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## THE CHRISTIAN AND THE STUDY OF HISTORY

Sir Herbert Butterfield (1900-79)

**D**o we live in an age with no sense of history? Ireland, the Middle East and Poland belie this. Maybe the historian is needed to slay the legends, to be the herald of what J. H. Plumb<sup>1</sup> called “the death of the past”. There are also New Testament scholars like Professor Dennis Nineham<sup>2</sup> who appear to imply that the distance between ourselves and the people of the New Testament world is such that we can hardly communicate with them. If Nineham is right, then the whole enterprise of ancient history, not to speak of archæology, and anthropology, seems somewhat futile, and it is doubtful if the now fashionable use of sociological categories will help either. Relativity takes over—unless it is the case that Nineham is stuck with rather outmoded views of how an historian works. Let us look at the contribution of one historian to the use of history by the Christian—the late Sir Herbert Butterfield, who was a Methodist and, though he would have disclaimed the title, a “lay theologian”.

Herbert Butterfield was born in 1900 at Oxenhope, between Keighley and Halifax. His father, who left school at the age of ten, was a woollorter and later a petty clerk, the very epitome of the “labour aristocracy”, that crucial group who bridge the gap between the working class and the lower middle class. These are the folk to whom Methodism traditionally made its appeal—men of integrity and responsibility. Albert Butterfield led his “class” of working men in the local chapel. Young Herbert was sent to Sunday school, hated it, and went to chapel worship instead. Men like Albert Butterfield (and, higher up the scale Margaret Thatcher’s father) encouraged their children in the virtues of self-education, thrift and hard work, individual choice and achievement, the pursuit of excellence, which produced a very high proportion of Methodists at universities after World War I. “It was a Methodist ethic which found the English liberal political and social tradition congenial.”<sup>3</sup> At a time when the “work ethic” is subject to scrutiny and criticism in the West, we do well to realize that Christianity has

<sup>1</sup> J. H. Plumb; *The Death of the Past* (1969).

<sup>2</sup> D. E. Nineham; *The Use and Abuse of the Bible* (1978).

<sup>3</sup> C. T. McIntyre (ed.); *Writings on Christianity and History* (1979), p. xxi.

nearly always produced the thrifty person of integrity. There is evidence that the "black-led" churches are doing this now, and will not easily be patronized by guilty products of upper-crust education who may accuse them of social élitism.

Herbert had early aspirations to authorship ; he preached as a teenager, an exercise in communication which stood him in good stead later ; went up to Peterhouse, the "historian's college", at Cambridge. A double first was followed by a Fellowship at a very early age. In his twenties he was a visiting Fellow at Princeton during the era of Prohibition. A lifelong teetotaler, Herbert drank while in the U.S.A.—a liberal protest at totalitarian temperance morals. There is something very nonconformist in that !

Herbert Butterfield's first book was *The Historical Novel* (1924). Points made there remained with him—that often a novel catches the spirit of an age as well as a piece of "scientific" history-writing. Stories and legends accrue round any great character, and often tell us what such a one was like. In his last book Butterfield applies this to Winston Churchill. There are hundreds of unverified "Churchill" stories. Are not the Gospels full of the same sort of material—not *ipsissima verba*, but full of verisimilitude ?

It is wrong to assume—as people so often do—when they are dealing with the Scriptures—that if an event has not been demonstrated with mathematical certainty, it has been proved not to have happened at all.<sup>4</sup>

The "redaction critic" concerned with the author's intention is concerned with what has been commonplace to historians. It has not unduly worried them—it is the person who pretends to have no pre-suppositions who is likely to be misleading.

The next book was of a quite different genre. Butterfield, in 1929, produced a large-scale work on the *Peace Tactics of Napoleon, 1806-8*. Three aspects of the revolutionary epoch are germane now. First, the historian of diplomacy has no illusions about power or about revolution. The romanticization of revolution, common in the age of Mazzini and common again in some Christian circles a few years ago, had a touch of naïveté about it. It may have been right for young Wordsworth to toast the Revolution of 1789—

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
But to be young was very heaven !

—yet the movement from idealism through the Terror to Napoleon is haunting and repetitive. The lesser Napoleons of today are a warning to idealists and ideologues. Nevertheless, Butterfield is not an ally of reaction—he reminds us how like hatred of Communism was earlier suspicion of democracy, and how much the Marxists mimic earlier Christians. Second, Butterfield was a true son of Acton in seeing the destructive element in power, and his Augustinian sense of human wilfulness and cupidity are only paralleled, I think, in Reinhold Niebuhr. The big book on Napoleon was followed by a short but brilliant biography in 1939, and in the next year *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (1940), a glance at the kind of statesman who saw the power of his own state as being paramount, no ideology, no desire to impose a religion or political system—simply *realpolitik*. Diplomacy,

<sup>4</sup> *Writings*, pp. 97 ff., 110.

incidentally, throws up patterns of human behaviour which change little across the centuries. One of Butterfield's outstanding essays, buried in a *Festschrift* to D. B. Horn, was on styles of diplomacy beginning with an analysis of the visit of the Assyrian Rabshakeh to the king of Judah, indulging in propaganda to the people behind the king's back—not much different from some use of “the media” today and a great deal more effective. Maybe the gulf between one age and another is not impassable!

