

## TWO PHILOSOPHERS OF HISTORY

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IT seems that all roads of thought, all mind-routes, lead into history; because, of any subject of study, even the most abstract, one is bound to ask, sooner or later, what has this to do with human life? And human life is necessarily historical. Every concept we use includes some reference to time, and as soon as we relate it to human life the reference at once becomes more or less explicit. In God himself our faith finds such a reference: he is not temporal, but his ways with man are; and in Christ he has seized hold of time in such a way as to compel us to acknowledge a divine mystery in it and to strive to penetrate this mystery so far as we can. This is a new compulsion, a peculiarly Christian one; it does not spring from the need to make sense of human life as such, but from the need, if one may so put it, to make sense of Christ. We certainly cannot separate human history, down to the present moment and on into the future, from Christ. But if this seems to commit us, as believers, to a 'theology of history', can we say that we are also committed, merely as reasoning animals, to a 'philosophy of history'? Is such a discipline in fact conceivable? As philosophy it must be conceivable, if at all, and approachable, if at all, from the side of reason, not of faith. What then has reason to say of the notion itself? And what have historians—an unphilosophical race for the most part, with an understandable bias against abstractions—to say about such philosophies of history as have been attempted—about the constructions of a Toynbee, a Vico, a Teilhard de Chardin?

These questions, it is clear, arise at the outset of any attempt to philosophize about history; they are preliminary; the answers they elicit must then either cut short such philosophizing or else serve as prolegomena to it. Father D'Arcy tells us indeed that 'Prolegomena to a Christian View of History' was the modest title he first thought of giving to his latest book,<sup>1</sup> and one may regret that he did not retain it, for it accurately describes both the content and the spirit of the work. It would not have suited M. Maritain's book<sup>2</sup> so well. One might be tempted to say that M.

<sup>1</sup> *The Sense of History, Secular and Sacred*. Faber & Faber; 30s.

<sup>2</sup> *On the Philosophy of History*. Edited by T.W.Evans. G.Bles; 15s.

Maritain starts where Father D'Arcy leaves off; but that would be inexact, for Father D'Arcy himself, in his later chapters, draws the outline, tentatively, of a 'Christian view of history', a religious 'historicism' (a term he equates with 'philosophy of history'); but through a great deal of his book, which is twice as long as Maritain's, he is concerned precisely with the prolegomena, with those preliminary questions—questions which Maritain disposes of, very briefly, in one chapter. In fact—apart from their common Catholic faith—the two writers approach the subject from quite different points of view. M. Maritain, let us say, is in a helicopter, drawing maps of the terrain far below; Father D'Arcy is path-finding on the ground, nosing through the thickets, gradually blazing a trail.

This difference perhaps inclines one's sympathies to Father D'Arcy; and certainly he writes with incomparably greater charm than Maritain. There is perhaps no serious writer in English today who possesses to such a degree the art of winning, as the old rhetoricians used to say, the reader's *benevolentia*. And let no one think this a matter of mere external graces. Courtesy is far deeper than mere good form, and to a very uncommon degree Father D'Arcy is intellectually courteous. His approach to almost any question is itself an exercise in courtesy; he clarifies his own position by gently searching into other people's. A great deal of this book—too much, some readers may think—consists of such ambivalent enquiry. One by one the chief writers on 'historicism', living and dead, pro and con, are introduced, considered, pondered and compared; nothing is accepted indiscriminately, nothing rejected out of hand—unless it be Lord Russell's paradox, 'as we cannot directly confront the past, it cannot be certain; we cannot even be sure that the world existed five minutes ago'; yet even here the *riposte* discriminates: 'On an artificial definition of certainty this may be so, but . . .'. Another sceptical approach, Mr C. S. Lewis's attack on all philosophies of history, gets exactly the right answer: 'he does not make clear where he draws the line between the historian and the historicist'—a reply that challenges the attacker to say whether history can altogether dispense with moral judgments, for 'once we allow moral judgment to enter into the historian's account of the past, we open the way to historicism'. A like cool, poised maturity of judgment appears again and again. Paul Tillich, for example, is given credit

for a 'bold, constructive energy' that 'merits comparison with the great systems of past theologians'; but then a single sentence, going to the heart of the matter, exposes a radical confusion: 'In any case sin is not a disruption of any metaphysical unity between God and man; it is an offence against God by a man who has already been created'.

I have implied that Father D'Arcy's book falls into two main parts: a clearing of the ground (prolegomena to a philosophy of history) followed by a 'Christian view' of history. In the former section two questions inevitably present themselves: the status of history as a form of knowledge and the possibility of a valid historicism. The first of these questions Father D'Arcy tackles directly, putting all his cards on the table. Admitting, of course, the indirectness of historical knowledge, its dependence on testimony and belief, and noting that the notion of belief (in its secular, non-theological sense) has been left strangely unexplored by philosophers, Father D'Arcy lays his chief stress on what he calls 'interpretation', i.e., roughly, the way human beings understand one another and come to know, more or less certainly, the characters, interests and even motives of men through signs and outward actions. Except for a special dependence on testimony from the past, this is precisely the sort of knowledge yielded by history. It is knowledge of man by man, in which the knower has to let himself be guided by an experience of human nature in himself and in his contemporaries, as well as by documents and other records. 'The subject matter of history is human conduct', and therefore the historian who tries to 'divest himself entirely of his feelings and beliefs' is simply being untrue to his craft, he is blinding himself to his proper subject matter, human action. History, then, is an interpretative discernment, scrupulously faithful to but not limited by the material records, of whatever is intelligible in past human lives. It is not, strictly, science (here Maritain agrees, but he gives, I think, a different reason); it is 'a half-way house between science and art'. And all this brings us, *via* a stress on moral judgment to within sight of 'historicism'.

At this point Father D'Arcy steps to one side and lets the historicists speak for themselves, while he stands at their elbow, interposing comments but without committing himself to any clear-cut system either with respect to the methodological principles involved in a valid historicism or with respect to such

axioms or laws as this may be able to establish. Here a difference appears between him and M. Maritain. Maritain only touches on the nature of historical knowledge, but as regards the kind of thinking involved in and required by the philosophy of history, it is evident that he is working with a clear-cut complete theory (though he does not draw this out in detail) based on Thomist principles. For him the 'objective content' of philosophy of history 'consists of universal objects of thought, which are either the typical features of a given historical age or some essential aspect of human history in general, and which are *inductively* abstracted from historical data'. After stressing the 'part played here by induction', Maritain continues: 'in addition these universal objects of thought must be *philosophically verified*, i.e. checked with some philosophical truth previously acquired. Then we see that they involve some intelligible necessity. . . . Induction and philosophical truths are and must be joined together' in a valid philosophy of history. With this characteristically downright statement Father D'Arcy would very likely agree in principle, but he never throughout his book speaks as though he *already had* a philosophy of history clear-cut in his mind, with defined postulates and precise conclusions. His method and approach preclude such an attitude, and in any case the way of tentative description seems to be more congenial to him than that of exact logical definition. Thus, on the difference between history proper and historicism he is content with this: 'the formal object of his (the philosopher of history's) study differs from that of the historian in that he is looking at history as a whole . . . trying to find there certain laws or tendencies, repetitions in the rise and fall of nations, constant aims and conditions of progress and decay'. Father D'Arcy never improves on this rough working definition, and therefore his whole book might well leave us unsatisfied if we were to suppose that his successive examinations of the chief historicists—Hegel, Vico, Croce, Toynbee—were intended precisely as steps in an analysis of the nature of historicism itself. But I do not think this was his intention. His book is not in fact a philosophical treatise on the philosophy of history. Nor is it even, as the bulk of Maritain's is, an exposition of laws and axioms presented as discernible—to reason alone or reason aided by faith—in the historical record. What then is Father D'Arcy after? His own answer, stated on his first page, is that he set out to find a

satisfactory 'Christian view of history'; and by the time we have reached his last page we are in a position, I suggest, to restate this aim for ourselves and a little more precisely. For what this brilliant book actually gives us is: (a) an account of historical knowledge, (b) an absorbingly interesting but rather unco-ordinated and piecemeal critique of various historicisms, and (c) a third thing which I find difficult to define but which certainly emerges as the book proceeds to its close: let me call it 'a Christian justification of the finite, temporal process, or 'an attempt to correlate human history with the Kingdom of God as the Catholic faith presents this'.

This latter formula brings us pretty close to the final chapter of Maritain's book, 'God and the Mystery of the World.' Maritain is more schematic of course, but then he is very much briefer. But both writers are concerned, fundamentally, with what Christianity, i.e. the Church, is doing in this world, in time. And for both writers what it is doing will only be fully revealed beyond time, beyond history. And so for both there is a mystery in history which is hidden from the historicist—completely hidden from the historicist who lacks faith, but partly so from the Christian historicist too. As Maritain puts it: 'The end is beyond time, and never therefore can the movement of history come to a definitive and final state . . . or self-revelation within time. Never can a Christian philosopher of history install himself, as Hegel, Marx and Comte did, at the end of time.' But the question recurs: what is the relation *now* and what will the relation be *then*, at the end of time, between human history and God's kingdom? And at once, it is clear, we have touched off a coruscation of problems—nature and grace, the meaning and limits of progress, the moral value of secular interests, the meaning of other-worldliness, the crying contrast between the Church's universal claim and her very limited influence, and then the unification of mankind and the scope and resources of science; all these and kindred problems, involving the deepest issues between Christianity and Humanism, Catholicity and Protestantism, confront the Christian historicist. Now, of our two authors it is Maritain who deals more directly with such problems, considered as a set of distinct questions each requiring a distinct answer; whereas Father D'Arcy is, I think, at bottom concerned with only one all-inclusive matter. Paradoxically, it is the man in the helicopter who focuses on particulars;

the man on the ground aims at something more general, as I hope to show before ending.

But first, a final word on Maritain. In a way his book has more to do with the contemporary world than Father D'Arcy's; it comes much closer to politics. For Maritain's chief concern (unlike Father D'Arcy's) in this work is with the parallel development in time of the Church and secular society, and with inter-relating the two with an eye to what is actually going on now and what may be expected in the future; and all this from the point of view of a theological moralist making a free use of Thomist distinctions to light up the deeper relations between Christianity and the secular world. And any reader disposed to sympathize with such an approach should find this book extremely useful. 'Useful', on the other hand, seems too cold a term to apply to Father D'Arcy's work. Here there is enchantment as well as instruction, a profound current of feeling that it seems appropriate to call poetic. The author's deepest concern, it seems to me, is to find a valid Christian justification of the temporal, i.e. of the story of mankind as a whole, of the unfolding richness and wonder of human life. And it is because he really feels this richness and wonder that Father D'Arcy can so touch and stir the heart, especially in the final chapters, as he approaches the term of his enquiry. No summary of these splendid pages could do them justice; but perhaps a hint of their meaning will be given if we say that they almost compel one to see the human finite world, 'the toys of this life', 'the human *Comedia*, the tangled mass of bitter-sweet experiences', as the recipient of 'a divine benediction' and a sort of rehearsal for heaven. The clue, finally, is charity; charity which has power to give to all we do, excepting sin, that 'transposition', that mysterious 'place in another setting' which Christ has indicated to us: . . . 'as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me'. Only in the light of charity can our little passing life be seen as a preparation for and symbol of the Kingdom.

Father D'Arcy will not of course take all his readers as far as this; only the believer will go all the way. Others may find themselves bewildered and disappointed; but that will be their loss: this is a work of rare distinction.