

THE MEANING OF HISTORY: POSING THE PROBLEM

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In his widely-read novel, *Darkness at Noon*, Arthur Koestler has the convicted former Communist party leader, Rubashov reflect, "We all thought one could treat history like one experiments in physics. The difference is that in physics one can repeat the experiment a thousand times, but in history only once."¹ He was, of course, right. Since I am a part of history I cannot avoid the problem of its meaning.

History is like time. Everyone assumes he knows what the word means until he pauses to think about it. Our confusion is only thickened by the fact that the English word "history" is itself ambiguous. It may mean either the process of past events or the intelligible narrative constructed by the historian from those events. Our word "history" is from the Greek term *historiê* meaning "investigation or inquiry." And so it was used until Polybius (c. 204-122 B.C.), who conceived of the study of the past as a special type of research needing a name of its own. Polybius used *historiê* in our modern sense, in the sense of a literary product based upon inquiry.

The German language avoids the ambiguity of English by retaining a philological distinction between the "event" and its recording. *Historiê* describes the series of outer events. *Geschichte* denotes the inner side of these events as the historian endeavors to render a meaningful account of them.

The historian is concerned with past events but not all of them. Nature has a past and if we are to believe biology, geology, paleontology and anthropology that past is an extensive one. But history is a thing apart from nature. History is occupied with the actions of human beings enacted against the back-drop of the natural order. As Herbert Butterfield puts it, "History is a human drama, a drama, of personalities, taking place as it were, on the stage of nature, and amid its imposing scenery." Nature does play a significant role in the tragedies and comedies that are human history, but it does so only as background for the mystery that is man.

The historian's subject then is man, but not man in isolation. He is looking for the significant human happenings, the pattern of events that has enduring importance. He is, therefore, more than a chronicler or a biographer. He is seeking that pattern of meaning which will make the past meaningful for his contemporaries.

This naturally suggests that history is a science in that it asks questions of the past and an art in that it is a recording of events in an intelligible and interesting fashion. The data of the historian is thus a composite of "fact" and evaluation. It is impossible to eliminate the subjective element in history. The skilled researcher will sift his evidence, but in the end he will make his own judgment of credibility and significance. These decisions are made from within some world and life view. In other words, the historian cannot avoid the questions of philosophy. "The writer who thinks that he has no philosophy of history or who believes he is detached is self deceived," writes Louis Gottschalk.

Are we then submerging history in the skepticism of the subjective? Is history as Voltaire expressed it "a pack of tricks we play on the dead"? No, the stable and unchanging is provided in the reality of the "event itself." There is such a thing as a critical method; there are honest as well as dishonest investigators. But in order to approach objectivity the historian must recognize his biases, his own world view, bring it out into the open and take his point of view from with-

in history. He is incapable of playing God, looking at the world from above and outside.

The student of history who is a Christian is subject to the constant temptation to "speak from outside." He is in danger of moralizing before he has understood. His urge to pass judgment on the past easily distorts the attempt to sympathize with and to describe fully the past. Such impulses must be resisted if one is to render a fair account of events.

But the Christian need not think that he alone is subject to this temptation. It is a threat to the Marxist, the economic determinist, the naturalist, and every other observer of yesterday's happenings. Since it is impossible to avoid a world and life view the Christian historian need not apologize for his commitment to a particular view of life of life and destiny. He is simply obliged to show how his point of view makes better sense of the stuff of history.

It is now necessary to move from our understanding of the nature of history to some discussion of the meaning of history. In recent years the phrase "meaning of history" has been gaining acceptance above the older term "philosophy of history" because of the connotation the latter phrase carries. "Philosophy of history" may suggest a number of things: 1) To Voltaire, who apparently invented the phrase, it meant a critical history, a historical thinking which was autonomous and not governed by the stories recorded by earlier generations. It suggested, in short, a non-theological understanding of history. 2) According to Hegel and writers at the end of the eighteenth century the philosophy of history was simply universal history. 3) According to nineteenth-century Positivists it connoted the general laws governing the course of historical events.