Third, the big book on Napoleon showed a method of doing history which is of lasting value, much needed now. He would imaginatively let himself be attracted to each side in order to understand them almost from inside. He called this the process of “self emptying” in conscious quotation from Philippians or the hymn “And can it be”. Next he would sort out his criticisms of each side's errors and exaggerations and discern the residue of truth in each position, what he frequently called “picking up the other end of the stick”—not always the “right” end! He would then reconcile the truths at a higher level of insight, what he often called the “last analysis”. In his own religion he had reconciled “evangelical” and “liberal”, and came out as what we would call “critical orthodox”—neither reductionist nor fundamentalist. These days we are more prone to shout slogans and to fail to see the other person's viewpoint. Siren-voices are telling us that unless we always “take sides”, we are automatically on the side of the so-called *status quo*, which is always assumed to be replaceable by something better. The “cross-bencher” is thus at a discount. The “Butterfieldian” version of Hegel's dialectic is of great value. “The owl of Minerva” may be a bird that extremists would love to shoot, but she is of great value, and liable to become extinct.

In 1931 Butterfield, then a young don beginning to develop lecture techniques, which made him a “star” among undergraduates later, produced a small book, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, only 132 pages in length, but packed with ideas, as readable now as then. For very few of the ideas expressed did he need to repent. Basically, it is an attack on the idea of progress—what is discussed is the tendency in many historians to write on the side of Protestants and Whigs, to praise revolutions provided they are successful, to emphasize certain principles of progress in the past, and to produce a story which is the ratification, if not the glorification, of the present. The Whig view still rears its head, not least when we assume that somehow living standards must get better and better, that communities may not decay or even wither away, forgetting that we may be “one with Nineveh and Tyre”. The historian is more reconciler than avenger. He cannot easily arrange the men of the past as friends and enemies of progress. We simply have to enter into minds *unlike* our own, which means that there are enough similarities. We must not always study the past with reference to the present, but in its own right. “The true historical fervour is the love of the past for the sake of the past”, so that, for instance, we see Magna Carta as a feudal document and not as an anticipation of the great Reform Bill or Mr. Gladstone's first government. Sometimes analogies have to be destroyed, for the chief aim of the historian is the elucidation of the unlikeness between past and present, and his chief function is to act in this way as the mediator between other generations and our own, for in the end “it is nothing less than the whole of the past with its complexity of movement, its entanglement of issues and its intricate interactions

which produced the whole of the complex present".<sup>5</sup> This scintillating little book was seen by Professor G. M. Trevelyan as an attack on much of what he stood for, so much so that he handed to Butterfield his vast collection of papers on Charles James Fox, implying that he was the one to write a definitive life of Fox,—a fantastic backhanded compliment! Alas, the book on Fox was never finished.

For us, the *Whig Interpretation* puts a question mark against a lot of assumptions about progress which are still around. Butterfield produced a sequel to the *Whig Interpretation*, a little book called *The Englishman and his History* (1944)—which E. H. Carr described as a eulogy of things English produced under the pressure of war, only to be countered by Butterfield, who revealed that the book was a re-write of lectures actually given in Berlin of all places in 1938. But the book is a vindication of some of the Whigs and their contribution—not least Nonconformist Whigs!

It seemed that Herbert Butterfield was destined for a quiet and fruitful life as Professor of Modern History in Cambridge. Another very large book was gestating on *George III, Lord North and the People, 1779-1780*—400 pages on one year of British politics! The book came out in 1949, but was overshadowed by a remarkable story. In 1948, Butterfield was pushed into giving two courses of public lectures in Cambridge—one on *The Origins of Modern Science, 1300-1800* is an attempt to interpret the rise of the scientific method as an episode in European history of supreme importance eclipsed only by the rise of Christianity. The audience was large, the book popular. But the lectures on *Christianity and History* surpassed all bounds—eight hundred undergraduates listened to him at 12 noon on Saturdays for a whole term. The two books, together with *George III*, were published at the same time. Butterfield was a "best-seller" in two spheres. As a student at Cambridge at the time, I remember my room-mate, an agnostic, pushing his copy of the *Origins* at me, saying, "This will rock your faith", only for me immediately to push *Christianity and History* at him, saying, "And this will rock your agnosticism". "Good God!", he said, "the same fellow!" It was a quite remarkable feat. The *Origins* showed how the rise of the modern scientific world-view reduced even the Reformation and the Renaissance to the rank of mere internal displacements within mediæval Christendom. The role of secularization in modern history was expounded by Butterfield long before theologians had heard of it. He showed, too, how the idea of progress, and indeed of evolution, came from historical thinking long before Darwin was born.

