged the actions of men. As Calvin said:

He subdued the pride of Tyre by the Egyptians; the insolence of the Egyptians by the Assyrians; the haughtiness of the Assyrians by the Chaldeans; the confidence of Babylon by the Medes and Persians, after Cyrus had subjugated the Medes. The ingratitude of the kings of Israel and Judah, and their impious rebellion, notwithstanding His numerous favours, He repressed and punished, sometimes by the Assyrians, sometimes by the Babylonians.... Whatever opinion be formed of the

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<sup>37</sup> Clark, *The Kingdom of Free Men* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1957), pp. 204-5.

acts of men, yet the Lord equally executed His work by them, when He broke the sanguinary sceptres of insolent kings.<sup>38</sup>

Of course this immanent judgment is seldom as transparent as it was in the events to which Calvin refers. Yet Augustine saw it clearly in the fall of decadent Rome, and we today can hardly avoid seeing it in the annihilation of the demonic fascism of the Third Reich. The Christian faith affirms that such immanent judgment prevails throughout history, for "as a man sows, so shall he also reap." Even though the Christian sees only "through a glass, darkly," he remembers the question of one of Thornton Wilder's characters in his novel *The Cabala*: "Do they think, the [skeptical] fools, that their powers of observation are clearer than the devices of a god?"

Moreover, history is moving toward a final Judgment, a climax in which "the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll," and in which the evils of human egotism throughout history will finally be put right. On that day, we are told, "there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known" and, "whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops" (Luke 12:2-3). This promise of final, perfectly just judgment at the end of time gives the Christian conception of history a direction and an ultimate meaning. Every moment of the Christian's life must then be lived existentially in the light of John Donne's question, "What if this present were the world's last night?"<sup>39</sup> The time of the end cannot be calculated, but the fact of the end is certain. For the Christian, that day holds not terror but anticipation, for not only will all things be made right, but he will see, face to face, his God and Savior, who once died to redeem him from the hell of self and restore him to perfect freedom in Christ.

And the validation for the Christian conception of history—the evidence of its truth? Can we know that it is not just a myth, like the banging of pans to "frighten away the whale that is swallowing the sun"? We can indeed. In the next two chapters I give the objective, historical evidence, which I shall do no more than summarize here:<sup>40</sup>

1. On the basis of accepted principles of textual and historical analysis, the Gospel records are found to be trustworthy historical documents—primary source evidence for the life of Christ.
2. In these records Jesus exercises divine prerogatives and claims to be God in human flesh. He rests His claims on His forthcoming resurrection.
3. In all four Gospels, Christ's bodily resurrection is described in minute detail; Christ's resurrection evidences His deity.

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<sup>38</sup> Institutes, IV, xx, 30-31.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Worlds Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt., Brace & World, 1960).

<sup>40</sup> See also Montgomery, *The Shape of the Past*, especially Pt. I, chap. v.

4. The fact of the resurrection cannot be discounted on a priori, philosophical grounds; miracles are impossible only if one so defines them—but such definition rules out proper historical investigation.
5. If Christ is God, then He speaks the truth concerning the absolute divine authority of the Old Testament and of the soon-to-be-written, apostolic New Testament; concerning His death for the sins of the world; and concerning the nature of man and of history.
6. It follows from the preceding that all biblical assertions bearing on philosophy of history are to be regarded as revealed truth, and that all human attempts at historical interpretation are to be judged for truth value on the basis of harmony with scriptural revelation.

There is, however, another way to attest Christ's claims, and I shall conclude with it. He promised, "If any man's will is to do his [God's] will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God" (John 7:17, RSV). And the Apostle Paul writing under divine guidance tells us that "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). This means that if any person honestly wishes to discover the truth of Christ's claims, he need only put himself in contact with God's word in Scripture and Church, and God's word will attest itself in his personal experience. Only a suspension of disbelief is necessary: "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" I can say that I have never known anyone (including myself) who has prayed this doubter's prayer without having it answered in the affirmative.

As the Roman world fell apart, and all of Western civilization collapsed with it, men's hearts failed them for fear. It was then that Cyprian spoke for himself and for others of the Christian persuasion: "We want to stand upright amid the ruing of the world, and not lie on the ground with those who have no hope."<sup>41</sup> Today we look out on a world which has uncomfortable parallels with Cyprian's time.

Secular philosophies of history, because they are themselves conditioned by the flux of passing time, are incapable of standing upright. But the One who stood upright on a cross tow thousand years ago--and who can transform our lives today—and who will assuredly come again with glory to judge the quick and the dead, He is able to lift us from the ground, and give us the gift of a historical hope that will never be disappointed.

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<sup>41</sup>CL Ethelbert Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars: Historical Sketches*, trans. K. and R. Gregor Smith (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955).

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