Regardless of the different connotations of "philosophy of history," after Voltaire's time it implied a view of history stripped of any thought of Divine providence. Empirical evidence and human reason became the sole sources of information for developing an over-all view of history. Most modern students of history, driven by "scientific" considerations, have rejected the Christian belief in fulfillment (eschatology) and the Christian appraisal of human nature as so much theological smoke which blurs the vision of a careful observer of human events.

Karl Lówith speaks of a philosophy of history as "a systematic interpretation of universal history in accordance with a principle by which historical events and successions are unified and directed toward an ultimate meaning." But it is just this "principle" that most practicing historians despair of finding. Harbison is probably right when he judges that the ordinary professional historian is usually a practicing Positivist. Most historians are concerned with the "when" and "how" of history but occupied very little with the "why." Huizinga's comment would find wide support from his fellows: "There is not a more dangerous tendency in history than that of representing the past, as if it were a rational whole and dictated by clearly defined interests."

Objection to viewing history as a rational whole springs from the desire to let history speak for itself. The historian, like the natural scientist, is uncomfortable with answers to questions which do not come from empirical evidence. The practicing historian is all too aware of the practical impossibility of gaining "a rational whole" from the facts of history.

He has some idea of how extensive is the data of history. He knows that no man can ever begin to comprehend the myriads of past events. He knows how intricate are the threads of historical causation. He knows that evidence can be found to support any theory of the mind which falls under its spell.

The trained observer of human happenings is also acquainted with the haphazard in natural events. He notes the famine that fells a kingdom and the hurricane that redirects the future of an empire. He is convinced that the human mind is incapable of sufficient elasticity to allow for the infinite surprises that can emerge from the tedious texture of time.

The historian is also conscious of the mystery of human personality. His search for meaning ultimately leads him into the indefinable and uncontrollable factor of human passions and fears and faiths. Who can fathom such depths? For these and other reasons the practicing historian is skeptical of any short-order answer to the meaning of history.

But oddly enough, it is at this point that the professional historian and the Christian are in complete agreement. Both question the ability of unaided man to find within history the meaning of history itself. Both affirm that human events are not self authenticating. Both assert that history fails to yield answers to the ultimate questions of human existence.

The Christian declares, however, that what the historian fails to do as an historian that he must do as a man. He must decide about the meaning of life and what is of value. If the historian's concern for objectivity makes him suspicious of pat answers to the meaning of life, he cannot for that reason avoid answering the question. Each of us, because he participates in life, is forced consciously or unconsciously to make some judgment about life's meaning. The interest of the ancients in history testifies to this fact.

The Ancient Pagan World

Ancient literature introduces us to a world apart. No one can read Homer and his daily newspaper and avoid the contrast. Ours is a scientifically filtered world. Mystery matters little. The ancients were not so. Myth was their vehicle for communicating what they felt about the mysterious world beyond. It is of prime importance, therefore, that we consider the meaning of myth and its relation to history.

In primitive societies myth was a way of speaking about the numinous feeling of awe. It was not a fable or fairy story intended to entertain. Myth was designed to deal with the moral and spiritual order. As Nicolas Berdyaev suggests, "Myth presents to us the supernatural in the natural, the supra-sensible in the sensible, the spiritual life in the life of the flesh; it brings two worlds together symbolically."

This means that myth must be distinguished from history as we have defined it. Collingwood differentiates history and quasi-history. The latter differs from history in that it does not proceed by research, that is by asking questions, but by mere assertion. Moreover, the deeds done in quasi-history are those of the gods, not mere men.

Collingwood also feels that two types of quasi-history are discernable. Theocratic history is that type which deals with divine action either by the gods above the king or by gods somehow identified with the king. Myth is the other type of quasi-history. It goes beyond even theocratic history in that it is occupied with the divine and has no connection with human actions at all. In myths one is concerned with the activities of the gods in the dateless past. It is obvious that much in the Old Testament, according to Collingwood's definition, is either theocratic history or myth.

