

DO RELIGION AND HISTORY CONFLICT?

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A true philosopher can no more pass by the open door of a free discussion than an alcoholic can pass by the open door of a saloon. Since my hosts have been kind enough to invite me to say what I think, the highest compliment I can pay to their tolerance and liberality will be to do just that. This is not going to be a debate. I would be the most unteachable of mortals if at this stage of life I still believed that one could get anywhere arguing with a dialectician. One might as well attempt to pacify or intimidate a walrus by tossing sardines at him as to bate a philosopher with arguments. I have accepted your kind invitation because I think the subject is worth discussing.

"Do Religion and History Conflict?" Only a philosopher would word a question so strangely. If history and religion are different things, as the question implies, isn't comparing them like comparing a rose and a submarine, or might we not ask as well whether free trade and tap-dancing conflict? All things — whether ideas or concrete objects — compete for our attention, but that is plainly not the kind of conflict our questioner has in mind. Nor are we asked whether the *laws* of history and religion conflict. Such laws as we have in history — fundamental principles such as propounded by Thucydides or Buckle or Spengler — are simply generalizations based on insight and analogy: there is nothing rigorous or binding about them. Furthermore, your religion may conflict with my history and my religion with

your history; but for that matter your religion and mine probably conflict, as do your history and mine.

Still, I think we can agree that the idea behind the question is clear: does the story of man's life as taken from the documents, that is, his history, resemble the life-story of the race as taught by revelation, i.e., in holy scriptures? The question is valid for all Christian sects and for non-Christian religions as well. The alternative to the general question is a chaos of special problems. Every church comes before the world with certain basic historic propositions peculiar to itself. Every church may be judged by those propositions when they are clearly stated: if a group announces that the end of the world is going to come on a certain day or, like Prudentius, predicts victory in a particular battle as proof of its divine leadership, or claims like the Mormons that there once was a prophet named Lehi who did so and so, we can hold that church to account. Incidentally, it will not do to project those accepted propositions into inferences and corollaries of your own, and then criticize their supporters in the light of those inferences and corollaries. We must be very careful to determine *exactly* what is claimed, by exactly what particular group, and then to determine exactly what happened and is happening. At this point the discussion breaks up into thousands of special topics, none of which could be handled here tonight.

The religions of the world take their stand on history to a far greater extent than is commonly realized. Christianity is by nature apocalyptic — a definite concept of world-history is implicit in its teachings, its scriptures are at least half history, and it rests its whole case in the last analysis on the fulfillment of prophecy. My own church by its very name takes a definite his-

torical stand: these are the "last days," not the end of the world, but a time of continual crisis and mounting world conflict accompanying the "wasting away of the nations." I would like to spend all the time in an historical vindication of my religion: but no general conclusions can be drawn from one personal case. Something more general is indicated.

In civilized societies it is customary for educated people to carry around in their heads two images of the past, present, and future world — the one religious, the other secular. Here we have two drawings of the same landscape: are they identical, is there a general resemblance between them, or are they in hopeless conflict? If one has attended a liberal Sunday school the two pictures will tend to coincide because they have, conscientiously, been made to; the same is true if one has been trained in a fundamentalist school or college. It is apparent that both pictures are highly adjustable — there is an orthodoxy and a heresy in history as well as religion. History is as much what a man believes as his religion is. History vindicates the proposition that God loves the Jews; with equal force, if you want it that way, it vindicates the proposition that he hates them. History has long been taken as a superbly convincing illustration of the working out of the principle of evolution in human affairs; today some scholars see in it a smashing refutation of any such idea. History is the story of man's progress or his frustration, depending on how you want to read it.

