

The Renewal of Christian Views of History in an Age of Catastrophe*

C. T. McIntire

Christianity and History

While Hitler annexed Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1939 and then invaded Poland in the fall, Reinhold Niebuhr delivered his Gifford Lectures in Scotland on the nature and destiny of man. Niebuhr recorded his sense of the monumentality of these events in a diary partially serialized in *Christian Century*.¹ His lectures possessed a timeliness that created a sensation among his hearers. Making use of Augustine and the Bible he challenged the prevailing views of human nature and history and declared them failures before the experience of contemporary history.

He reworked the lectures as the war unfolded. In 1943, he published the series on history as volume two of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, with the subtitle, *Human Destiny*. “The belief that informs these pages,” he wrote in January 1943, “is that the Christian faith represents deeper sources of power for the fulfillment of life than has been assumed in the main currents of modern culture.”²

Niebuhr’s lectures marked a beginning point in what became, from the 1940s through the 1970s, a widespread renewal of interest in Christian views of history.³ The renewal reasserted the vitality of Christianity for the interpretation of history and historical study

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¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Leaves from the Notebooks of a War-Bound American,” *Christian Century*, 56 (1939), 1298-99, 1405-6, 1502-3, 1607-8.

² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, II (New York: Scribner’s, 1943), vii.

³ This analysis has primarily in view the renewal in English-speaking North America and Great Britain. Writings which originated elsewhere are considered relative to their influence in English language areas.

in a culture that had ceased to take Christianity for granted. During the late 1940s, book after book and article after article by a diverse set of authors appeared on the theme of Christianity and history.⁴ E. Harris Harbison of Princeton University commented on this phenomenon in December 1951 at the meeting of the American Historical Association in New York. In a paper entitled “The ‘meaning of history’ and the writing of history,” he said he believed there was “a kind of Augustinian revival of interest in the meaning of history.” Its proponents included theologians and philosophers, and it had begun to influence even the writing of history by historians.⁵

In a review published in the first issue of *History and Theory*, in 1960, Harbison expressed his appreciation of the number and the creativity of the publications on Christianity and history which continued to appear. He wrote,

Whether these works mark the swansong of an expiring Weltanschauung, or whether they herald a vigorous Renaissance of Christian thought it is perhaps too early to tell. But it is already clear that it is no mere revival of the conception of history which dominated Western thinking from Augustine to Bossuet.

⁴ Some statistical indication of the trend in the number of publications involved can be gathered from Robert North’s “Bibliography of Works in Theology and History,” *History and Theory*, XII (1973), 55-140. From the perspective of the thesis of this essay, North’s bibliography was very incomplete. It stressed theology and biblical studies, and did not include all of the relevant works on a Christian view of history by many of the thinkers discussed in this analysis. But it can serve as a suggestion nonetheless. The figures gave combined totals by year for all categories in North’s bibliography, which included articles, books, reviews, and translations.

	Totals English	Totals all languages
1907-29	1	18
1930-34	3	37
1935-39	16	37
1940-44	3	16
1945-49	10	41
1950-54	21	76
1955-59	36	103
1960-64	83	225
1965-69	150	291

1949 started the English upturn, with 7. 1948 started the upturn for all languages with 13, while 1949 had 18.

⁵ E. Harris Harbison, “The ‘meaning of history’ and the writing of history,” *Church History*, XXI (1952), 97-106.

His own essays on the subject were collected posthumously in 1964 under the title *Christianity and History*.⁶

The renewal of Christian views of history, from the 1940s to the 1970s, acquired the proportions of a major movement of contemporary thought. The main contributors to the renewal, included in this analysis, were notable historians—Herbert Butterfield, Christopher Dawson, Arthur Link, Eric Cochrane, Henri-Irénée Marrou, Arnold Toynbee, Georges Florovsky, Kenneth Scott Latourette, Harbison—as well as some of the most creative Christian theologians, philosophers, and writers of the twentieth century—Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Hendrikus Berkhof,⁷ Gustavo Gutierrez, Jacques Maritain, Herman Dooyeweerd, C. S. Lewis, and T. S. Eliot. They came from Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions. The Protestants were Methodist, Anglican, Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist, and Evangelical. They lived and worked in the United States, Great Britain, France, Switzerland, Germany, The Netherlands, Canada, and Peru, and their influence extended to many other countries. Most had something to do with the Ecumenical Movement among Protestants, Orthodox, and Catholics. Their work influenced scholars in many fields as well as the general public, clergy and laity alike, in all kinds of denominations.

The range of issues concerning history that they and many others addressed covered the theology of history, the philosophy of history, and historiography. They discussed questions of the meaning of history, time, the nature of history, God’s work in history, laws in history, religion and culture, the character of historical study and historical knowledge. The renewal of Christian views of history was no narrow phenomenon.

In a larger context, this revival can be seen as part of a general increase of interest in philosophy of history among all schools of thought during and since World War II.

⁶ Harbison, Review of M. C. D’Arcy, *The Meaning and Matter of History: A Christian View*, in *History and Theory*, I (1960-61), 86. Harbison, *Christianity and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964).

⁷ Hendrikus Berkhof, professor of theology at the University of Leiden, was the original author of the World Council of Churches’ document, “God in Nature and History.”