In referring to that ancient literature which is occupied with gods and semi-deities some term or terms other than "history" are necessary. But it should be

absolutely clear that the mere use of such terms does not in itself imply any judgment upon whether or not such events did or did not take place. There is no need to quarrel with anyone who chooses to define terms for purposes of communicating ideas, but to reject all myths as meaningless for the twentieth-century mind is another matter. If history is defined as a story of human actions then the historian as historian must remain agnostic before the testimony of divine activity in human affairs. Any judgment he makes with respect to the reality or unreality of the divine in history is made as a philosopher — perhaps as a Positivist — and not as an historian.

Assumptions about the world and the universe derived from scientific investigation of nature so dominate history in the technical sense that it is inadequate for dealing with the central claims of the Christian faith. As T. A. Roberts has written,

Historical investigation proceeds on the assumption that a study of the past is only possible if the supernatural is shouldered out of the way, for historical study knows no techniques or methods for evaluating the supernatural. Faith stakes its all on the interpenetration of the natural and the supernatural most clearly revealed in gospel history.³

While it is of no little significance that modern historical method, like natural science, arose in a Western culture permeated by Christian concepts, the ancient Greeks must be considered the first historians. They lifted history out of the mire of mythology. For this reason they call for our attention.

Yet the Greeks had little reason to look for a “philosophy of history.” It was enough for them that history yielded lessons to be learned, virtues to be emulated, and evils to shun. History was for them of value but only because the rhythm of its changes was likely to repeat itself.

To speak of a philosophy of history was for them to speak in contradictions. Philosophy was a discipline in absolutes, in ultimates, in the metaphysical. History, on the other hand, was a study of the changing world of nature and men. History was political history, the domain of the statesman. The only purpose in history was no purpose, the regularity and order of the universe in the cycle of birth, growth, decay, and death. Thus history and philosophy belong to two different realms. To employ Plato’s distinction, philosophy belongs to the realm of *epistémé* (knowledge) while history belongs to the sphere of *doxa* (opinion). *Doxa* is by no means worthless. For practical purposes it is useful enough, but only *epistémé* yields truth about the eternal.

Thus for the Greek it is impossible to derive ultimate truth from that which is “historical” because history belongs to the realm of becoming, the ceaseless cycle of existence. History by definition precludes any event of unique or absolute significance. This is why the “preaching of the cross” was to him foolishness (I Cor. 1:23) and the incarnation impossible. If Christ were God he could have no part with history; if he were man he could have no part with the absolute.

Herodotus

Upon Herodotus (484-425 B.C.) falls the distinction of being the original genius of history. As Collingwood puts it, “The conversion of legend writing into the science of history was not native to the Greek mind, it was a fifth-century invention, and Herodotus was the man who invented it.”⁴

Herodotus was primarily concerned with the history of a particular war, the great Persian invasion. Much of his “research” consisted of personal observation.

Of the nine books which constitute his work six of them or two thirds of them are devoted to introduction based largely upon personal travels. The work itself therefore, is not significant in its content. Its claim to fame rests in Herodotus’ style and in his method of ascertaining just what happened.

In his own words Herodotus undertook to write “in order that the memory (*ta genomena*) of the past may not be blotted out from among men by time, and that great and marvelous deeds (*erga megala kai thómasta*) done by Greeks and foreigners and especially the reason (*hé aitié*) why they warred against each other may not lack renown.”⁵ The “father of history,” then, reveals a three-fold interest: 1) fact, *ta genomena*, 2) value, *erga megala kai thómasta*, and 3) causation, *hé aitié*. In this endeavor Herodotus is for his day unique. He sought for causes of events from the realm of nature and men when all the poets of his time were content to give mythical explanations of earthly happenings.

