

A STUDY OF HISTORY: WHAT
I AM TRYING TO DO

Since 1927 I have been writing this book, *A Study of History*, side by side with the Chatham House Survey of International Affairs that my wife and I began to write in 1924. I could not, I believe, have done either piece of work if I had not been doing the other at the same time. A survey of current affairs on a world-wide scale can be made only against a background of world-history; and a study of world-history would have no life in it if it left out the history of the writer's own lifetime, for one's contemporaries are the only people whom one can ever catch alive. An historian in our generation must study Gandhi and Lenin and Atatürk and F. D. Roosevelt if he is to have any hope of bringing Hammurabi and Ikhnaton and Amos and the Buddha back to life for himself and for his readers.

The particular generation into which I was born happens to be a revolutionary one. In less than one lifetime the face of the world has changed almost out of recognition, and the West's position in the world has undergone the greatest change of all. So, if one has been following the course of world affairs since 1914, one is bound to have gained, from this alone, a good deal of new knowledge about history; and, meanwhile, the forty years that have seen this new chapter of history writing itself have also seen the Orientalists and the archaeologists recovering for us other chap-

ters of history that had been either forgotten completely or had been remembered only in a few shreds and tatters of tradition. In our day the Minoan civilization has risen from its grave below the Graeco-Roman civilization; the Shang Culture in China from below the classical Chinese civilization; the Indus Culture from below Aryan India; the Hittite civilization from below the Asia Minor known to Herodotus; and at the same time our picture of the Sumerian and Egyptian civilizations, and of the pre-Columbian civilizations in the New World, has been quite transformed by the new knowledge that the excavator's spade has brought to light here too. This re-discovery of the rather less recent past, together with the portentous events of our own day, has given us a wealth of new historical information. Our vision of the history of mankind, since the rise of the earliest known civilizations about 5,000 years ago, has been enormously enlarged and has also been brought into much sharper focus; and, since curiosity is one of the characteristics of human nature, we find ourselves moved, in our time, to take a new look at the new face of history as a whole. This is the origin of my book, *A Study of History*. It is one person's impression of history in the new light in which we can now see it; and of course a number of other people have been tempted, by the same opportunity, to take their look and form their impressions. Each of these individual views will show the new picture in a different perspective; and, since it has only lately become possible to take this panoramic view of history, the first attempts (of which mine is one) are sure to be revised and corrected and superseded as time goes on and as more people turn their minds to this exciting intellectual enterprise.

There is, though, one negative observation that will, I believe, continue to hold good. As soon as one looks at the new panorama of history, one sees that it bursts the bounds of the current framework within which our Western historians have been doing their work for the last 250 years. This Late Modern Western view of history was a reflection of the temporary situation during the Late Modern Age. From the failure of the second Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683 down to the outbreak of the first world war in 1914, western Europe dominated the rest of the world, while the west European middle class dominated the rest of the population of western Europe. During that brief and abnormal period of history, the world was being managed by a western European middle-class oligarchy which could afford to be small because it was uncommonly able and sensible. Under this dispensation "the lower classes," "the colonials," and "the natives" did not count, though, between them, they accounted for

all but a tiny minority of the human race; and this state of the historical facts set the pattern for the Western historians of that age.

The traditional pattern in the West down to the end of the seventeenth century had been the Israelite pattern, which Christendom and Islam had taken over with modifications in their own favor. In this Jewish-Christian-Muslim view, history had appeared to be an act of God beginning at the Creation and destined to end in the Last Judgment, while Israel (or Christendom or Islam) had been singled out as being the people chosen by God for carrying out His purposes. The last great Western exponent of this Jewish-Christian-Muslim pattern of history had been Bishop Bossuet. His eighteenth-century successors made the Late Modern Western pattern of history, on which we have been working since Bossuet's death, by cutting God out of the picture and dealing with the Christian Church as the Church had dealt with Israel. Bossuet's successors appropriated the role of being "the Chosen People" from the Christian Church, as the Church had appropriated it from Israel; and they transferred this role, partly to "Europe," but mainly to the particular West European nation to which a particular historian happened to belong: to France, Britain, Italy, Spain, and so on, as the case might be. This eighteenth-century Western view of history as a movement in a straight line, leading up to a twentieth-century "Europe," "Britain," or "Nicaragua," instead of leading up to a future Last Judgment, simply cannot take in the new panorama that the twentieth century has now opened out before our eyes. In that antiquated Late Modern Western picture there is no room at all for China or India, and hardly any room even for Russia or America. And where are we to find in it so much as a niche for the Maya or for the Hittites? In the light of our new knowledge, we are compelled to discard this pattern, as our eighteenth-century predecessors discarded Bossuet's. Once again, we have to look at history with new eyes, as our eighteenth-century predecessors did.