If we are to judge our two pictures on the basis of artistic merit, that is, of subjective appeal, we are under no obligation to declare either one the better picture, nor, on artistic grounds, is there any reason why they should look alike. If, on the other hand, we are judging

for accuracy (and that is what is here clearly implied) there is no point in comparing the pictures with each other; we must instead compare both with the original model. At once the nature of tonight's loaded question becomes apparent. For the obvious intent of the question is to test religion's claims in the light of historical discovery, or as the newspaper phrased the question, "Can religion face its own history without flinching?" There is no hint that history might flinch in the face of religion (as some historians have): the question proposes a beauty contest in which one of the contestants has already been awarded the prize, a litigation in which the prosecuting attorney happens to be the judge. History is above the storm; the only question is, Can religion take it?

That won't do. We cannot assume at the outset that either picture is perfect. We have no right to treat "History" as the true and accurate image of things. Like science and religion, history must argue its case on evidence. This body is like a jury: every member must do his own thinking and make up his own mind (that is the beauty of these meetings, we have been told), but only after viewing all the evidence. This is a staggering assignment, but no one can evade it and still form an intelligent opinion. Professor W. S. McCulloch, the authority on the mechanics of the brain at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has just written: "Man's brain corrupts the revelation of his senses. His output of information is but one part in a million of his input. He is a sink rather than a source of information. The creative flights of his imagination are but distortions of a fraction of his data."¹ In other words,

¹ W. S. McCulloch, "Mysterium Iniquitatis of Sinful Man Aspiring into the Place of God," in *Scientific Monthly* 80 (1955), p. 39.

we all receive information much better than we report it; so much so, that however bad the evidence may be, it is always better than any man's report of it. Every juryman must examine and, if you will, distort, the data for himself, whether we are dealing with special or general problems of history. The prospect is terrifying — and it is the historian, not the prophet, who flinches.

What we are up against may be illustrated by the case of a speaker on this series who maintained that there can be no true religious knowledge because one can never produce reliable evidence for it. He was such a ferocious stickler for evidence (and in that I enthusiastically agreed with him) that when he said three or four times that the Egyptians in 5,000 years produced nothing but the sheerest nonsense in religion, and insisted on using that supposed fact as evidence for his most questionable claim (i.e., that religious teachings to be valuable need not be true), I could not help asking myself on what evidence he could possibly rest such a statement? Five thousand years is no small slice of history, and the Egyptians have left us a very respectable heap of documents. I remembered that a severe and exacting Egyptologist, T. E. Peet, had written: "As long as our ignorance is so great, our attitude towards criticism of these ancient literatures must be one of extreme humility. . . . Put an Egyptian or Babylonian story before a layman, even in a good translation. He is at once in a strange land. The similes are pointless and even grotesque for him, the characters are strangers, the background, the allusions, instead of delighting, only mystify and annoy. He lays it aside in disgust."² Our

²T. E. Peet, *A Comparative Study of the Literatures of Egypt, Palestine, and Mesopotamia* (London: Schweich Lectures, 1931), pp. 4-6, 12 f.

speaker was properly disgusted with the Egyptians, but to charge them with uttering nothing but nonsense for 5,000 years really calls for a bit of proof.

At the first opportunity I hastened to the stacks of your excellent library, hoping to find treasures indeed, and there discovered just *one* Egyptian book — a religious work, incidentally, which I value very highly. I looked for other Oriental treasures, the heritage of great world civilizations — and found nothing! Surely, I thought, we can't talk about history intelligently and leave all that stuff out. But that is precisely what we do! And that raises the all-important question for the student of history: Is there not some way of obtaining a reliable impression of the past, or of building a plausible structure of history without having to examine *all* the evidence? The problem that concerns our historians today is that of reducing the *bulk* of evidence without reducing its *value*. The futility of the quest is a corollary of the oft-proved proposition that the quality of history is a function of its quantity: the more information we have, the better our picture, and the rule is in no wise vitiated by the fact that some information is more valuable than other.