However, when we consider his approach to an overall explanation of history we find something less than genius. As Cochrane indicates, Herodotus reveals his dependance upon the Ionian physical “scientists” (he was from Ionia) particularly Heraclitus, the early philosopher who believed the universe, including souls, was atomically structured. The historian’s cosmos is much the same as that of the “scientists.” It is spacial, temporal, and “material.”

The only pattern in the cosmos, according to Herodotus, is in a law of compensation (*tisis*) to which all physical processes are ultimately subject. This law tends to restrict all things which seek to exceed the norm. For example, applied to the natural world it accounts for the periodic Nile flood. It is supremely, however, the explanation of the struggle between Greece and Persia. As Cochrane explains it:

To Herodotus, the nemesis [retribution] which overtook the great king [Xerxes] serves to restore an equilibrium which had been threatened as never before by the accumulation of such vast human and material resources in the hands of a single man.⁶

This suggests that the cosmos is reduced to matter in motion, perpetual, incessant motion. Since mankind, along with all physical and material phenomena, is subject to this law, the net result is a pessimism because the mind of man is merely a spectator unable to influence in the least the course of events. As Herodotus has a Persian say: “Dear Friend, it is not possible for man to avert that which God has decreed shall happen Verily it is the sores of all human ills, to abound in knowledge and yet have no power over action”.

This *tisis* is as close as Herodotus comes to describing the meaning of history. This does not subtract from the importance of his pioneering work. He was blazing new trails and the greatness of his name and work have been secured by the centuries. This cannot be denied. But his greatness rests upon his originality in historical approach, not upon his philosophy.

As a philosophy of history his scheme is lacking in some important aspects. If we take Löwith’s definition of a philosophy of history as a standard, we notice immediately one deficiency: Herodotus makes no claim to universal history. He limited his perspective to the Greco-Persian conflict. While this served as an example of the universal law of compensation (*tisis*), it would not, even according to Herodotus, pretend to be any more than a significant encounter between East and West.

Second, Herodotus made no attempt to explain historic origins. He did record the background of a number of nations, but he was unable to carry his story beyond a few generations. This limitation was due to his methodology. *Historié*, inquiry,

was for him a search for eyewitnesses. To his credit these eyewitnesses were questioned again and again in an attempt to ascertain the facts and the trustworthiness of some testimony; but this method by its very nature limits the historian to one or two generations. As long as history was limited by this method of research it remained near-sighted in its quest for historic causation. Consequently, any philosophy of history was to be extremely limited. Such weaknesses in Herodotus' work can be traced in his successors as well.

Thucydides

His most immediate successor was Thucydides (c. 460-399 B. C.), the author of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. An Athenian by birth and the son of a gold mine owner, Thucydides experienced a turning point in his life when, as a general entrusted with the command of the regions of the Thracian seacoast he lost Amphipolis to the Spartans. For this he was exiled from Athens. Thus he spent the years between 423 and 404 either on his property in Thrace or in travel. As an exile from Athens he was able to visit the Peloponnesian allies and was later able to visit Syracuse. This travel gives his history a certain objectivity which is becoming a historian. The abrupt ending of the *History* suggests that he probably died a sudden death.

Thucydides' *History* differs from Herodotus' in one important respect. He was writing of events contemporary with the audience for whom he wrote. Herodotus, on the other hand, dealt with a story that had happened thirty years before the time of his writing. The two are alike in that both were limited to evidence gained by personal observation and trustworthy testimony of eyewitnesses. Of this Thucydides writes:

As to the deeds done in the war, I have not thought myself at liberty to record them on hearsay from the first informant or on arbitrary conjecture. My account rests either on personal knowledge or on the closest possible scrutiny of each statement made by others.⁷

This similarity in methodology does not carry over into basic philosophy. Apparently, Thucydides was reacting to Herodotus at this point. He felt that the path of freedom from Herodotus' monism and pessimism was in distinguishing between "primary" and "secondary" causes. He believed that only the latter could be retained since they alone are observable and capable of verification. To avoid distraction by some *logos*, some unifying explanation, one must recognize a plurality of causes rather than one philosophic monism.