*Christianity and History* I would rate one of the ten most important books in Christian theology written in Britain since the second World War. We can only pull out a theme or two still relevant to us now. He wrote, he said, prophetically—for a time not of progress but of cataclysm. Themes like human sin and cupidity and the nature of judgement loom large, also the need to repent of that self-righteousness against which Jesus fought so hard. History is too flexible ever to be hardened into the concept of "righteous" nations who have the right to imagine that they can wage wars "for righteousness"—a theme picked up in more detail in *Christianity, Diplomacy and War* (1953). Butterfield saw the individual as of infinite value but flawed:

<sup>5</sup> *Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), pp. v, 2, 9, 10, 19.

It is essential not to have faith in human nature. Such faith is a recent heresy and a very disastrous one . . . What history does is to uncover man's universal sin.<sup>6</sup>

If you remove the safeguards of civilized life, chaos and anarchy reign, illustrated when Butterfield recalls the Liverpool Police Strike of 1919, which led to riots like those of Toxteth in 1981.<sup>7</sup> On the combination of judgement and promise, of which the Old Testament is full, there is great penetration—judgement often enough comes from “the penalty of God's formidable non-intervention”. Conflict in history is usually “tragic” rather than simply good versus evil (*that* war is at a higher level, or in the individual himself). In any case the goal of history is the manufacture of human souls. The process is more like a composer making it up as he goes along or like a father teaching a boy to ride a bike on an indefinite stretch of sand. What matter the odd course, so long as the boy rides the bike? The lectures reach their climax with a profound discussion of the Incarnation and the typical Butterfieldian comment that what really matters in Church history is the slow leaven of Christian love, the work done by humble men over the face of the earth—“the most moving spectacle history presents”.<sup>8</sup>

The conclusion is the famous closing passage:

. . . if one wants a permanent rock in life and goes deep enough for it, it is difficult for historical events to shake it. There are times when we can never meet the future with sufficient elasticity of mind, especially if we are locked in the contemporary systems of thought. We can do worse than remember a principle which both gives us a firm rock and leaves us the maximum elasticity for our minds, the principle, hold to Christ and for the rest be totally uncommitted.

Lest anyone is so foolish as to think that that means other-worldliness or an apolitical stance, this passage is glossed in a later essay:

. . . holding on to this one piece of rope, this one affirmation of ours—taking our stand so to speak on this one rock, the living Christ—we are better able to be free and flexible about everything else. We can prevent ourselves from making gods out of mundane things or out of mere abstract nouns. It is important that we should recognize our liberty and exercise it thoroughly.<sup>9</sup>

So he means that nothing—no state or nation or class or church or society, has total sovereignty. This is what Paul Tillich used to call “Protestant principle”, and we do well not to forget it in an age of totalitarianism.

From 1949 to 1960 Butterfield's output for sheer range and penetration was amazing, though later on the pace slackened somewhat, and becoming Master of his college, Regius Professor and Vice-Chancellor, sucked him into university politics, in which he proved a sagacious chairman. I fear history was a little the loser. One of my academic memories of Cambridge is Butterfield's course on “Renaissance and Reformation” (never published) and that remarkable *tour de force* on the Diplomatic Revolution of 1756, when he showed how in one crucial year the whole of European and indeed world history was changed.

<sup>6</sup> *Christianity and History* (1949), p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> *Writings*, p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> *Christianity and History*, p. 136.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 146; *Writings*, p. 256.

But we must ask now what he has to say in his later books to the Christian. *Christianity in European History* (1951) shows the role of the faith and the Church in changing cultures—urban Rome, the significance of Constantine's conversion, not wholly an evil incidentally, the Christianization of barbarian peoples, a phase not to be repeated unless civilization breaks down, the familiar Butterfieldian stress on the leaven in the meal.

