

Concordia Theological Monthly

Volume 35

Article 48

9-1-1964

Brief Studies

Carl S. Meyer

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Meyer, Carl S. (1964) "Brief Studies," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 35, Article 48.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol35/iss1/48>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

BRIEF STUDIES

THEOLOGY OR PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY — WHICH?

A Review Article

- A THEOLOGY OF HISTORY.** By Hans Urs von Balthasar. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963. viii and 149 pages. Cloth. \$3.50.
- DER SINN DER GESCHICHTE: CHRISTUS.** By Hendrik Berkhof. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963. 256 pages. Cloth, DM 10.50; paper, DM 7.50.
- CHRIST AND HISTORY.** By George A. Buttrick. New York: Abingdon Press, 1963. 176 pages. Cloth. Price not given.
- PHILOSOPHY AND HISTORY: A SYMPOSIUM.** Edited by Sidney Hook. New York: New York University Press, 1963. x and 403 pages. Cloth. \$6.00.
- TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF HISTORY.** By Eric C. Rust. New York: Oxford University Press, 1963. xi and 292 pages. Cloth. \$6.00.
- A STUDY OF HISTORY.** By Arnold Toynbee. Vols. IX and X. New York: Oxford University Press, 1963. viii and 747 pages; ix and 422 pages. Paper. \$2.95 and \$2.25.
- INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY: AN ESSAY ON THE LIMITS OF HISTORICAL OBJECTIVITY.** By Raymond Aron. Trans. Geo. J. Irwin. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961. 351 pages. Paper. \$2.25.
- HISTORY: WRITTEN AND LIVED.** By Paul Weiss. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962. ix and 245 pages. Cloth. \$5.85.

The answer is not a simple one. Which is it? A philosophy of history? A theology of history? The Christian humanist need not

permit the dichotomy to remain. Must it be an either—or? The philosophical dare not transcend the theological or hold court in the *sanctum sanctorum*. Its limitations and boundaries will not negate the things of the Spirit or destroy the integrity of the inexplicable. Faith does not need reason for its foundation, but it will not deny reason its place in explaining the ways of men among men.

Were history only the record of God's ways with man, philosophy would have no place in its interpretation. Faith must say: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor?'" (Rom. 11:33, 34 RSV). Faith must listen with Job to the voice of God in the whirlwind (Job 38—41) and hear what He has to say to His anointed Cyrus (Is. 45). Faith must say that there is meaning in history, and faltering philosophy can only help to detect in a dim way the broad outlines of that meaning. And faith alone gives theology its ultimate dimensions.

But history also tells about relationships between man and man. These relationships include all the various ramifications of man's activities, and so we have the various "kinds of history," social and/or economic, political and/or military, intellectual and/or cultural. These relationships are covered by the callings in which men are placed, by the manner in which they exercise these callings singly and jointly, and by the judgments and rewards that the exercise of these callings call forth. They are generally administered mediately; God, faith says, acts through men and uses them as His agents.

For while the world stands, authority, rule, power, and seats must remain. But God will

not long permit men to abuse them and turn them against Him, inflict injustice and violence on the godly, and enjoy it, boast of them, and fail to use them in the fear of God, to His praise and in defense of righteousness. We see in all histories and in experience that He puts down one kingdom and exalts another, lifts up one principality and casts down another, increases one people and destroys another; as He did with Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome, though they thought they would sit in their seats forever. Nor does He destroy reason, wisdom, and right; for if the world is to go on, these things must remain. But He does destroy pride and the proud, who use these things for selfish ends, enjoy them, do not fear God, but persecute the godly and the divine right by means of them, and thus abuse the fair gifts of God and turn them against Him. (Martin Luther, "The Magnificat," trans. A. T. W. Steinhäuser, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, XXI [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956], 344)

Luther's comprehensive understanding of history from the viewpoint of faith knew that men's lives and deeds, that is, history as event, include the mysteries of the ways of God with man and of God's use of men for judgment and for grace. He realized that to find theological meaning in history, or history as written and interpreted, the believer has to assume that God operates with His Law and with His Gospel and, paradoxically, both through fiat and through man's freedom. He understood that history as record tells the believer about *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus*. All the books considered in this review are in effect wrestling with the correctness of Luther's insights and those of historical positivists of various stripes. Probably none of the writers listed above will agree with this approach.

Each of the titles deserves a full-length separate review. Buttrick's *Christ and History* might well be read first or singled out if only one book can be read. He is by no means ready to endorse Toynbee. Nor can

this reviewer fault Buttrick on this score. The two volumes of the 12-volume *Study of History* listed above, erudite and brilliantly written, do not give the answer to "The Quest for a Meaning Behind the Facts of History" (X, 126—144). More than Toynbee's syncretistic prayer at the conclusion must climax a meditation on that theme. Rust in his *Towards a Theological Understanding of History* joins Buttrick in rejecting the cyclical theory of Spengler and Toynbee. Although Rust speaks of "the cult of progress," he is ready to concede that "man's social idealisms, economic orders, and techniques for civilized life disclose progress" (p. 45). The concept of progress does not receive attention from the twenty-six essayists in the symposium edited by Hook. Von Balthasar finds ambiguity in the term "progress." It must "proceed now only in reference to this being-at-hand (*parousia*) of the Last, the Absolute, the *eschaton* of history" (p. 135). Buttrick sees history "as a Dialogue between God and man-on-pilgrimage in the language of events." He adds: "There are recurrences in the Conversation (Toynbee's cycles) as in any dialogue, and Newness (American 'progress') as in any dialogue. There are unresolved mysteries, for God begins, continues, and ends the interchange. There is many a bafflement, for His thoughts are not our thoughts. But sometimes there is a breakthrough of light." (P. 13)

But if history is a dialog, why is its language so inexact and so unclear? If it is meaningful, why is the meaning hidden? Why do some find no message and meaning in history?

Buttrick says that the Bible is history, "history after its own kind" (p. 16). It is sacred history. It tells of God's mighty acts and of man's response; it "tells both of history's brokenness and history's redemption" (p. 22). It is eschatologically oriented, focused history, according to Buttrick, caught in tension and polarity between two worlds.

"The center of history is the [total Christ] event which is both Judgment and Mercy, which stands between land and sea—the land on which the drama of history is enacted, and the mysterious sea along which we walk and across which we are asking 'Is there any word from the Lord?'" (P. 44)

The uniqueness of the God-man, in Von Balthasar's presentation, makes Him "the norm of our being and the norm of our concrete history" (p. 12). The mystery of the hypostatic union, the historical life of the Logos, thus encompasses the fulfillment of history and the norm of history. The eternal Son of the Father came to do the will of the Father; therefore the basis of His time is His subjection to God's will (p. 33). Von Balthasar says: "History is subject to the Son and the Son to history. But the subjection of history to the Son subserves the Son's subjection to history, which in turn is only an expression of his subjection to the will of the Father" (p. 59). The *kairos* and the *eschaton* have meaning in Christ. The emphasis which Von Balthasar gives to the concept of time as he develops and defines it enables Him to speak of Christ as *universe in re*, the supratemporal *in time* (p. 89) and thus to accent the meaning of the sacraments (to him also the sacraments of marriage and penance) as making for the contemporariness of Christ with the believer especially in the Eucharist (p. 93). The church with its deposit of faith and tradition plays her part in the normative function of the Christ of history, he claims.

Buttrick and Berkhof and Rust would reject that interpretation, although they agree that Christ is the center of history. Berkhof uses the term "meaning" (*Sinn*) in the sense of goal. Among the ancient Israelites he finds particularly a strong consciousness that history has a goal. Augustine in his *De civitate Dei* formulated a Christian philosophy of history. Lessing, Herder, Hegel, Comte, Spencer, Nietzsche, Troeltsch, Speng-

ler, Bultmann, and Toynbee all have interpretations which Berkhof rejects. He begins with the Exodus as an actual historical event and Abraham. Then he takes up the royal psalms (47, 93, 96, 97, 99) and the psalms which sing of the sovereignty of God (24, 46, 48, 75, 76, 92, 95, 98). The message of the prophets (Is. 10; Ezek. 36—39; Dan. 7; et al) and the Apocalypse of Isaiah proclaim the judgment of God over His enemies and His mercy toward His people. Dan. 7 is for Berkhof of cardinal importance, since he finds here the key to Christ's use of the term "Son of Man," a concept which he says embodies a whole theology of history (p. 65). With the resurrection the prophecy of Dan. 7 has its consummation. The "day of the Lord" means for him the return of Christ to the Father, the session at the right hand, and His coming again. The "therefore" of Matt. 28:18 means that the power given to Christ becomes a reality through the proclamation of the Gospel to all nations. Three texts, however, give Berkhof difficulty: Matt. 10:23; Mark 9:1; 13:30. There was in primitive Christianity the expectancy of the imminent return of Christ. Berkhof regards the development of mission work as an analogy of the Christ event. His point of view is arresting but not convincing. "Wir können darum die Geschichte des Reiches Gottes, die mit dem Kreuz und der Auferstehung Jesu Christi ihren Anfang genommen hat, und die durch das Werk der Mission überall in der Welt verwirklicht wird, auch als *eine über die ganze Erde sich realisierende Analogie zu dem Christusgeschehen* umschreiben" (p. 88; italics in the original). From this point of view, then, he discourses on missions as a creative force in history, bringing freedom and a new way of life with it. Suffering there must be, in analogy with the suffering of Christ, and opposition. The power of the resurrection is evident in the lives of individuals and of the Kingdom, testified by the progress of missions. Berkhof expects the

conversion of Israel (Rom. 9—11) and the millennium. The fulfillment of the work of Christ in the continuity of the present and the future is certain to him who has faith, knowledge, and hope.

Christ is Lord of history also for Rust, professor of Christian philosophy at Louisville's Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He agrees with Berkhof and Buttrick that the *parousia* is the consummation of all history. Unlike Berkhof he emphasizes Christ's return to judgment and the resurrection of the body. "The *eschaton* of history is already present, yet history waits for its chronological end when the limitations of sinful historical existence and the frustrations of our creaturely time will be removed and God shall be all in all," he writes (p. 113). Rust deals with "the uniqueness of salvation history and the historization of myth" (pp. 94—107). "The imagery and symbolism of the myths have now become concrete historical actuality in salvation history," he claims (p. 96). The historian looks for concrete evidence but finds largely assertions in Rust. He divides secular history and salvation history, although he confesses that Christ is Lord also of secular history. In describing secular history he speaks of fallen man; he tells about the "realm of sin"; the reality of the demonic of limited power is acknowledged. Providence and judgment in secular history in the spatiotemporal dimensions and the order of society are treated at some length. However, Rust says that the Christian cannot offer a theodicy of history (p. 171). "Even secular history has a *positive* contribution to the total meaning that is disclosed in salvation history." The mighty acts in Christ, His incarnation, the triumph of the cross, the resurrection, and the ascension are part and parcel of salvation history. The resurrection, Rust affirms, "as an event transformed all future history" (p. 202); it actualized the *eschaton*. In the eternal order time is given significance by salvation

history, and divine election is an act of God's eternal love—Rust denies that there is a decree of reprobation (p. 223). "Salvation history becomes contemporaneous with all history" in the new humanity or the people of God and the body of Christ.

Rust has been greatly influenced by existentialism. Buttrick provides a corrective. He knows history as revelation and the fulfillment of history. The fulfillment of history is one of Berkhof's concerns; yet he, too, is wary of *Heilsgeschichte*. Von Balthasar has a concept of *Heilsgeschichte* that many will regard as too narrow as many will regard Rust's concept as too expansive. Mercy and judgment are considered in one fashion or another by all four of these writers; the concept of Law and Gospel may be urged on them for a greater consideration. All history is the consummation of God's will, revealed or hidden, permitted or ordained in every realm. The theologian-historian must also listen for the Lord's ironic laughter echoing in the halls of history. Yet there ought not be a great dichotomy between a theology of history and a philosophy of history.

"Time" seems to be one concept that both the theologians and the philosophers are concerned with. What Weiss calls "the reality and dimensions of the historic world" in confronting historic causation seems not to be among the theologians' major questions. Determinism, although not always under that name and oftentimes with modification, does come under their domain, although they do not assess it in the sense employed by Aron.

With it all, dare we come up with the question which Abelson calls "the big, fat, juicy question, What *is* it?" In his essay on "Cause and Reason in History" in Hook's symposium, he says:

The question is *too* juicy, because history is lots of things and not just one thing. History is art and science, poetry and journalism, explanation, narration, and criticism; it is epochal and parochial, holistic and individual-

istic, materialistic and spiritualistic, objective and subjective, factual and normative, practical and theoretical. Attempts to define history in terms of one style, one purpose, or one methodology reveal only the special preoccupations of the writer. For history is mankind thinking about itself, remembering, reporting, appreciating, explaining, moralizing, and even, as Professor Meyer Schapiro pointed out, dreaming. (P. 167)

Contingency and continuity, change and development, relationships and interrelations, chronological sequence and parallel happenings, selection, narration, explanation are the "stuff" of history as written. Rejecting Weiss's demand for unity of cause and William Dray's demand for "rational explanation," the historian can nevertheless find much that is cogent in both demands, because they force him to do more than operate with cause-effect relationships. To transcend the rational without becoming mystical, to acknowledge the total activity of the Divine without absolving man of freedom and responsibility, and to appreciate the total involvement of each age and of the entire course of history *coram Deo* without distorting its worth—these are among the tensions with which the historian comes into conflict and which make his task as fascinating as it is exacting. Not that history is entertaining or useful for teaching "lessons" but that it demands that man reckons with it, for history as happening governs the present and gives meaning to the future.

Does history belong to philosophy or theology? The question has taken another dimension. It belongs to both, for through

history the metaphysical becomes logical and the casual becomes meaningful. History as written tells of God's actions manward and of man's actions toward his fellowman. Judgment comes from on high; the dimly grasped meaning of history as happening needs the illumination of faith.

The translation of history as happening into history as written needs history as record, the documents—to borrow the useful division supplied by Charles Beard. Between the historian and his facts (history as record) there will be an interplay as historians are more than ready to point out, e. g., Leo Gershoy in his essay in *Philosophy and History* or Aron in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. This means that there is an interplay between the past and the present. Hence without subscribing to all of the implications of Weiss's statement, this reviewer would urge that there is in it much food for thought:

Though God is immanent in history in the sense of enabling past and future to exclude and be excluded by the present, He stands over against history as eternal and fixed, as its very Other. This He can do because He allows the historic present to be constituted by men publicly interacting with forces outside them. He is needed to guarantee the reality and relevance of an historic past and future; the historic present does not need Him, except as a counterbalancing Other who will relieve the present, in part, from the burden of its accumulated past. (P. 227)

That burden has been relieved by the Christ of history, the same yesterday and today and forever. CARL S. MEYER