Among what can be termed, broadly, liberal schools of thought, the new attention to philosophy of history was perhaps symbolized by the founding of *History and Theory* in 1960, the first English language publication in the field. This journal documented the general revival by publishing a series entitled *Bibliography of Works in the Philosophy of History* with volumes covering blocks of years since 1945.⁸

Marxists, too, in the same period, demonstrated new interest in the large questions of history. What used to be the concern of a relatively few people in the 1930s, when Marxism in its Soviet form appeared attractive to many disenchanted liberals, became after 1945 the vocation of an increasing number of New Left historians and philosophers. In North America and Europe as well as the Third World, a new Marxist view of history, where it did not replace the traditional liberal philosophies, was the primary rival available.⁹

Philosophy of history in general was a special concern of the post-1945 period.

The Sources: Biblical Studies and Catastrophe

The renewal of interest in Christian views of history emerged from two main sources. The secondary source was the “problem of history” in Old and New Testament studies and theology. The principal source was the experience of the catastrophes of the secular age and the search for an alternative view of human nature and human history.

In biblical studies, the “problem of history” had long been regarded as troublesome. From the 1940s, it became central and contributed to the wider concern about history, as a look at some of the leading biblical scholars illustrates. Rudolf Bultmann tended at first to minimize the importance of history to faith by affirming a radical difference between the

⁸ John C. Rule, *1945-1957* (Beiheft 1, 1961, with Supplement, Beiheft 3, 1964); M. Nowicki, *1958-1961* (Beiheft 3, 1964); Lewis D. Wurgaft, *1962-1965* (Beiheft 1967, with addenda, Beiheft 10, 1970); Lewis D. Wurgaft and others, *1966-1968* (Beiheft 10, 1970, with addenda, Beiheft 13, 1974); Sylvia Pruitt and Astrid Witschi-Bernz, *1969-1972* (Beiheft 13, 1974).

⁹ See Lionel M. Munby and Ernst Wangermann, eds., *Marxism and History: A Bibliography of English Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1967).

Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. He chose an existentialist philosophy of history as an answer to the weaknesses of the older liberal-positivist view of history which had prevailed. In *The Presence of Eternity: History and Eschatology* (1957), the most systematic presentation of his position, he claimed that the advent of Christ was “above time and history” and that in the faith of the Christian today “time and the world’s history are overcome.” Wrote Bultmann, “. . . the meaning in history lies always in the present.” Even as he minimized the importance of history to faith, however, he devoted considerable attention to the question of the nature and meaning of history.¹⁰

James M. Robinson’s *The New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1959) represented the concerns of the heirs of Bultmann who, while holding to an existentialist view of history, desired to see what can be known about the Jesus of history, and whether the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith could not be seen as more of a unity. Van A. Harvey’s *The Historian and the Believer* (1967) found such a line not far-reaching enough. He argued for a “radical historical confessionism” that affirmed the historicity of all human existence that Jesus and we share as the proper basis on which to approach the Jesus Christ of history and faith.

The work of Wolfhart Pannenberg and his circle tried to put history and faith back together again. For him history was not merely crucial to the faith, but was in itself God’s revelation. *Revelation As History* (1968) summarized the thesis that the message of the Christian kerygma is meaningless if separated from history as we know it. He probed the nature of the process of history and of universal history.¹¹

More generally, in theology and church doctrine the problem history was related to questions of the relativity of history and the constancy of truth, of the development of doctrine and the finality of biblical revelation, of the aggiornamento of the church and the

¹⁰ The book is Rudolf Bultmann’s Gifford Lectures in Scotland in 1955 which he gave in English. This is perhaps the place to notice that the thinkers who were probably the most influential were also Gifford lecturers: Barth, Niebuhr, Dawson, Toynbee, Bultmann, and Butterfield

¹¹ See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, I (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

continuity of the ancient traditions. The achievements of the second Vatican Council (1962-65), for example, pivoted on a renewed Christian view of history in relation to truth.¹²

The debate on the “problem of history” in biblical studies and theology received such wide attention at the time in theological circles that one is tempted to think of theology when speaking of a renewal of interest in Christian views of history. Significant as the biblical and theological concerns were, they were limited largely to questions about the life of Jesus, the history of Israel, the nature of revelation, hermeneutics, the authority of the traditions and structures of the church, and similar theological issues.¹³

The primary source of the new Christian interest in the meaning and nature of history lay elsewhere: in the experience of the crisis of the secular age. The conviction ran through much of the writings of the leading figures in the renewal that European and American culture in its secular form was coming to the end of an era and needed radical transformation.

The Great War of 1914-18 began a two-generation-long series of crises of immense scale which shook intellectuals and political, social, and cultural leaders out of a state of complacency toward the condition of their culture.¹⁴ Such leaders, along with great numbers of their middle-class followers, came to understand what the poor and outcast had always known—that life could be catastrophic and that our most prized achievements could be swept away in an instant. The Great War demonstrated that the barbarities of war could be multiplied, via exquisite technology, so as to engulf whole populations and

¹² For example, see the collection of papers which originated in German Catholic circles after Vatican II, Walter Kasper, *et al. The Crisis of Change: Are Church and Theology Subject to Historical Laws?* (Chicago: Argus, 1969).

¹³ Two summaries of the debate on the “problem of history” were James M. Connolly, *Human History and the Word of God: The Christian Meaning of History in Contemporary Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1965); and Carl E. Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics: New Directions in Theology, II* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).

¹⁴ The authors themselves referred most often to the experiences and developments mentioned in this and the next paragraph.

cultures. Once the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 had been achieved, the reign of Stalin showed that tyranny could outdo tyranny as a Marxist-Leninist totalitarianism was established on a scale more vast than Czarism. After a decade of semi-chaos in Germany, the Nazi revolution during the 1930s furnished a case of inhumanity and neo-pagan Aryanism massively organized with great technological skill. Meanwhile industrial capitalism increased its capacity to dehumanize by reducing still more of life to the economic and by transforming personalities into efficient supports of a huge productive apparatus. The Great Depression during the 1930s crippled the United States, Britain, France, Germany, and smaller countries as well. The Second World War surpassed even the Great War as the entire globe convulsed. The hubris of the industries, the science, the politics, and the militaries of European and American cultures up to 1945 seemed epitomized by the atomic bomb which annihilated Hiroshima.