The historian's problem was correctly formulated by the scholars of the Renaissance and Reformation. These men suddenly had an enormous heap of documents dumped in their laps. They were tremendously excited about the new treasure, and saw immediately that the whole pile would have to be gone through piece by piece and word by word: there could be no question of priority or selectivity or elimination, because there is no divination by which one can tell what is in a document before one has read it. This is a lesson which modern scholars have forgotten. The only legitimate

question is: "By what method can one properly examine the greatest possible amount of material in a single lifetime?" The challenge has small appeal to a hurried and impatient generation like our own. We look for easier and quicker solutions, as did the Sophists of old. And like them we find those solutions in the endless discussions and expensive eyewash of the university. Consider what goes on in the history business.

1) First, the academic mind wants neatness, tidiness, simplicity, *order*. It is impatient to impress an order upon nature without waiting for the real order of nature to become apparent. Historical events occur in an atmosphere of perplexity. Whether we are dealing with unique events or characteristic and repeated ones, as in Culture-history, we are given no respite from the unexpected: we never know what hit us. The historian must always step in and impose order after the event. He is like a general who, having all but lost his shirt in a campaign, blandly announces when it is all over: "We planned it that way!" History is all hindsight; it is a sizing up, a way of looking at things. It is not what happened or how things really were, but an evaluation, an inference from what one happens to have seen of a few scanty bits of evidence preserved quite by accident. There is no such things as a short, concise history of England, any more than there is an authentic 3-minute version of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. One might construct such a thing, and it might be a work of art in its own right, but it could only be a parody of the real thing — a pure fiction.

If I read the journal of Samuel Sewall, the letters of Cicero, the memoirs of Joinville or Froissart or Xenophon or Ibn Batuta, I cannot but feel myself getting

involved in exciting and vivid situations that will forever be as much a part of my experience as, say, the invasion of Normandy (I still remember what I *read* in Normandy as vividly as what I saw there). But if I read a paragraph or a sentence or two about each of the above in a college text-book, I have really had no experience at all. Yet it is not in those great neglected writers that the most valuable evidence is found, but rather in such completely neglected trivia as letters, diaries, notebooks, ledgers, etc., which few historians and no others ever care to look at.

2) The modern college teaches us, if nothing else, to accept history on *authority*. Yet at the end of his life the great Eduard Meyer (who wrote a history of the Mormons, incidentally), marvelled that he had always been most wrong where *he* thought he was most right, and vice versa. No man of our time had a broader view of world-history than Professor Breasted, or was ever more dogmatically sure of himself or, in the light of subsequent discoveries, more completely wrong. To be open-minded in history one must be working constantly at one's own structure of history, not passively accepting any second-hand solution or textbook opinion that floats down from the shining heights, as crabs and molluscs in the depths gratefully receive the dead and predigested matter that descends to them from luminous realms above. Everybody knows some history, nobody knows very much. Your *streng-wissenschaftliche Geschichte* is nowhere to be found. Ranke tried for it, but I believe with the historian Frowde that our best historian was *Shakespeare*.

3) The *insights* of men like Taine, Mommsen or Bury are not to be despised. Do not for a moment think that the only reliable evidence comes from brass

instruments. But insight offers no escape from evidence. It requires in fact to be properly checked by the most exhaustive evidence of all — that which comes only by constant, intimate, lifelong familiarity with the sources. There is no more merit in armchair humanities than there is in armchair science: the learner must come to grips with the real thing at first hand; he must run the evidence to ground as in a laboratory, and never be content with the fourth-hand hearsay of a textbook or the private evaluations of a translator.

4) The most popular attempt to grasp history at a gulp is the *Cook's Tour*, for which Mr. Toynbee's lumbering and laboring rubberneck bus is at present in great demand — though no one really seems to enjoy riding in it. Here the interest is in the monumental, the routine, the conventional, the accepted. The student is a tourist, a spectator, always detached, never allowing himself to become emotionally involved except at the prescribed stations where the guidebook instructs him to swoon. At best our college humanities are a sentimental journey, a scenic-postcard world of the obvious and theatrical: the Great Books, the Hundred Best Poems, the Greatest Works of the Greatest Minds, etc. All that make the study of history possible today is what I call the Gas-Law of Learning, namely, that any amount of information, no matter how small, will fill any intellectual void no matter how large. It is as easy to write a history of the world after you have read ten books as after you have read a thousand — far easier, in fact. This is the historian's dilemma: if his view is sweeping enough to be significant, it is bound to be inadequately documented; if it is adequately documented it is bound to be trivial in scope. It is a cozy and reassuring thing for student and teacher alike to

have our neat authoritarian College Outline Series, Syllabi of Western Civilization, Surveys of Great Minds, and what-not to fall back on. But please don't point to these pedestrian exercises in skimming and sampling and try to tell me that they are a valid refutation of the prophets!