The histories of all the civilizations that have now come to light cannot be arranged in a single series leading up to the present state of any one living civilization or any one living nation. Instead of the beanstalk pattern of history we have to draw for ourselves a tree pattern in which the civilizations rise, like so many branches, side by side; and this pattern is suggested by the most important feature in the history of the Modern Age. In this age our Western civilization has collided with all the other surviving civilizations all over the face of the planet—with the Islamic civilization, with the Hindu, with the Chinese, with the Aztec, and so on—and we can take a comparative view of the effects of these simultaneous col-

lisions upon the parties to them. This comparative treatment can be extended to the whole of history; and it is, in fact, the method of the human sciences: the theory of knowledge, psychology, anthropology, sociology, economics. The human sciences, like the natural sciences, make a comparative study of their data in order to discover the structure of the facts and the events; and I believe that here the historians ought to take their cue from the scientists. The academic division between history and the social sciences is an accidental one which is an obstacle to the progress of understanding. We need to break down the traditional partition, and to throw history and the social sciences together into a single comprehensive study of human affairs.

In a study of human affairs the first thing now to be done is to explore how far we can carry, in this field, the scientific method of investigating “laws,” regularities, uniformities, recurrences. Some Western historians in the post-Bossuet age have denied that there are any regularities in the course of human affairs and have declared, with evident sincerity, that they have no such patterns in their own minds. Yet the use made by these very historians of such patterns as “Europe” and “Britain” show that they are mistaken in their belief about the nature of their own mental operations. A pattern is still there; it is, as we have seen, the classical Jewish-Christian-Muslim pattern thinly disguised in secular modern dress. The difference between these post-Christian Western historians and their Christian predecessors is that the moderns do not allow themselves to be aware of the pattern in their minds, whereas Bossuet, Eusebius, and Saint Augustine were fully conscious of it. If one cannot think without mental patterns—and, in my belief, one cannot—it is better to know what they are; for a pattern of which one is unconscious is a pattern that holds one at its mercy.

One of my aims in *A Study of History* has been to try out the scientific approach to human affairs and to test how far it will carry us. Of course, no one would seriously contend that there are no patterns at all in historical thought, for thought itself is a mental pattern, and no historian could think one thought or could write one line without using such mental patterns as “society,” “state,” “church,” “war,” “battle,” and “man.” The real question at issue is not whether mental patterns exist but whether they cover the whole field of human affairs or only part of it; and my own belief is that there are some things in human affairs that have no pattern because they are not subject to scientific laws. One such thing, I believe, is an encounter between two or more human beings. I believe that the outcome

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of such an encounter would not be predictable, even if we had a complete knowledge of all the antecedent facts. I also think that the poetry and the prophetic vision that well up out of the subconscious depths of the human soul are not amenable to law. I think, in fact, that here we are in the presence of genuine acts of creation, in which something new is brought into existence; and this leads us back towards the Biblical view of history which was accepted in the West from the fourth century till the end of the seventeenth.

More than twenty-seven years have now passed since I began to make my first notes for *A Study of History*, and I am conscious that, during these years, my outlook has changed. As I have gone on, religion has come, once again, to take the central place in my picture of the universe. Yet I have not returned to the religious outlook in which I was brought up. I was brought up to believe that Christianity was a unique revelation of the whole truth. I have now come to believe that all the historic religions and philosophies are partial revelations of the truth in one or other of its aspects. In particular, I believe that Buddhism and Hinduism have a lesson to teach to Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the "one world" into which we are now being carried by "the annihilation of distance." Unlike the Judaic religions, the Indian religions are not exclusive. They allow for the possibility that there may be alternative approaches to the mystery of Existence; and this seems to me more likely to be the truth than the rival claims of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to be unique and final revelations. This Indian standpoint is the one from which these last four volumes of my book have been written. For each of us, the easiest approach to the mystery of the universe is, no doubt, his ancestral religion; but this does not mean that he ought to rule out the other approaches that the other religions offer. If one can enter into these, as well as into one's own, it is gain, not loss.

This book is now behind me; but even the longest book is only one piece of action, and, though the book is finished, the subject is perennial. As I write these words, I seem to catch the faint sound of the busy archaeologist's trowel, as he deftly uncovers new layers of buried civilizations in Bucklersbury and Beyce Sultan and Palenque. Meanwhile the critical current chapter of the history of our own world runs on: and, all the time, the psychologists are digging down deeper in the new dimension that they have added, in our lifetime, to the study of human affairs. A student of history will never find himself out of work, so long as he keeps his wits.