The world-wide era of crisis gave no evidence of ending into the third and fourth generations: the Cold War, the bomb, Viet Nam, economic glut and squander, maldistribution of wealth, oppression of the poor, technocracy, depletion of resources, pollution, urban disintegration, revolution, dictatorships, and more revolution.

For many Christian thinkers, this “time of troubles,” as Toynbee called it,¹⁵ shook loose the idea of progress and the trust in human reason which underlay both the old liberal as well as the Marxist views of history. The glorious day of the liberal idea of progress, abetted by the Pax Britannia for a century prior to 1914, led the elites and even many of the common people, whether bourgeois or not, to enjoy the most optimistic expectations about their present and their future. The accomplishments of industrial capitalism and European and European-related imperialism were to them the most tangible proof of progress. Early Marxists, while not enamored with the promises of the liberal view of history, nonetheless firmly believed their own unabashedly optimistic view of the course of human history.

¹⁵ Arnold Toynbee, in *A Study of History*, IV (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), believed all civilizations experience a “time of troubles” as part of their breakdown. A “time of troubles,” which may last centuries, can be overcome by a revitalization of religion.

Before 1914, some of the most thoughtful advocates of the Christian social gospel, while critical of capitalism and Marxism, shared the optimism about progress in history. In 1907, during the heyday of Teddy Roosevelt's Progressivism, Walter Rauschenbusch spoke confidently of helping "to build the coming Messianic era of mankind":

Perhaps these nineteen centuries of Christian influence have been a long preliminary stage of growth, and now the flower and fruit are almost here. If at this juncture we can rally sufficient religious faith and moral strength to snap the bonds of evil and turn the present unparalleled economic and intellectual resources of humanity to the harmonious development of a true social life, the generations yet unborn will mark this as the great day of the Lord for which the ages waited, and count us blessed for sharing in the apostolate that proclaimed it. He was convinced, in 1912, that only the domain of business and industry remained to Christianize.¹⁶

That was *before* the cataclysm.

During the gestation of the Great War, Oswald Spengler wrote the first draft of *The Decline of the West*. He reworked the text during the war and published it in 1918. Though obtuse and clumsy, the book met an immediate need for an explanation of catastrophe and became a German bestseller. And so it did in the United States after the English translation appeared in 1926. Spengler certainly broke with the secular idea of progress, but he replaced it with a neo-pagan idea of inevitable organic decay.¹⁷ The notion was not an ultimately satisfying alternative.

As the "time of troubles" lengthened during the 1920s and 1930s, the situation was ready for another alternative view of history. Christopher Dawson saw the opportunity in 1929

¹⁶ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 352, 422; see also *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), chapters 2 and 3.

¹⁷ See Oswald Spengler's and the translator's prefaces in *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality*, translated by Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Knopf, 1926).

when he published *Progress and Religion: An Historical Enquiry*. He argued that we need not lament the passing of “the English middle-class version of the optimistic liberal creed, which had set out to refashion the world in the preceding century.” We must not “take refuge in fatalistic theories of the inevitability of cultural decline.”¹⁸ And neither will we find help in a Marxist or communist faith. Rather, Dawson concluded, only in a recovery of Christianity which supplied the original spiritual dynamic of the culture could we hope for a renaissance:

If our civilization is to recover its vitality, or even to survive, it must cease to neglect its spiritual roots and must realize that religion is not a matter of personal sentiment which has nothing to do with the objective realities of society, but is, on the contrary, the very heart of social life and the root of every living culture.¹⁹

A number of Christian thinkers did publish books in the 1930s, in response to the catastrophe, that reflected on the meaning and nature of history. Dawson, a Roman Catholic, was central. So was the Anglican Arnold Toynbee, who issued the early volumes of *A Study of History* in 1934 and 1939. Nicholas Berdyaev, Russian Orthodox, published *The Meaning of History* in English in 1936. Paul Tillich, from German Lutheran tradition, brought out *The Interpretation of History* the same year. The papers of the 1933 meeting of the American Catholic Historical Association appeared in 1936 under the title *The Catholic Philosophy of History*. H. G. Wood, a Quaker, gave the Hulsean Lectures at Cambridge University in 1933-34 on *Christianity and the Nature of History* (1934). One of the official books of the 1937 Oxford conference on church, community, and state was devoted to history, *The Kingdom of God and History* (1938), and included articles by Tillich, Dawson, and Wood.

When Reinhold Niebuhr presented the Gifford Lectures on history in Edinburgh in 1939, the catastrophe had deepened and the situation was prepared for a renewal of interest in

¹⁸ Christopher Dawson, *Progress and Religion: An Historical Enquiry* (London and New York: Sheed & Ward, 1929), preface.

¹⁹ Dawson, *Enquiries into Religion and Culture* (London and New York: Sheed & Ward, 1933), Introduction.

Christian views of history on a wide scale. In the movement of historical thought that developed thereafter, Niebuhr no doubt was the most influential figure. He continued to reflect on the large questions of the nature and meaning of history during the 1940s, and in 1949 published *Faith and History*.