There can be no doubt that those who merely preached the Gospel without *arrière-pensée*, those who preached purely for the salvation of souls and assumed that man was born for eternity, always worked better in the cause of civilization than they ever knew or purposed.<sup>10</sup>

Ecclesiastical power was abhorrent to Butterfield. He has no solace for those who imagine that Christians in positions of power are better than others—they are often enough too self-righteous and too inflexible. The meat of this little book, however, is a brief penetrating statement of the impact of secularization, much of it a representation of ideas originally Christian, especially Christianity in its “insurgent” forms. England had nonconformity, Germany got rid of it. This is a sobering thought when nonconformity in religion is somewhat under a cloud! The danger of secularization is that abstractions like “society” came to be more important than individuals. Butterfield predicted long before some Christians became besotted with it—how often were the blessed words “the secular” used in the '60s as a slogan! —that secularism could lead to dark pagan mythologies, superstition, irrationalism, with the Christians having the greatest opportunity for a millennium in offering purpose and meaning in its Gospel.

Those who preach the Gospel, nurse the pieties, spread New Testament love and affirm the spiritual nature of man, are guarding the very fountain, dealing with the problems of civilization at its very source and keeping open the spring from which new things will still arise.<sup>11</sup>

Much of the argument of this short book is elaborated in a survey *Christianity in History* in the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas II* (1973), pp. 373-412.

*History and Human Relations* (1951) picks up many of the same themes—the tragic element in modern international conflict, Marxist history, a typical piece of Butterfieldian dialectic still worth reading in the age of President Reagan and liberation theology. The element of fear in international affairs is a recurrent theme, the chief element indeed in big-power conflict, a theme picked up again in *International Conflict in the Twentieth Century*, published in 1960, containing much that is now, very belatedly, being said by Christians who seemed to have other things on their minds when Butterfield was warning of things to come (the military dictatorships of Right and Left were predicted in 1951).

The greatest war in history could be produced without the intervention of any great criminals who might be out to do deliberate harm in the world. It could be produced between two powers both of which are desperately anxious to avoid conflict of any sort.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, Butterfield, whilst admitting that every nation in Europe has

<sup>10</sup> *Christianity in European History* (1951), p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>12</sup> *History and Human Relations* (1951), pp. 19-20.

taken to aggression when it suited it to do so, says that to refuse to arm against a potential aggressor is to help create the very evil of which we complain. We must do this without “barbarizing” ourselves, and maybe any policy involving the nuclear bomb would do precisely that. Butterfield was no pacifist, and I am not sure where his argument really leads us—possibly a piling-up of conventional arms which aren’t exactly children’s toys! Certainly his point stands that it hardly will do for undergraduates who couldn’t wheedle sixpence out of a college porter to lecture Bismarck on diplomacy—the same would apply to the armchair Christian diplomat too! History is always complex; the range of choices for the statesman is often limited. Sometimes silence is golden.

Along with that great defender of the Church of England, Lord Clarendon, we must sadly accept the fact that the affairs of the world would be worse if we were governed by ecclesiastical statesmen. The Christian who feels that his religion has anything to contribute to the politics of today must realize that the outsider is going to be very cautious of him. He had better disguise his message as common sense!<sup>13</sup>

So we can be slightly cynical about Ian Paisley, Makarios, Bishop Muzorewa and Canaan Banana, and sceptical of Wolsey and Richelieu, though the latter was a consummate statesman! This does not mean that Butterfield was against the “radical”; far from it. He supported what he called an “insurgent” form of Christianity so long as it didn’t achieve power! Then it would be too assertive and self-righteous, the danger of the “Nonconformist Conscience” in any age. On the other hand, sometimes

until some act of violence occurs, we do not realize that there is a problem to be solved . . . in the imperfect state of our own international order, it is clear that it requires an act of violence to secure that a topic is in any effective sense put on the agenda at all.<sup>14</sup>

A neat counterbalance to the point about anarchy! This is the typical Butterfieldian dialectic.

In 1955, and then in 1981, posthumously, Sir Herbert produced two books which are not so relevant to this article. *Man on his Past* (1955) showed skilfully how the modern conception of historical scholarship developed—the Göttingen school; the gigantic contribution of Von Ranke, to whom Butterfield clearly owes much; Acton, who again was a formative influence on so many. Butterfield began here with what he was familiar with. In his last book he starts at the beginning and shows how Hittites, Egyptians, Chinese and Greeks thought of history and why and what they wrote. *The Origins of History* (1981) is “caviare to the general”, but in the middle of it are outstanding chapters on the Bible as history. It is not necessary to espouse outmoded views on *heilsgeschichte*—there is only one history, after all—to see the amazing contribution of the biblical historians. They alone of ancient peoples asked for penitence from their own people as well as support from God. Promise always went hand in hand with providence and judgement. Yahweh was the God of history rather than of nature, with the Exodus the centre of the story. No doubt the biblical expert might find Sir Herbert lacking in some of his detail—he hadn’t read all the latest monographs—nevertheless, like the *Origins of Modern Science*, it shows amazing range and a mind willing ceaselessly to pick other brains around him. It is the

<sup>13</sup> *Writings*, p. 38

<sup>14</sup> *International Conflict in the Twentieth Century* (1960), p. 32.

integration that is the mark of the true scholar. One other book of the 1950s, *George III and the Historians* (1957) was very much an historian's book—a full-scale dialogue with the school of Sir Lewis Namier (only a fellow-giant would take *him* on!). With that we are not concerned now, though chapter one of that book, "The Historian and his Tools", is a first-class introduction to historical method.