This has the advantage of allowing for human responsibility, but Thucydides felt that the intellectual life of man presents itself to the historian as a ceaseless struggle. There is always an opposing environment which man seeks to understand and control. In encountering the world around them, Thucydides assumes that men respond to similar stimuli in similar ways. In this fashion he explains the uniformities and sequences of human behavior. One of these fundamental behavior patterns is the political order. The state, he feels, is a product of the proper exercise of wisdom and power based upon divisions of functions and the prudent use of capital. The goal of such a state is the happiness of men.

There is, however, an unpredictable element which man confronts and which serves to upset man's pattern of public order. This element is chance or luck (*tuché*). In the end it always brings men's defeat, crushing him beneath irrational forces. There is no apparent reason why *tuché* cannot be viewed optimistically, that is discerning the creative side as well as the destructive, but for Thucydides it remained

merely the "accidental" or the "contingent." It is, therefore, highly dubious whether or not Thucydides improved upon Herodotus' pessimistic monism (*tisis*). Collingwood feels that Thucydides in fact suppressed history, fathered by Herodotus, in favor of this psychological interest which he likely received from Hippocratic medicine.⁸

Polybius

By the time Polybius entered history's stage (c. 204-122 B.C.) the scene had noticeably changed: 1) Alexander had destroyed the Greek city-state idea and replaced it with a cosmopolitan point of view. History, along with philosophy, ethics, and the arts, took on an ecumenical character. In thought East and West had become one. 2) Universal history demanded new methods because world history simply cannot be written from living eye witnesses. It became necessary to compile evidence available from previous historians and other sources. Slowly men began to push back the boundaries of the past beyond immediate eye witnesses. These changes and others may be noted in Polybius.

Polybius was the son of a distinguished general of the Achaeans. Born about 204 B.C., he is reported to have died at 82 as a result of a fall from a horse. Like his father, he was educated in military and political life. When Achaia was delivered to the Romans after 168, he was among the hostages taken by Rome. In Rome he gained the favor of Scipio Aemilianus and accompanied him on his expedition to Africa. On this journey he witnessed the destruction of Carthage in 146 B.C. He then went to Greece where the Achaeans had become involved in a war with Rome. It was through Polybius that favorable terms of peace were obtained for Achaia.

His *History*, originally of 38 books, was concerned with Rome's rise to world dominion between 220 and 146 B.C. Unfortunately, only the first five books and a few fragments of later portions survive. These witness to Polybius' political and military knowledge which is superior to that of other historians of antiquity.

In some ways we enter a new phase of the history of history when we come to Polybius. We find in his *History* signs of a philosophy of history as well as evidence of certain modern methods. In the first place, he shows an awareness of the scope of history, one which goes beyond the immediate geographical and political area. He is attempting to write the story of the conquest of the world. Undoubtedly his cosmopolitan interest is due in part to the fact that his interest is Rome, the one nation in the process of achieving universal rule.

Yet even more important for our purposes was his conviction that unseen forces were at work bringing the world to unity. As he says:

The peculiarity of our study and the marvel of our times is this. Just as Fortune (*Tuxn*) has bent almost all the affairs of the world to one end and has inclined them to one and the same goal, so by means of history we must bring under one conspectus for our readers the agency which Fortune has employed to accomplish the whole. For this consideration it is chiefly which incited and stimulated me to undertake my history, coupled with the fact that no one in our time has attempted a general history.⁹

This statement not only discloses the source of Polybius' cosmopolitanism, it also reveals his concept of causation. He attributes "almost all" the conditions of men to "fortune." This belief in *tuché*, however, does not blind Polybius to the place of secondary causes. In other connections he distinguishes between remoter causes (*aitiai*) of events and their immediate origins (*archai*).