Another central figure was Herbert Butterfield, then professor of modern history at Cambridge University. In 1948 he presented a course of lectures at Cambridge which he repeated over the BBC, and then revised and published in 1949 as *Christianity and History*. Dawson and Toynbee continued to be significant after the war as their thought developed and they reached new audiences.

Many thinkers were influenced by these four figures—Niebuhr, Butterfield, Dawson, and Toynbee. On the whole, however, it is important to notice that most thinkers came to their views of history and culture chiefly as the result of their own experience of the crisis of contemporary history, together with their own reflection on the crisis in the light of the Christian tradition. These included notably Latourette, Brunner, Barth, Tillich, Lewis, Eliot, Dooyeweerd, Maritain, Harbison, Florovsky, Marrou, and Gutierrez. Two seminal figures—Bultmann and Pannenberg—came to their thought on history in the context of their New Testament and theological studies, but they too were not untouched by the turmoil of contemporary history. Tillich expressed the feeling of many in his generation:

We are not scholars according to the pattern of our teachers at the end of the nineteenth century. We were forced into history in a way which made the analysis of history and of its contents most difficult. Perhaps we have had the advantage of being nearer to reality than they were. Perhaps this is only a rationalization of our shortcomings.²⁰

It should not be surprising that an age of catastrophe yielded significant Christian reflection on the meaning and nature of history. It is at such times that the fundamental

²⁰ Paul Tillich, "Autobiographical Reflections," in *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, edited by Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 21.

matters of life which calmer days take for granted especially come to attention. It is no mere coincidence that many of these thinkers, whatever their ecclesiastical tradition, in some way or another felt the power of Augustine's thought about history. Perhaps the twentieth century with its terrible culture-wide calamities was not unlike the fifth when Augustine experienced evidence of the fall of Roman imperial culture and then developed his Christian view of history.

Augustine, from his vantage point in North Africa, was scandalized in 410 when Alaric and his army of Visigoths invaded the eternal city of Rome and for three days ran riot, destroying, pillaging, burning as much as they could. He could not glory in the humiliation of the city he believed was the greatest in the world. To him, Christian though he was, the pagan city of Rome was the center of civilized life. The near-universal conviction in the empire of the time was that Rome would not die. The plunder of Rome suggested otherwise. Jerome wrote, "If Rome can perish, what can be safe."²¹ Alaric's invasion passed, but the prospect of catastrophe was enough to prompt Augustine's thinking along monumental lines. Prior to 410 he had reflected often on the contrast between the life of Christians and that of the pagan culture around them. Now his thought moved on. By 413 he published the first three sections of the *City of God*. Thirteen years later he completed all of the twenty-two sections of the work. In the process, from out of the biblical sources, his knowledge of history, and his experience of the disintegration of the culture of Rome, he defined a Christian philosophy of history.²²

Augustine's *City of God* proved more durable than the classical city of Rome. His thought still generated thought. Through his life and writings, said Marrou, he "instructs us by his example in the art of living through an age of catastrophe."²³

²¹ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 287-98.

²² Brown, 299-312.

²³ Henri-Irene Marrou, *St. Augustine and His Influence through the Ages*, translated by Patrick Hepburne-Scott (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 7.

Niebuhr and Butterfield

A look at two of the leading thinkers serves to indicate the character of a major portion of the renewal of Christian views of history. The books in the 1940s by Niebuhr—*The Nature and Destiny of Man*, II (1943), and *Faith and History* (1949)—and by Butterfield—*Christianity and History* (1949)—stimulated considerable thought on the subject. Their books were in many ways very different from each other, treating different aspects of the subject differently, and for different audiences. Yet, they displayed a generally common outlook—a remarkable point since they were apparently written independently of each other.²⁴

For both Niebuhr and Butterfield the character and scale of the crisis of the age directly stimulated their thought. Wrote Niebuhr:

The crisis in which we live today is more than a political one. While political institutions are being shaken to their foundations by the world catastrophe which has overwhelmed us, it will become increasingly apparent that the philosophical and religious presuppositions by which men live are as seriously challenged by world events as are the political institutions by which they have ordered their lives.²⁵

Butterfield observed:

Whether we escape the deluge or not, therefore, we are confronted by the threat of it on a scale out of all comparison with what was even feared in 1914. And history has resumed its risky and cataclysmic character.²⁶

Niebuhr and Butterfield both believed the crisis was partially due to an optimistic view of history that liberalism and Marxism shared. Such optimism was characterized by two features. First, both liberalism and Marxism were certain that complete redemption would come within the course of history, and, second, both philosophies were convinced that

²⁴ Herbert Butterfield claimed he did not read Niebuhr until after he had published these Cambridge lectures [Personal interview, Peterhouse, Cambridge, 17 June 1975]. Butterfield could not, however, have been unaware of the general discussion of Niebuhr's lectures, or of the emphases of neo-orthodoxy.

²⁵ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, II, vii.

²⁶ Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (London: Bell, 1949), 70.

history could be entirely understood from inside history. The followers of these philosophies believed, according to Niebuhr's compelling phrase, "that history is itself Christ."²⁷ They had come, said Butterfield, to "regard these human systems and organizations as being the actual end of life, the ultimate purpose of life."²⁸ Needless to say, these messianic and optimistic convictions possessed tremendous power, and the scale and intensity of the cataclysm demonstrated it.

Both Niebuhr and Butterfield believed that secular views of history were also dependent upon optimism about human nature that attributed redemptive character to human reason. They detected a seemingly congenital inability to recognize or acknowledge human evil, unless of course the evil be the enemy's.