Right at the end of Butterfield's life an American scholar, C. T. McIntire, edited *Writings on Christianity and History*. Published in July, 1979, Sir Herbert was able to read it just before his death. This book is the best introduction to Sir Herbert's thinking in the area most likely to appeal to the general reader. The short biography and assessment by McIntire can be supplemented by the chapter in Maurice Cowling's *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern Britain* (1980)—one of those important books which ecclesiastical reviewers seem to have ignored. We can only pick up some key points from these essays by way of summary. The essay on *God in History* (1950) I would rate the most brilliant single piece Sir Herbert ever wrote. How can we believe in Providence and freedom in a scientific universe? Only Nicolas Berdyaev<sup>15</sup> of modern writers on Providence surpasses it, I think.

Nothing is more important [he says] than that we should recover the sense and consciousness of the Providence of God—a Providence that acts not merely by a species of remote control but as a living thing operating in all the details of life—working at every moment, visible in every event. Without this you cannot have any serious religion, any real walking with God, any genuine prayer, any authentic fervour and faith.

Perhaps people are too overawed by laws of nature, thinking of them like Acts of Parliament rather than hypotheses. To look at Providence we need three levels of analysis, each of which can be true at the same time.

If you go on a journey, and at the end of it I ask: "Why are you here now?" you may answer, "Because I wanted to come" or you may say, "Because a railway train carried me here" or you may say, "Because it is the will of God"; and all these things may be true at the same time on different levels. So with history:—we may say at the first level of analysis that men's actions make history and men have free will—they are responsible for the kind of history that they make. But then at a different level we find that history, like nature itself, represents a realm of law; its events are in a certain sense reducible to laws. However unpredictable history may be before it has happened, it is capable of rational explanation once it has happened, so much so that it becomes sometimes difficult to imagine that it ever had been possible for anything else to have happened or for history to have taken any other course.

Now to take an example we can see the long term causes of the first World War, but the men of 1914 cannot be let off blame for blunders of colossal proportions. And what of the Providence "in whom we live and move and have our being?"—"It is Providence who puts us in a world where we run the risks that follow from free will and responsibility"—a world which has its regularities and laws we do well to know about. God does not interfere with planetary movements or history; we are all perhaps like the people we see in dreams—when we stop dreaming they no longer exist, and

<sup>15</sup> N. Berdyaev; *The Meaning of History* (1936).

when God stops His work of creating and maintaining the universe we ourselves and all this fine pageantry of stars and planets simply cease to exist any longer. It is not meaningless to praise God for a new day or the Spring. It is because God is in everything, in every detail of life

that people so easily think they can live as if He didn't exist.

Another essay written in 1977 called *Does Belief in God validly affect the Modern Historian?* returns to the question more sharply. How do we see the hand of God in history? We must not bring God in as a "God of the gaps", when we have no other explanation. Christians too easily drag in the Holy Spirit as an explanation of, say, the Evangelical Revival. If God is not everywhere, He is nowhere. This is very reminiscent of Bonhoeffer and Charles Coulson.<sup>16</sup> Does the historian run the proper risk of "methodological atheism"? That risk *was* run by Christian historians as diverse as J. N. Figgis, B. L. Manning,<sup>17</sup> the late Dom David Butterfield, that monk of terrifying historical thoroughness, his lay friend Herbert Butterfield, and the formidable Norman Sykes. The issue is complex, and it is always a risk too easily to name the name of God. Perhaps we don't see God in history, if we don't see Him in our inmost beings. There is no Exodus without a burning bush—and no doubt the rest sat round and picked blackberries! The Exodus was a small "hiccup" in Egyptian history which never recorded defeats! Maybe mass unemployment in Liverpool is a judgement on the slave trade, which made it prosperous. Yet where there is a judgement, there is always a promise and hope is renewed. So we have the constant theme for Butterfield of determinism, contingency and providence—in the end *people* make history from "shoeblack to sovereign Lord", to use Carlyle's phrase; but we have to learn, where we are unfree also. You won't get a flourishing "Junior Church" if there are only pensioners on the estate nearby!

Butterfield then turns to his old theme of the conflict of right and wrong in history. The "war for righteousness" is rejected. How easily the churches fell for it in 1914!—even P. T. Forsyth,<sup>18</sup> the greatest theological mind of the day, in 1916 published his worst book, preaching a war for righteousness against Germany, though his mood changed rapidly, and the *Justification of God*, the sequel, marked a change of stance. It would be a salutary thing if men would recognize that in the case of "many of the world's conflicts the struggle is not between right and wrong but between one half right that is too wilful and another half right that is too proud".<sup>19</sup> Can we today still espouse the concept of the Just War or its twin brother Just Revolution? Is it too slick for radicals, rightly opposed to racism, to condemn as "implicit racists" those Christians who are uneasy about the Programme to Combat Racism's support for groups pledged to use violence for the purpose of liberation? Do we indulge in political utopianism? Do we sometimes want our opponents to appear more wicked so

<sup>16</sup> D. Bonhoeffer; *Letters and Papers from Prison* (1959), p. 103; C. A. Coulson; *Science and Christian Belief* (1958), p. 41.

<sup>17</sup> J. M. Turner; "J. N. Figgis: Anglican Prophet", *Theology*, vol. 73, October 1975, pp. 538-44; J. M. Turner: "Bernard Lord Manning as Church Historian", *Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society*, vol. 1, No. 5, May 1975, pp. 126-38.

<sup>18</sup> P. T. Forsyth; *The Christian Ethic of War* (1916); *The Justification of God* (1916).

<sup>19</sup> *Writings*, p. 48.

that we can be justified in our aggression ? —C. S. Lewis<sup>20</sup> had some pungent thought on *that* phenomenon which appears on both sides. The “left” will paint a right-wing dictatorship as black as possible, any change is merely “cosmetic”, the “right” always finds the international Communist conspiracy under every bed. Does Butterfieldian dialectic push us on to the side of the *status quo* ? “Double-think” is too easy in this area and the kind of indignation which is directed to one side only. World Council of Churches’ statements appearing to condone the military take-over in Poland as a lesser evil than anarchy (Luther’s old argument !) contrast strangely with support of guerrilla anarchy elsewhere. The next block of essays are about the Bible—spin-offs from the more, massive treatment in *The Origins of History*. The God of history, providence and judgement appears again as does the “suffering servant”—the only example of a nation with a national mission which didn’t involve aggrandisement. *The Modern Historian and New Testament History* (1974) should be compulsory reading for biblical scholars, bringing them comfort and discomfort—comfort in that the secular historian is right always to distrust the ecclesiastical mind. *Why* do New Testament scholars appear to assume that Paul’s letters are always accurate as against Luke, that obviously biased historical theologian ? Memoirs and diaries are notorious for lapses of memory, as a look at recent editions of Gladstone’s *Diaries* reveals. Discomfort in that Butterfield (quite different from Michael Goulder or Willi Marxsen<sup>21</sup>) shows the utter centrality of belief in the Resurrection.

At any rate it seems totally impossible to discover any personal ambition or vested interests which could have induced the disciples and the preachers to carry out a sort of hoax. They must have known they were going to almost certain death.<sup>22</sup>

Short shrift to the “Gnostics !” If the Gospels are aimed at communicating a particular view, is that surprising ? A lot of sources the historian has to handle are similar. If we read Marxist historians like Christopher Hill or Eric Hobsbawm or E. P. Thompson, we allow for their bias, but we needn’t thereby assume that they are liars or make it up ! The scepticism and odd sleight-of-hand by which some “redaction critics” shut off all knowledge of the “mortal Jesus” (John Coventry’s phrase), yet seem to know so much about the communities to which the Evangelists address themselves needs some probing. We then have *The Establishment of a Christian Interpretation of World History* (1963)—Eusebius, Augustine, the division of history into five monarchies which was the norm before the eighteenth-century Germans “invented” the “Middle Ages” and “modern times”. A question stabs out : was Constantine, so eulogized by Eusebius as God’s instrument, the Christian Cyrus, really the “curse of Christendom”, as R. M. Benson dubbed him ? Can Christianity survive its establishment ? We might beware the traps before we say a resounding nonconformist “No !”, especially if we have an L.E.A. grant for youth work or for that bright lad at theological college ! The radicals who now say we should have nothing to do with those who hold power can easily be impaled on the horns of an awkward

<sup>20</sup> C. S. Lewis ; *The Screwtape Letters*, pp. 40-3 ; *Reflections on the Psalms* (1961), pp. 21 ff. ; *History and Human Relations*, p. 122.

<sup>21</sup> John Hick (ed.) ; *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), pp. 48 ff. ; W. Marxsen ; *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* (1970), pp. 138 ff.