This leads us to his view of the purpose of history. According to Polybius the purpose of history is two-fold: to ascertain the facts and to discover the reason for the facts. As he wrote:

The peculiar function of history is to discover in the first place, the words actually spoken, whatever they were, and next to ascertain the reason why what was done or spoken led to failure or success. For the mere statement of a fact may interest us but is of no benefit to us: but when we add the cause of it, study of history becomes fruitful.¹⁰

Polybius shows unusual insight into the function of the study of history. He is opposed to all who would use history in a flippant fashion to entertain. Doubtless he is reacting against the poets who used "history" in just this way. He writes:

For the end of history is not identical with that of tragedy, but quite the contrary. In tragedy the end is by the most plausible language to astonish and move the audience temporarily. In history the end is by real facts and real speeches to instruct and persuade for all time the lovers of knowledge . . . the leading motive is truth for the benefit of the student.¹¹

Concerned with objectivity, Polybius felt that once a historian discovered the reason or cause of events in the past, he was then more capable of courageously facing the present:

For it is the mental transference of similar circumstances to our own times that gives us the means of forming presentiments of what is about to happen, and enables us at certain times to take precautions and at other times by reproducing former conditions to face with more confidence the difficulties that menace us.¹²

It is noteworthy that the historian presupposes that the external world of things and events is contrary to us. Evidently, in Polybius' mind *tuché* or fortune is both a determining and a contrary factor in human history. The best that man can do is to study history in the hope of ascertaining its behavior in the past and preparing himself to face it. This note sounded by Polybius is the reason for Collingwood's comment:

The idea of fortune, *tuixn*, bulks largely in his conception of history, and imports into it a new element of determinism . . . and the freedom of his (Man's) will is shown not in controlling the outward events of his life but in controlling the inward temper, in which he faces these events.¹³

In the end Polybius' original interest, *tuché*, which promised to give us some glimpse of a philosophy of history robs history of significance, for what is history if man is not a responsible agent in the story? We are left with a determined pessimism akin to Herodotus' *tisis*.

After Polybius

After Polybius there is little to enthuse the student who is pursuing a philosophy of history. Tacitus (c. 55-120 A.D.), it is true, is a historian of no mean proportions, but he is hampered by the spirit of rhetoric, his psychological approach leading him to distort history as he seeks to represent the clash of extremes of character. Aside from Tacitus all other authors of note seem to be absorbed in the lives and examples of great men. Suetonius wrote the valuable *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* and Plutarch wrote his monumental *Lives*. In their biographical records these men, as well as Livy and Tacitus, hoped to find some virtue to emulate or some vice to shun. Some such theme occurs and reoccurs in their writings. Livy, for example, writes:

What chiefly makes the study of history wholesome and profitable is this: that you behold the lessons of every kind of experience set forth as on a conspicuous monument; for these you may choose for yourself and for your own state what to imitate, from these marks for avoidance what is shameful in the conception and shameful in the result.¹⁴

Plutarch sounds a similar note:

Virtue, by the bare statement of its actions, can so affect men's minds as to create at once both admiration of the things done and desire to imitate the doers of them . . . And so we have thought fit to spend our time and pains in writing of the lives of famous persons.¹⁵

Perhaps the best statement of this point of view is from Tacitus:

My purpose is not to relate at length every motion, but only such as were conspicuous for excellence or notorious for infamy. This I regard as history's highest function, to let no worthy action be uncommemorated and to hold out the reprobation of posterity as a terror to evil words and deeds.¹⁶

Beyond this tendency to moralize later writers contribute little to the meaning of history.

Summary

The ancient pagan world passed without a serious over-all view of history and its meaning. There were always those persistent weaknesses in the Greek mind, intensified in the Roman, toward history. The ancient world was hampered by a limited methodology. Historical evidence was rather uniformly identified with eye witnesses of the acts and historical method with eliciting these.

Yet an even more fundamental obstacle to a philosophy of history was the Greek conception of substantialism under which the historian labored. Substantialism was that metaphysical system whose chief category was substance, usually an immaterial essential reality. It implies a theory of knowledge which limits true knowledge (*epistémé*) to the substantial. "Hence the attempts to think historically and the attempt to think in terms of substance were incompatible."¹⁷

The question which arises for the Christian, and the one which cannot be answered completely satisfactorily, is, "How does the Christian avoid the same dilemma?" Biblical Christianity must hold both to the sovereign immutable will of God and to the responsibility of man in the process of time. The Westminster Confession attempts a solution when it states:

Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, yet by the same providence he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.¹⁸

With his concern for the ultimate, perhaps the Christian, like the Greek, will always be inclined to slight this world and its history. But the believer in Christ, unlike the Greek, holds that history is the scene of God's activity. He can never forget the Incarnation. God did become flesh and dwell among us—and thereby hallow history. The Christian, therefore, cannot deny history as could the Greek who had no Incarnation at the heart of his body of beliefs.

If the Greek was hampered in historical interests by his substantialism, he did not on this account assume that men were powerless to alter their lives and destinies. As Collingwood puts it, they had a naive sense of the power of man to control his destiny. Evidently, from their interest in the lessons which history affords, there is a possibility of avoiding the destructive power of fate if man is only aware of the steps to freedom. Whatever limitations man faces are those imposed by ignorance.

In order to fully understand the Greek mind, it is also necessary to distinguish fate or fortune (*tuché*) and the gods. By the time that most of the historians of the Greco-Roman world wrote, the gods had become suspect, at least the crass gods of Homer's Olympus. Consequently, the gods have no plans of their own for the development of human affairs. Their sole role is to grant success or decree failure for the plans of men. This implies that someone is either to be praised or to be blamed for what happens here on earth. In a word, it implies the responsibility of man.

Christianity too lays stress upon man's responsibility, but unlike the Greek concept of man, it refuses to view man in black and white contrasts. The Greeks saw man as either enlightened or ignorant. Christianity recognizes the mystery in the make-up of man that can at times produce irrational acts. The unpredictable element in human history persists. This fact opens up the possibility of influences upon man which although not the object of technical historical research nevertheless may be the key to a proper understanding of human events.

This points us to the last and perhaps the chief difference in the Greek view of history and in the Judeo-Christian view, that is the end (*telos*) of history. In Judeo-Christian thought history is meaningful only in relation to some transcendent purpose. Therefore, to speak of meaning in history is to speak of a final purpose transcending actual events, whether that purpose impinges at every point, at an eschatological day, or at both. Such a purpose fills the pages of the prophetic writings. But it is this sense of impinging ultimate which is conspicuously absent from Greek thought. Löwith summarizes the contrast well when he says:

In the Hebrew and Christian view of history the past is a promise of the future; consequently, the interpretation of the past becomes a prophecy in reverse, demonstrating the past as a meaningful "preparation" for the future. Greek philosophers and historians were convinced that whatever is to happen will be of the same pattern and character as past and present events. They never indulged in the prospective possibilities of the future.¹⁹

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FOOTNOTES

1. Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* (New York: Modern Library, 1941), p. 160.
2. Nicholas Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1935), p. 70.
3. T. A. Roberts, *History and Christian Apologetic* (London: S.P.C.K., 1960), p. 173.
4. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 19.
5. Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, I, 1.
6. C. N. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 467.
7. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, I, 22.
8. Collingwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.
9. Polybius, *History*, I:3-4.
10. *Ibid.*, XII, 25b.
11. *Ibid.*, II, 56, 7 ff.
12. *Ibid.*, XII, 25b.
13. Collingwood, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
14. Livy, *Histories* I, pref.
15. Plutarch, *Lives*, "Pericles," II, III.
16. Tacitus, *Annals* III, 65.
17. Collingwood, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
18. The Westminster Confession of Faith, V, 2, found in Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper, 1905), III, 612.
19. Karl Löwith, *The Meaning of History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1949), p. 6.