To find a radical alternative to these beliefs, both Niebuhr and Butterfield turned to the biblical sources of the Christian faith, Butterfield more to the Old Testament, and Niebuhr more to the Gospels and Paul. The starting point in a Christian view of history for both men was a two-sided belief. On one side was the acknowledgment of the reality of evil in human nature, what Butterfield called "the universal element of human cupidity." On the other side was the affirmation, for Niebuhr, of the image of God in human nature, and, for Butterfield, of the primacy of human personality in history.²⁹

Both writers saw the Christian view of history as catastrophic and tragic, but not ultimately so. Because of evil, history is a drama of conflict, not of gradual improvement. Niebuhr regarded the cross of Jesus Christ as the key to the story of history, and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the paradigm of history. In the death of Jesus Christ evil appears to triumph, but in the resurrection of Jesus Christ we come to see that God, not evil, triumphs in the end. History, now and in the eschaton, moves "beyond

²⁷ Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Scribner's, 1949), viii.

²⁸ Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, 64.

²⁹ Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, introduction and chapter 2; Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, I (New York: Scribner's, 1941), chapter 6.

tragedy.”³⁰ Butterfield saw in the conflicts of history a particularly clear manifestation of God’s Providence. Providence takes the compound of all the human wills that clash in any historical event or process and constantly brings good out of evil. Conflict in history leads not to mere dissolution, but to “that kind of history-making which goes on so to speak over our heads, now deflecting the results of our actions, now taking our purposes out of our hands, and now turning our endeavours to ends not realized.”³¹

Butterfield believed that the Christian has “in his religion the key to his conception of the whole human drama.” Niebuhr, too, stressed that the biblical view of history treated history as a whole and understood history from the perspective of the end. God, through Israel and especially Jesus Christ, revealed the end of history in the middle of history, so to speak, and thereby provided from outside history the terms in which the process of history made sense. History was not annihilation or annulment, but fulfillment and consummation. At the same time, Butterfield could affirm that each person and each moment is “equidistant from eternity.” No human act depended upon absorption in a developmental process to be worthwhile.³²

Niebuhr and Butterfield took very different routes to such relatively similar views of history. Butterfield’s was the more straightforward. He was raised in a devoutly Methodist family in Yorkshire, England. He never significantly altered the essentially Augustinian beliefs he learned early about the worth of human personality, the doctrine of sin, the relativity of human achievement in history, and futility of worshipping anything other than God.³³ *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931) established his

³⁰ Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, chapter IX. Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Scribner’s, 1937).

³¹ Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, 94. Compare this with Butterfield, “God in History,” R. J. W. Bevan, ed., *Steps to Christian Understanding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 111-13. Also, Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: Bell, 1931), chapter 3.

³² Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, II, chapter 10. Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, 22-25, 65-67.

³³ Most biographical details about Butterfield derive from a personal interview, Peterhouse, Cambridge, 17 June 1975. Butterfield’s friend, Professor David Knowles, wrote: “These pages on St. Augustine may not be out of place in a book dedicated Herbert Butterfield, for he is in more than one way himself Augustinian.” [Knowles, “St. Augustine,” in J. H. Elliot and H. G. Koenigsberger, eds., *The Diversity of History: Essays in Honour of Sir Herbert Butterfield* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 19].

genius as a historian as he did battle with a one-sided, whig-liberal view of progress in history. Marxism never seriously tempted him, but he did study it carefully in the 1930s and learned from it: history as conflict, the place of economic and social factors in history, process and law in history.³⁴ He wrote *Christianity and History* (1949) by request, but hesitantly, because as he says, “It had never occurred to me to set myself up as a theologian.” He simply said those things which he thought post-war, non-Christian students might do well to hear about history. The crisis of the times, it seems, did lead him after 1945 to begin publishing a fair number of books and articles on the themes of Christianity and history, diplomacy, and politics, including *Christianity, Diplomacy, and War* (1953), *International Conflict in the Twentieth Century: A Christian View* (1960), and “Christianity and Politics” (1966-67). Without having an elaborate system, or indeed without interacting closely with anyone on such matters, he worked for the renewal of Christianity in relation to the principles of those areas of life. His writings as a historian on topics such as modern science, George III, Napoleon, and especially on the history of historical writings are, demonstrably, dependent upon the sorts of Christian presuppositions about human nature and history which he explicitly treated in *Christianity and History* (1949), *History and Human Relations* (1951), “God in history” (1958), and elsewhere.³⁵

Niebuhr’s development was more spectacular. His intellectual odyssey inscribed a dramatic and complicated series of “conversions of thought” surrounding a rather constant commitment to love and serve God and to offer help to the practical affairs of industrial workers, politics, and international diplomacy.³⁶ He began a thirteen-year pastorate in industrial Detroit as a fairly typical liberal idealist in the line of the social

³⁴ Butterfield, “History and the Marxian Method,” *Scrutiny*, I (1933), 339-55; and Butterfield, “Marxist History,” in *History and Human Relations* (London: Collins, 1951), 66-100.

³⁵ See C. T. McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield: Historian as Dissenter* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2004).

³⁶ Of the many studies on Niebuhr, the most helpful on this point are: Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2001); Richard Wrightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Cornell Univ., 1996); Ronald N. Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians* (Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1972), and Paul Merkley, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Political Account* (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1975).

gospel. Toward the end of the 1920s, he questioned the optimism of the old liberal view of human nature and history. When he moved to New York in 1928 to teach at Union Theological Seminary, he also began to move toward Marxism. During the 1930s, in his books *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) and *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934), he worked out a Christian social theory influenced by Marxism that gave him an instrument with which to criticize liberalism. The Marxist view of history as catastrophe and conflict gave him support in his critique of the liberal view of history as gradual progress. By the 1940s, when his seminal books on history were published, he moved completely away from Marxism toward Augustine and a new reading of the Bible. He called himself a Christian realist. During the 1950s he continued to shift toward a Christian pragmatism. He used his developing Christian view of history to interpret the history of America, democracy, and world politics in several books: *The Irony of American History* (1952); *The Structure of Nations and Empires* (1959); *A Nation So Conceived: Reflections on the History of America from Its Early Visions to Its Present Power* (1963); and *The Democratic Experience: Past and Prospects* (1969).