<sup>22</sup> *Writings*, p. 102.

dilemma here. It is not easy to initiate change without power, as Wilberforce and Shaftesbury knew well.

An interesting point here is Butterfield's rejection of any cyclical view of history. Augustine saw that the idea of Christ returning to be crucified again in another repetition of the cycle would turn the whole salvation story into a kind of cosmic puppet-show. What then of the boy on the bike on an indefinite stretch of sand going round and round? I think there is a point worth teasing out here: the biblical Christian has Ecclesiastes as well as Revelation in the canon.

I end with two typical Butterfieldian attitudes. The historian above all needs humility and imagination—while Hitler was alive it was necessary to fight him and stop his cruelties, destroying his power; but it would be good if an historian could explain how a boy of ten playing in an Austrian street could be like that.<sup>23</sup> Under the skin we are sinners all! The whole process of emptying oneself in order to catch the outlook and feeling of men not like-minded with oneself is an activity which ought to commend itself to the Christian.

Then there is the historian as prophet.<sup>24</sup> The world, he says, may be secular, but it will not stay secular. The hungers, anxieties and nostalgias which favoured the success of Christianity in the Roman Empire are going to operate in the same way again over a still wider world. And in the world-conflict of religions which is bound to come (that is a contrast to John Hick and Cantwell Smith) and which can hardly be said to have begun as yet, our church will have no special privileges. It will demand only freedom of conscience. In the ancient Roman Empire it did not need even that, for it won the victories partly through the readiness of Christians to accept martyrdom. He sees new styles of Christianity not tied to Græco-Roman culture emerging in Asia and Africa.

The twentieth century seems to me to require what I have called the "insurgent" type of Christianity—not the kind which binds up the fortunes with the defence of the *status quo*. By "insurgent" Christianity I do not mean cheap or noisy agitation and the pursuit of novelty for its own sake. I mean the kind of Christianity which, instead of merely cherishing traditions and idealizing it, is constantly ready to return to first principles, to make fresh dips into the Gospels and the New Testament revelation.

Liberals and reductionists get a warning—liberals in 1900 would have tied Christianity to the things that happened to be fashionable in the year 1900. Maybe the Wiles, Cupitts, Kents and Ninehams of our day are in the same jam—faith is judged by what the latest Arts Faculty atheist can swallow! Butterfield disclaimed the title of "lay theologian", but could engage in doctrinal niceties at crucial points. The Christian must hold together belief in the Jesus of history and the living Christ—"continuous with the historical Jesus, yet one with whatever God exists, showing us in this earthly life all that the human mind could grasp of the nature of God". His essential Methodism emerges when he asserts:

I wish I could convince them that this is the greatest moment in a thousand years for the preaching of Christianity and they can safely leave the results to Providence!<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> N. Stone; *Hitler* (1980). A brilliant short attempt.

<sup>24</sup> *International Conflict in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 105 ff.; *Writings*, pp. 253, 254, 255, 256, 259.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 256, 260.

One last shot from Butterfield as an old man, a sentence which may reflect his long friendship with David Knowles :

I would say that sometimes I wonder at dead of night whether during the next fifty years Protestantism may not be at a disadvantage because a few centuries ago it decided to get rid of monks. Since it followed that policy, a greater responsibility falls on us to give something of ourselves to contemplation and silence and listening to the still, small voice.<sup>26</sup>

Despite his disclaimer, Butterfield *was* one of the great lay theologians—C. S. Lewis, T. S. Eliot, Basil Willey, T. E. Jessop, B. L. Manning, D. M. Mackinnon can parallel him. He was one of that very small company who could engage with total integrity across the disciplines, a great teacher, a self-effacing man who “held to Christ”, believing in the infinite value of human beings, and making history an exciting and compelling exploration.

J. MUNSEY TURNER.

[The Rev. J. Munsey Turner, M.A., B.D. is the Superintendent of the Halifax Methodist circuit, and was formerly Lecturer in Church History at The Queen’s College, Birmingham.]

[For recent assessments of Butterfield, see John W. Derry : “Herbert Butterfield”, in J. Cannon (ed.) : *The Historian at work* (1980), pp. 171 ff., M. Cowling : *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern Britain*, vol. 1 (1980), and A. R. Coll : *The Wisdom of statecraft : Sir Herbert Butterfield and the philosophy of international politics*, Duke University Press, Durham, USA (1986).]

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CLIVE D. FIELD.

## ERNEST GORDON RUPP DD FBA

**T**HROUGH the death of Gordon Rupp our Society has lost its most distinguished Church historian. Born on 7th January 1910 he was at King's College, London, where he read History, and at the London Institute of Education. After his acceptance for the Ministry, he studied at Wesley House, Cambridge, Strasbourg and Basel. After a year working among students, he was for eight years a minister in the Chislehurst Circuit (1938-46). He was President's Assistant at Wesley House during Dr. Flew's Presidency. He then taught Church History at Richmond College (1947-52), was lecturer at Cambridge (1952-56) and professor of ecclesiastical history at Manchester (1956-67). He then returned to Wesley House as Principal (1967-74) and was Dixie professor of ecclesiastical history and fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge (1968-77). He became a Fellow of the British Academy in 1970. Latterly he was professor emeritus at Cambridge, honorary fellow of Emmanuel and Fitzwilliam Colleges, Cambridge and of King's College, London. In addition to his Cambridge doctorate, he had honorary doctorates from Aberdeen, Manchester and Paris. He was world-famous as a Luther scholar, as was shown by *Luther's Progress to the Diet of Worms* (1951) and his Birkbeck Lectures *The Righteousness of God* (1953). He was one of a group who went with Bishop George Bell to re-establish relations with German Lutherans after the war. He was eager that the heirs of Luther and the heirs of Wesley should talk to one another officially and he contributed an important introductory paper on "Basic Commonalities between Lutherans and Methodists" to the international dialogue between Lutherans and Methodists.

He was however by no means confined to Lutheran studies. Among other publications we may mention *Studies in the English Protestant Tradition* (1947), *Some Makers of English Religion* (1957), his Fernley-Hartley lecture *Patterns of Reformation* (1969), his Cato lecture *The Old Reformation and the New* (1967), *Just Men* (1977), and *Thomas More* (1978).

In 1954 he delivered the Wesley Historical Society lecture, *Thomas Jackson*, and he contributed frequently to Methodist history by lectures and sermons. He gave an address to the World Methodist Conference at Oxford in 1951 on "Methodism in relation to Protestant Tradition", at Lake Junaluska in 1956 on "Methodism in relation to the Protestant World" and to the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies in 1962 on "The Doctrine of the Church at the Reformation"; this is published in *The Doctrine of the Church* ed. D. Kirkpatrick, (1964). To the symposium on *John Scott Lidgett*, edited by Rupert Davies (1957), he contributed a chapter on "The Biblical Theologian". A notable sermon "Pillars of Wisdom" on 25th January 1985, the 150th Anniversary of the opening of the Theological Institution at Hoxton and the beginning of Ministerial Training in the Methodist Church of Great Britain, was published in the *Epworth Review*, May 1985. In 1984 at the celebrations in Bristol of the bicentenary of the first Methodist ordinations he spoke on "John Wesley: the Man"; this is published in *The People called Methodists* (Discipleship Resources, Nashville). His views on our recent liturgies, not altogether favourable, are shown in an article in the *Epworth Review*, September 1981, and his exposition of a major emphasis in our theology is shown in his article on "Perfection" in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* ed. A. Richardson and J. Bowden, (1983).

With Rupert Davies he planned *The History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, and contributed to the first volume an introductory essay. As I joined them as editor of the subsequent volumes, I can bear testimony to the keen interest he took in the progress of this work. He attached a special importance to the forthcoming fourth and final volume consisting of bibliography and source-documents. The editorial work on this was virtually complete at the time of his death, and it went to press a few days later. Only a week or two before his death he published *Religion in England (1688-1791)*, which includes a major treatment of the origins of Methodism.

He was essentially a Methodist, a "high Wesleyan", who revered Scott Lidgett, as Lidgett had revered W. B. Pope. He was President of the Conference in 1968.

His ecumenical interest was shown in that he had been a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches. He also took part in the conversations between the Methodist Church and the Church of England. He was an observer at the second Vatican Council.

Important as were his contributions to scholarship, he will also be remembered as a faithful pastor and a preacher. In his sermons he graced his learning with brilliant shafts of wit, and through them shone his deep devotion to Christ and his Church.

He died on 19th December 1986. We thank God for his ministry and give our sympathy to his wife Marjorie and his son Martin.

A. RAYMOND GEORGE.

*John Wesley in Devon*, edited by M. J. Wickes, prints the extracts from the *Standard Journal* which refer to Wesley's journeys through Devon, all but two of which were made on his way to and from Cornwall. The annotation relies heavily on Curnock. There is a helpful bibliography and index. Copies are £2.50 post free from the compiler, 83 Meddon Street, Bideford, Devon EX39 2EW. Mr. Wickes has also put all students of the Bible Christians in his debt by compiling an index to *The Bible Christians: their Origin and History* by F. W. Bourne (1905). It is an index of people and places and is a great improvement on the four page general index with which readers have had to rest content until now. It costs £2.00 from the above address.