5) To handle problems requiring data beyond the capacity of students and educators impatient to shine, the ancient Sophists devised certain very effective discussion techniques. In these, the most important skill was that of presenting evidence by implication or inference only. Since it is quite impossible in a public discourse (or in print, for that matter) to put all one's evidence on display, one must be allowed on occasions to present one's knowledge merely by inference. The Sophists seized upon this welcome path of escape from drudgery, and by the arts of rhetoric made of it a broad highway to successful teaching careers. A limited use of jargon is indispensable in any field: having solved for "x," we do not have to derive "x" every time it is mentioned, but simply to indicate it by a symbol, such as those useful key-words commonly used to power historical discussions: the Medieval Mind, *Sturm und Drang*, the Frontier, Hellenism, the Enlightenment, Puritanism, the Primitive, Relativity, etc., each of which is supposed to set a whole chorus of bells chiming in our heads — the echoes of deep and thorough reading. But by a familiar process these labels are no mere labels any more; they have become the whole substance of our knowledge. The student today has never solved for that "x" about which he talks so glibly — he has got its value from an answer-book; the cue word is not just a cue; it is now the whole play. The stock charge against the philosophers in every age has been that they

have made themselves experts in the manipulation of labels to the point where they live in a world of words. The art of *implying* the possession of certain knowledge without actually claiming it has become one of the great humanistic skills of our time, in Europe as well as America. Without it the teaching of history would be almost impossible.

My own self-confidence in sounding off on historical matters need not reflect any solid knowledge at all, but may well be the product of a careful grooming, a calculated window-dressing. Today the typical academic historian does most of his training before a mirror. The modern world, like the ancient, is a world peopled largely by zombies. Occasions like this one tonight are not meant to teach but to impress. If it was knowledge we were after, we would all at this time be perusing the evidence, not listening to me.

The confusion of discussion-born ideas with evidence is the root of much trouble in education today. People wishing to be liberal demand that their ideas be given the authority of evidence with the general public and in the classroom. If we refuse to accept those ideas, however hackneyed and unobjectionable they may be, as legal tender in an economy where only evidence passes as such, they complain that their ideas are being held in contempt and that they are being persecuted — which is not true at all.

6) What about those great historical systems which the giants have erected from time to time — do not such give a faithful picture of the world? Alas, system is the death of history! The great historians have all been random readers. Professor Schmid has shown how the professors of Alexandria killed the Greek humanities when they diverted their students from ran-

dom reading to required reading for credit.³ One builds systems only by excluding as well as including. When you choose to build one structure rather than another you are not merely rearranging materials in new combinations, you are emphasizing some things at the expense of others. Excluding or suppressing evidence is dangerous business, and what makes it doubly dangerous is the way in which systems of history by their very exclusiveness convey a powerful and perfectly false sense of all-inclusiveness. The product of the System is the closed mind, the student who has taken the course and knows the answers, who has been systematically bereft of the most priceless possession of the inquiring mind — the sense of possibilities.

"The Bible excels in its suggestion infinitude," said Whitehead and, as a friend describes it, "suddenly he stood and spoke with passionate intensity, 'Here we are with our finite beings and physical senses in the presence of a universe whose possibilities are infinite, and even though we may not apprehend them, those infinite possibilities are actualities.'" Later he added, "I doubt if we get very far by the intellect alone. I doubt if the intellect carries us very far."⁴ The study of history in the schools today, with its "intellectual" orientation, effectively stifles that very sense of possibilities which it is the duty of history before all else to foster. For every door it opens our modern education closes a thousand. We cannot insist too emphatically on the endless mass, variety, detail and scope of historical evi-

³ Wm. Schmid, *Die klassische Periode der griechischen Literatur* (in Walter Otto's *Handb.d. Altertumswissenschaft*, Munich, 1926), pp. 1-26.

⁴ Lucien Price, "To Live without Certitude, Dialogues of Whitehead," in *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1954, p. 59.

dence; every page of every text is a compact mass of a thousand clues, and every reading full of new and surprising discoveries. That is the essence of history, and the modern academic presentation completely effaces it. The modern scholar is eager to reach his conclusion, get his degree, and stop his investigations before there is any danger of running into contradictions. From a safe and settled position he wants only to discuss and discuss and discuss. The *via scholastica* is well-marked: first one takes a sampling, merely a sampling, of the evidence; then as soon as possible one forms a theory (the less the evidence the more brilliant the theory); from then on the scholar spends his days defending his theory and mechanically fitting all subsequent evidence into the bed of Procrustes.

7) But surely there is a general over-all picture of history, or some really basic points, upon which a *mas-sive consensus* exists. Surely the verdict can be imparted to students in a few lessons, and it must be fairly reliable. There is a charming study by the Swede Olaf Linton on the basic certitudes of Church History in the 19th and 20th centuries — what he calls the Consensus with a capital "C." Mr. Linton shows us how the Consensus changes with time and circumstances just as completely and just as surely as the fashions in women's hats. The Homeric question furnishes us with a good illustration of present-day consensus. What we call higher criticism is the application to the Bible of methods of textual criticism developed in the study of the Homeric problem. That problem is really far simpler than the Biblical (there is hardly a book in the Bible that is not as mysterious as Homer), yet after 200 years of intensive investigation where do we stand?

Listen to Professor Wade-Gery of Oxford: "Homer, who wrote the Iliad as I believe sometime in the eighth century . . . lived (as I believe) in Chios, and knew the Eighth City of Troy. He was (as I also believe) a man of exceptional genius. . . . I feel sure that almost all which makes the Iliad a great poem is the poet's own creation." * And listen to Professor Whatmough of Harvard in the same issue of the same journal: ". . . nothing is, or could be, more puerile than the notion that the Iliad could possibly have been composed by one man. . . . The complex descent of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey is as certain as anything can be in this very uncertain world. . . . I know of no competent linguist . . . whose knowledge of Greek and Greek dialects I respect enough to quote his name, who holds any other opinion. . . . to use the term author or authorship . . . is simply to sin against the light." † Note it well: ". . . as certain as anything can be. . . ." Yet a host of big names are quite convinced of the oppositel The Consensus has its fads and fashions like everything else.

As for the scientific consensus, with all its vaunted objectivity, let us hear Whitehead again: "In those years from the 1880's to the First World War, who ever dreamed that the ideas and institutions which then looked so stable would be impermanent? . . . Fifty-seven years ago it was when I was a young man in the University of Cambridge. I was taught science and mathematics by brilliant men and I did well in them; since the turn of the century I have lived to see every one of the basic assumptions of both set aside; not, indeed, discarded, but of use as qualifying clauses instead of as

* H. T. Wade-Gery, "The Dorian Invasion . . ." in *American Journal of Archaeology*, 52 (1948), 115 f.