By the 1940s Niebuhr believed that the experiences of recent history refuted both the liberal and the Marxist views of history. He wrote in 1949, “This refutation has given the Christian faith, as presented in the Bible, a new relevance.”³⁷ He wanted his work to contribute to a renewal of Christianity in the wider culture.

Christian Alternatives and the Ecumenical Movement

The idea of finding a Christian alternative to the prevailing philosophies of history functioned decisively in the thought of the leading thinkers. Many went on to propose ideas for general cultural reconstruction: Niebuhr, Tillich, Maritain, Butterfield, Marrou, Eliot, Dawson, Toynbee, Dooyeweerd, Brunner, Florovsky, Gutierrez, and perhaps even Barth. In an age of crisis, they hoped to find a way out, somehow enlightened by the spirit and power of Jesus Christ and the Christian tradition.

³⁷ Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, viii.

Although animated by this common Christian concern, what appeared was a remarkable diversity. One must use the plural in saying that they found a number of Christian alternatives and offered a variety of Christian views of history. The differences often were not minor. For example, Brunner, Toynbee, and Dawson thought that a linear view of history was important, while Bultmann did not. Pannenberg and Gutierrez stressed how inseparable salvation and ordinary history are, while Bultmann insisted upon their divorce, and Maritain spoke of two distinct realms of the sacred and secular which are nonetheless closely linked. Dooyeweerd and Maritain looked for specific laws in history, Butterfield claimed there probably were such laws, but did not name any, and Barth and C. S. Lewis disparaged or denied the validity of identifying any laws. Eliot stressed the leaders, while Gutierrez emphasized the outcast. Marrou and Florovsky preferred the large questions of interpretation in history, while Butterfield and Link started with the particulars. Link perceived the connection between his Christian faith and his historical vocation to be specialized on the point of his concern for the truth, while Florovsky, Butterfield, Marrou, and Dawson saw the connection to be much more pervasive throughout their historical study. Latourette detected a gradual improvement of the position of Christianity in history, while most of the others did not.

The theological differences among the authors were great as well and often underlay their diversity of views on history. We need only think of how different were the approaches to the Bible of Latourette, Bultmann, and Tillich, or how opposite were Gutierrez's, Toynbee's, and Dooyeweerd's views of human salvation through Christ.

Moreover, their searches for a Christian alternative varied considerably, some of them being very complex. Along their routes, some of them experienced attraction to persons or viewpoints which were contradictory, or which they later rejected as inconsistent with Christian beliefs, even if they learned something in the meantime.

The more spectacular searches are worth mentioning. The journey of Reinhold Niebuhr we have already seen as he moved from old liberal Christian idealism, to a Marxist-

influenced Christianity, to Christian realism, to Christian pragmatism. Maritain began as a liberal Bergsonian, then converted to Roman Catholicism, and as a Catholic was attracted briefly to the proto-fascist Charles Maurras, then discovered Thomism and finally developed neo-Thomism. Dawson was raised a liberal Anglican, later converted to Roman Catholicism and, in working out his Augustinian Catholic Christianity, experienced attraction at various times to certain features of Marxism, fascism, and liberalism. T. S. Eliot was raised Unitarian, converted to Anglo-Catholicism, and in the process briefly spoke well at different times of Maurras, Marxism, and Social Credit.

The similarity underlying these pilgrimages as well as that of others was their conviction of the need to mark out a Christian way which offered an alternative to mere identification with liberalism, conservatism, fascism, and Marxism. Such people were often misunderstood. For example, reviewers of Dawson's books used conflicting labels to identify his ideas—capitalist, Marxist, fascist, liberal, conservative, reactionary.³⁸ In reality, the label most befitting Dawson should start with "Roman Catholic" and then add adjectives like "Augustinian" and "social pluralist." What one commentator said about Toynbee is true of most thinkers who hoped for a renewal of Christianity in the culture:

At bottom, secular ideologies, whether liberal, socialist, capitalist or whatever do not mean much to Toynbee. It is, of course, only religion that counts.³⁹

The point being made here can be generalized. Whatever their differences in their views of history, or their theology, or their biographies, the term to use first in describing all the leading authors as well as their views of history is "Christian." They all shared a common characteristic: Jesus Christ and Christian belief were decisive for their lives and their views of history.

³⁸ Anne Woolever, *Christopher Dawson: A Study in Anti-Democratic International Thought, 1920-1960* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1969), *passim*.

³⁹ Roland N. Stromberg, *Arnold J. Toynbee: Historian for an Age in Crisis* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 86. See C. T. McIntire, "Toynbee's Philosophy of History: His Christian Period," in C. T. McIntire and Marvin Perry, eds., *Toynbee: Reappraisals* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 63-92.

One significant cultural movement tended during the period to direct their diversity toward a common Christian renewal. All but one of the Protestant thinkers here highlighted had some connection with the Ecumenical Movement. The Catholics among them were ecumenically minded. The Ecumenical Movement itself began as a search for a Christian way in the modern world. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, long-time General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, once characterized the Ecumenical Movement as “a third way” that cut across accepted dichotomies and deadlocks, and rejected the current alternatives .⁴⁰

Many of the thinkers were leaders in the Ecumenical Movement.⁴¹ The Oxford conference on church, community, and state in 1937 received the help of Niebuhr, Tillich, Barth, Brunner, Dawson, Latourette, and Florovsky. Barth, Brunner, Niebuhr, and Florovsky were principal speakers in Amsterdam at the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948, and Tillich was present. Florovsky was for a time a member of the World Council's Central Committee and the Faith and Order Commission, as was Hendrikus Berkhof. Toynbee was once a member of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs. Eliot, Niebuhr, Barth, Brunner, and Florovsky were members of the Advisory Commission on the theme of the second assembly of the World Council in 1954, and Toynbee was a member of that assembly's section on international affairs. Latourette was active in the International Missionary Council. John Baillie, who wrote two books on Christianity and history, was a president of the World Council.⁴² All the leading Catholics—Maritain, Gutierrez, Marrou, Dawson, and Cochrane—supported Protestant-Catholic ecumenism.

The Ecumenical Movement from the 1930s through the 1970s was a significant influence in the renewal of Christian views of history—by reflecting the renewal of thought on

⁴⁰ Edward Duff, *The Social Thought of the World Council of Churches* (New York: Association, 1956), 288-90. Visser 't Hooft wrote this in 1953 when the world seemed dominated by a struggle between liberal democracy and communism.

⁴¹ Most of what follows is gathered from David P. Gaines, *The World Council of Churches: A Study of Its Background and History* (Peterborough, N.H.: Richard R. Smith, 1966).

⁴² John Baillie, a professor at the University of Edinburgh, wrote *What Is Christian Civilization* (New York: Scribner's, 1945); and *The Belief in Progress* (New York: Scribner's, 1950).

history, by providing a forum of common discussion, and by stimulating interest in the topic among member churches. The theme of Christianity and history was one of the most durable in ecumenical affairs on the world level.

The volume issuing from the 1937 Oxford conference, *The Kingdom of God and History*, set the course. The Amsterdam assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948 took the theme “Man’s disorder and God’s design” and faced directly the reality of catastrophe in history in the context of trust in God’s work in history. Two of the assembly sections studied Christian renewal amid the disorder of society and international disorder. Addresses by Niebuhr, Barth, Brunner, Florovsky, Baillie, and C. H. Dodd, among others, spoke with varying emphases of the meaning and nature of history.⁴³

The theme of the second assembly in Evanston in 1954 was “Christ, the hope of the world.” The issue now became philosophies of history and eschatology. The report of the Advisory Commission on the theme presented a Christian view of history in contrast with rival secular hopes:

The centre of world history is the earthly life, the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Him God entered history decisively to judge and forgive.... Because God is the Lord of history, Christians must reject all doctrines of automatic progress or of fated decline. Man’s hope is not in any process or achievement of history.

The false hopes identified were democratic humanism, scientific humanism, and Marxism. The document directly reflected Niebuhr’s, and possibly Butterfield’s, thought. Barth drafted the concluding section.⁴⁴

⁴³ Gaines, part III, *passim*. The texts of the sectional reports were on the disorder of society, 292-97; and on international disorder, 301-6.

⁴⁴ The text of the report is in Gaines, 1140-67. Visser ‘t Hooft said Barth wrote the conclusion [*Memoirs* (London: SCM, 1973), 247]. On the Evanston theme, Visser’t Hooft wrote: “The eschatological problem—that is the problem of the relation of the Kingdom of God to human history and of the ultimate hope to the proximate hope—is the key problem of modern theology and had dominated ecumenical discussion ever since the Stockholm conference of 1925” [*Memoirs*, 246].

In New Delhi, at the third assembly in 1961, the World Council of Churches voted to study during the 1960s the theme of God's work in history. The proposal originated in the Division of Studies and was supported by the Department of Church and Society. The urgent question was how to discern what God is doing in history in an age of revolution and immense changes in every sphere of human life. One section at New Delhi reported this conviction:

The Christian must always recognize that Jesus Christ is the Lord of history and he is at work today in every nation of the world in spite of, and through, the ambiguous political, economic, or social structures and actions in any given country.⁴⁵

In the fall of 1962, the Division of Studies published *The Finality of Jesus Christ in the Age of Universal History*, which included a discussion of the themes of God and history, and the nature of universal history. The aim was "to help clarify the witness which the churches are called to make in the modern age."⁴⁶ Certain members of the committee for the Division of Studies felt that more specific work was needed on the historical questions in the study. This concern led to a further study, "God in Nature and History," written by Hendrikus Berkhof, and published in 1965. After extensive study by groups in many parts of the world and by a consultation in Geneva, the document was revised. It went next to the conference of the Faith and Order Commission in Bristol in 1967. The Commission published it, with further revisions, as its own.⁴⁷ Berkhof reported on the study and addressed the fourth assembly of the World Council of Churches at Uppsala in 1968.⁴⁸ A request by Faith and Order for a parallel study on "*Man in Nature and History*"

⁴⁵ *The New Delhi Report, the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, 1961, ed. Visser 't Hooft (New York: Association, 1962), 102, italics in the original report. See also *Workbook: New Delhi, 1961* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, n.d.), 68-73, 87.

⁴⁶ Published in *Bulletin of the Division of Studies*, WCC, VIII, no. 2 (Autumn 1962), 1-42. A shorter version, without the appendices, appeared in *Ecumenical Review*, XV (1962-63), 320-31.