† J. Whatmough, "Hosper Homeros Phesi," *Ibid.*, 45-46.

major propositions; and all this in one life-span, — the most fundamental assumptions of supposedly exact sciences set aside. And yet, in the face of that, the discoverers of the new hypotheses in science are declaring, 'Now at last, we have certitude' — when some of the assumptions which we have seen upset had endured for more than twenty centuries." ⁷ And but a few months ago Professor McCulloch wrote: "At last we are learning to admit ignorance, suspend judgment, and forego the explication ignoti perignotum — God — which has proved as futile as it is profane. . . . So long as we, like good empiricists, remember that it is an act of faith to believe our senses, and that our most respectable hypotheses are but guesses open to refutation, so long we may rest assured that God has not given us over to thralldom under that mystery of iniquity, of sinful man aspiring to the place of God." ⁸

I can answer the question, "Do religion and history conflict?" for myself, but not for anyone else. At present my religion and history do not conflict, as once they did. Well, you say, of course they agree because you make them agree. That is not entirely true. There are controls. Within the last three or four years leading Jewish and Christian scholars have been forced to relinquish a concept of history which they had painfully built up through the decades to an almost perfect consensus. Some of them put up a magnificent fight, but in the end the evidence was too strong and one by one they gave in. It is a healthy sign when religion and history conflict: it means that they are not being bent wilfully to force them into agreement. In most historical fields the difficulty of the languages in which the

⁷ Whitehead, *op. cit.*, p. 59, cf. *Ibid.*, May 1954, p. 53.

⁸ McCulloch, *loc. cit.*

sources are written is enough in itself to guarantee a minimum of intellectual integrity in the researcher: the documents simply refuse to speak unless one approaches them with a really open mind and is willing to swallow his pride and suppress self-will. In much the same way the rigorous demands of mathematics guarantee a measure of honesty in any scientist who is equipped to work in a field.

But unfortunately there are no such controls in those more socialized fields of learning which, for that very reason, have completely banished the older disciplines from our secondary schools and supplanted them at the university by pretentious techniques of discussion and pseudo-scientific "quantification of the obvious." In such an atmosphere it is futile to attempt a serious discussion of history.

I believe my history and religion agree in a way that is objective enough to justify my conviction that the agreement is not entirely the result of my own manipulating. But whether this agreement is significant or not must be decided by everyone for himself, on his own examination of the evidence. As to the general question, "When do we flinch?" the answer is: Wait until history comes up with all the answers, or with any answer we can be entirely sure of — then we will know whether to flinch or not. Meantime, it is the historian's duty (for it is he who appeals to an uncompromising objectivity) to flinch every time an answer of his proves defective — which is, roughly, on the hour every hour.

Does life on the moon resemble life on Mars? It is a good question, but premature. When I was a little boy we used to sit in a tent on hot summer afternoons and debate loudly and foolishly on just such lofty themes as this one. I think we all felt vaguely uncom-

fortable about the whole thing, and that made us all the more excitable, dogmatic, and short-tempered. The trouble was that we were not yet ready; we did not have the necessary knowledge. But when would we be ready? Are we ready yet? If not, we should stop playing this game of naughty boys behind the barn, smoking corn-silk and saying damn and hell to show how emancipated we are. It is much too easy to be a "swearing elder": knowledge is not so cheaply bought. We are not free to discuss any imaginable question simply because we say we are. I am not *permitted* to discuss botany with anybody, at any time or place; it is not the jealousy of a reactionary society or the dictates of a narrow Church that cramp my style — I just don't happen to know anything about botany. Prejudice, says Haldane, does not consist in having an opinion and defective — which is, roughly, on the hour every hour, before examining all the evidence. If anyone draws any conclusions but one here tonight, they must needs be prejudiced conclusions. If we have gathered here to read lectures to each other or to the Mormon Church, we might as well spare our breath; or if you are looking for a stick to beat the Church with, my advice is, leave History out of it — it will come apart in your hands. For our knowledge of the past is too trivial to serve as an effective instrument in real situations — that is why it is often appealed to but never actually used.

What do we have then? Well, I have a testimony: I may be ignorant, but I am not lost. Socrates counted a life well spent that ended only with the discovery that he knew nothing. That was not a figure of speech or a clever paradox: that was his solemn testimony delivered in the hour of his death. And if the most profitable activity of the mind is that which leads to

the discovery of its own ignorance and ineptitude, we can all take heart in the thought that we have not entirely wasted our time in coming here tonight. At this point we can begin the study of the Gospel; there is no further need for waiting around until "History" can make up its mind.