⁴⁷ Berkhof's original article, in *Study Encounter*, I (1965), 142-60; the final version, in *New Directions in Faith and Order: Bristol 1967* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1968), 7-31.

⁴⁸ Berkhof's report of the history of the study appeared in *Ecumenical Review*, XX (1968), 464-65. His address was published in *The Uppsala Report 1968: Official Report of the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 1968), 304-12. The title was "The Finality of Jesus Christ: Our Common Confession and Its Implications for Today."

resulted, after Uppsala, in the establishment of Humanum, a centralized study program on human nature in the context of social change.⁴⁹

For more than thirty years, at the world level of the Ecumenical Movement, sustained attention was given to the question of history. The consequences continued to be felt in all the major areas of concern of the World Council of Churches—social change, revolution, and the Third World, missions, faith and order.

The major way in which the renewal of Christian views of history proceeded from the 1940s to the 1970s was by means of thinkers reflecting on the experiences, problems and issues involved, and through the ordinary course of people reading their relevant books and articles. But the Ecumenical Movement provided timely, organized support for the renewal, while the spirit of ecumenism in some manner animated most of the leading authors. In such ways, the new interest in history contributed its share to making Christianity, with all its internal diversity, a renewed live option in world culture.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ See *Workbook: Uppsala 1968* (Geneva: WCC, 1968), 12-13. Dietrich Ritschl presented a paper with that title before the working committee of the Faith and Order Commission in Sweden, 1968 [*Minutes* of the working committee, Faith and Order Commission, Uppsala and Sigtuna, 1968, 16-21].

⁵⁰ It should be kept in mind that a revival of Christian presence in the European and American world during the period 1940s-1970s took many diverse and contradictory forms, such as, in the United States, that represented by the effects of Vatican II, the resurgence of conservative churches, Evangelicalism symbolized by Billy Graham, new social consciousness among Evangelicals, the Jesus Movement, the “underground churches,” Pentecostalism, the charismatic movement in Catholic and Protestant churches, and so on. The World Council of Churches was one kind of presence and not necessarily the most important.

The Range of Themes

The combined writings by the important thinkers on Christianity and history during the period from the 1940s to the 1970s revealed a remarkable range of issues within in their development of Christian views of history. Contrary to what might be presumed, their work was not limited to, although it included, what might be called the theology of history. Their Christian views of history were not simply theologies of history. They also engaged the issues of philosophy of history and historiography. The themes may be grouped around three foci.

Their writings devoted to questions of the meaning of history coalesced under the heading theology of history. Here the writers treated how the revelation of Jesus Christ provides a transcendent approach to interpreting the course of history as a whole from the origins to the *eschaton*. The main themes are the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the cross and resurrection, Christianity in history, the goal of history and Christian hope, the transcendent meaning of time, the interplay of redemption and sin in history, God's work in history, the relation between salvation history and history as we ordinarily know it, the uniqueness of a Christian view of history. The leading writers on these themes included historians (Dawson, Latourette, Toynbee), philosophers (Niebuhr, Maritain), and theologians (Tillich, Bultmann, Brunner, Pannenberg, Gutierrez).

Their writings on the nature of history and culture treated what is often called the philosophy of history. The main issues had to do with discerning patterns, regularities, or laws in history, the relationship of a philosophy of culture to philosophy of history, and religion and culture. Important to some of the writers was to see how the understanding that Christians have of the meaning of history illuminates the structure of the historical process. Writers on these themes included philosophers (Maritain, Dooyeweerd), historians (Butterfield, Dawson), theologians (Barth, Berkhof), cultural thinkers (Eliot, Lewis), and an institution (World Council of Churches).

Their writings on the task of historians and historical study shifted attention to historiography, the study and writing of history. Topics included what it means to be a Christian historian, the character of historical scholarship and historical inquiry, and the relationship between the historian and historical reality. The central issue was how being a Christian and having a Christian understanding of the meaning and nature of history affects the task of interpreting and writing history. Those who focused on these themes were historians (Harbison, Florovsky, Link, Butterfield, Marrou, Cochrane).

Harbison was right in regarding the renewal of the 1940s and after as no mere return to an earlier form of Christianity. It certainly reflected an urgently felt need to restore contact with an ancient tradition reaching back to Augustine, Paul, the Gospels, the prophets, and the Torah. At the same time, it involved the development of new insights, nourished by the Christian tradition, and stimulated by the experience of history in the twentieth century. The renewed Christian approaches to understanding history were concerned with the same kinds of problems treated by other approaches—liberal or Marxist, idealist or positivist, analytic or phenomenological. Moreover, Christian approaches often discussed problems rarely considered by some other viewpoints. Christian views of history offered additional and, in many cases, alternative suggestions for philosophy of history and historiography, and they contributed to the theology of history, which secular non-Christian viewpoints neglected.

The renewed Christian views of history, stimulated by the work of important thinkers from the 1940s to the 1970, did not stop with them. Many historians, theologians, and philosophers continued to question the dominant secular assumptions about history and historical study, and to devote themselves to the themes raised during the initial period of renewal. In doing so, they became contributors as well to the general reconsideration of history and historical study that continued into the 1980s and after.⁵¹

⁵¹ See, for instance, C. T. McIntire and Ronald Wells, eds, *History and Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); McIntire, *The Ongoing Task of Christian Historiography* (Toronto, Institute for Christian Studies, 1974). Historians working on the questions raised here may be found in professional societies, such as: American Catholic Historical Association, American Society of Church History, Conference on Faith and History, Ecclesiastical History Society in Great Britain, Canadian Society of

Church History, and Canadian Catholic Historical Association. But they are also participants in the general historical societies in the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere.