

CHAPTER I

THE ENIGMA OF HISTORY

IN the Introduction to his *History of Europe*, the late H. A. L. Fisher wrote: "Men wiser and more learned than I have discerned in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern. These harmonies are concealed from me. I can see only one emergency following upon another as wave follows upon wave, only one safe rule for the historian: that he should recognize in the development of human destinies the play of the contingent and unforeseen."¹ He is voicing the feeling of many who scan the complex pattern of world history and look for something which shall unify its divergent figures and give them a sense of wholeness and meaning. The problem of history is the problem of meaning. Is it, as the Greeks and others since their day have contended, just an endless succession of cycles of birth, maturity and decay, or has it some enduring purpose beneath its complex movements? Are we able to see a distinct unity within its diversity?

I

It is well that we should clarify our minds as to the nature of history itself before we pass on to consider its meaning. History is the remembered past. This means at once that it cannot be just the totality of happenings, significant or insignificant, in any particular epoch of time; it has passed through the mesh of the human mind and been retained in the memory because a significance or meaning has been read into it. At once therefore we must differentiate an historical event from a mere occurrence, for it must be that occurrence related to the judgments and feelings of the human mind. Indeed, history consists of a unity of the objective and the subjective, of a happening and the reaction of the human mind to it, interpreting its significance and translating that significance into action. It is only thus that events become historical and are incorporated into historical tradition, so that history can never be a bare cinematograph record of the totality of past happenings. It is always coloured with the interpretations and meanings read into those happenings by the persons involved in them. A selective process has been at work whereby certain happenings have been rejected as unhistorical and others stored in the memory and built up into tradition because they had a peculiar meaning for the persons concerned.

¹ *History of Europe*, London, 1936, p. v.

History can never consist of bare facts, for the very presence of such events in the historical consciousness implies that a certain judgment of meaning has been passed upon them, and that they have been retained in the memory because of their significance.

Furthermore, history is always the concern of a historical group and not of an individual. It is not biography, although it may embrace personal biographies in so far as they influence the life of any particular historical society. The events retained in history are not those which play their part in some individual life alone, but those which have repercussions upon a whole historical group. Thus their meanings must be of interest to the life of such a group, so that they can be embodied in its tradition because they are significant for its future life and action. Those occurrences become historical events which have a public meaning for some historical society, reinforcing the particular ideals and ambitions of that society, or creating a crisis in the realization of its central purpose.

Hence history is concerned with individuals living in community and not with isolated units. The story of history is bound up with the internal life of such groups and with the relationships between them. It presents us with a picture of societies treasuring certain purposes and ambitions, good and evil, and building up from generation to generation a tradition in which are incorporated the events that have affected their common life and which seemed to them so pregnant with meaning that they are worthy of remembrance. A sense of destiny has been moulded and shaped by historical occurrences and these have been drawn into the historical consciousness and incorporated in the remembered past of the group, reinforcing their sense of mission. It is this historical tradition which ensures the continuity of society and enables it to bear some particular meaning down the stream of time. Each group carries its own psychical atmosphere, its own peculiar climate of meaning, and is able to do so because of its remembered past.

This does not mean that the individual does not count in history—a danger into which many modern historians are falling, as we shall see later—but it does mean that the individual person gains historical significance by his relation to one or other of the historical groups. The great figures of history have found their place in the remembered past because of their relationship to some historical society, either in frustrating or in furthering the fulfilment of its destiny, in creating a crisis which profoundly affected its future life, or in helping to shape it and make it conscious of its historical mission. Even when they have been opposed to the society in which they have lived, their record

comes down the years because of the repercussions of such opposition upon the common life. They have become historical events, full of meaning and significance for the group, so that their place in tradition is assured. Every historical society, too, is built up of the totality of individuals who compose it, and its life is determined by the interaction of their individual and collective decisions. The great figures may be remembered, but the history which they have so profoundly affected is the product of numberless lives, possessing no distinctive significance but each making his own contribution, creative or destructive, to the common stock of historic destiny.

A consideration of the historical past, therefore, requires that we should give due place to human freedom and personal decision. It is free beings who with their ideals and aspirations form the raw material out of which history is built. Two other factors must also be taken into account—natural necessity and divine purposefulness. History is not made by man alone, but by man in struggle with and reaction to the forces of his natural environment and his physical nature, and above all in his relationship to the living God. Indeed, the Christian would declare that it is God who in His divine sovereignty writes history, allowing for the contingencies of Nature and the decisions of men, and weaving all their partial meanings into the coherent pattern of His sovereign purpose. Thus the meaning of history must be sought in the nature and the purpose of God. Most interpretations of history place their emphasis on one of these factors, to the exclusion of the others. The Marxist sees the whole of history determined by man's economic environment, whereas Spengler sees the successive cultures as biological organisms, subject to the same laws of natural necessity as the individual members of a biological species and leaving no room for the ultimate significance of human initiative and personal decision. Again, the Speculative Idealists see history as the unfolding of Absolute Spirit in time, and eliminate the irrational and the contingent by the aid of their logical dialectic. Finally, the humanist and the evolutionist see man as the hero of the historical scene, bestriding the forces of Nature and conquering the powers that oppose him. The title of Professor Childe's book, *Man makes Himself*, is indicative of a view-point which sees man climbing out of the primeval slime up to the dawning of an age of the gods. None of these philosophies can give us a true view of our historical destiny. We shall consider them in greater detail as we progress, but at this stage we must emphasize the place of Nature and of man in the process of history, whilst affirming the overruling purpose of a God who is both transcendent to and immanent within the process.

The point at issue is whether history has any all-embracing meaning or whether at best we can find only fragmentary meanings wrought into it by various groups. We are indebted to the Jews for the fundamental conception of the unity of history. As opposed to the Greek, the Jew was a realist. If, for the Greek, time and change could not be real because reality must be motionless and unchanging, for the Jew, time was the anvil upon which God was beating out His purpose. If the Greek longed to escape from the cavalcade of the years into the unchanging serenity of the eternal order, the Jew was content to accept the world in which he lived as a place in which the living God could draw near to him in succour and in judgment. Herodotus and his successors made a large contribution to the writing of history, but it is to the Hebrew people that we must turn for the first vision of a unity in history. The prophets and writers of the Deuteronomist school, whose work is found throughout the historical books of the Old Testament, saw a definite plan in history. They believed that all history is in the hands of God and subject to His sovereign will, so that the story of all nations and peoples is a unity and not an assortment of separate items and diverse strands of development.

The Christian Church is the heir to this Jewish faith, gathering up its vision in Jesus, and declaring that all history centres in Him and His redemptive work. St. Augustine gave classical expression to this view of history in his *Civitas Dei*, and through the centuries Christian men have clung to the faith that there is a history of the world, a history which is not a collection of the histories of separate nations and successive cultures, but which is a unity knit together by the purpose of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It may truly be said that one of the gifts of Christianity to the world is the concept of world history.

It does not follow, however, that Christianity provides a comprehensive philosophy of history, if by a philosophy of history we mean the attempt to give a rational scheme by which the process of history can be explained on a logically satisfying basis. The Christian knows that reason alone cannot carry us to the heart of history's secret, or disclose the nature and purpose of the living God. If the meaning of history is to be disclosed, it must take place in a divine act of disclosure and not through the stumbling efforts of the human reason to grasp its elusive secret. It is, however, true to say that in the philosophic thought of the post-Christian era history first became a problem, and that most attempts to provide a philosophical interpretation of it may be

traced back in germ to the outlook of the Christian faith. To give such an interpretative scheme, the philosopher takes to the series of historical events one or other of two categories, according as he leans to the idealistic or the realistic side of philosophic thought. If he is an idealist, he endeavours to see history as the unfolding or development of some eternal value or absolute idea. If he is a realist, he sees historical events in a chain of causality, governed by certain laws and obedient to certain natural principles. The first sees the meaning of history in a supra-historical world of ideas, and the second sees the meaning of history in the natural order of becoming and reduces history to the level of science, seeking in scientific laws and natural analogy the secret of the historical scene. Between the two stand those who interpret history as a progressive movement towards an earthly goal, using evolutionary categories on the analogy with nature and combining with these a rationalized Messianism borrowed from the Christian faith. In the latter case the meaning of history is disclosed in the final stage of the process, towards which it moves progressively. All such differing schools of thinkers seek for a rational solution and one which is completely objective, but they are oblivious to certain aspects of reality because of the categories which they employ. On the one hand, we have Hegel transforming history into a vast system of logical dialectic in which the Eternal Idea determines itself externally in the flux of time. On the other, we have the historical positivists thinking of history in terms of evolutionary and scientific principles, fitting the development of the human race into a scientific order of causation, and reducing history to the level of mere becoming. On the extreme right we have the Platonic school of thinkers who see no meaning in history at all, but would find the end of man in the eternal world alone; on the extreme left we have Spengler taking each culture as a living organism subject to the same laws of development and decay as any other living thing in the realm of nature, developing a morphology of history upon this basis, and denying history any ultimate meaning whatsoever. Between such positions we have the humanist and the Marxist. Marx naturalizes the dialectic of Hegel; he makes the history of the human race into an economically determined system, in which the contradictions of historical existence are no longer resolved in a dialectic of thought, but in the conflict of economic classes; and this conflict is linked in his thought with a prophetic revolutionism which forecasts the emergence of a classless society at the end of the process. The humanist has not produced such a coherent scheme as Marx; unlike the Communist thinker, he recognizes the moral idealisms and spiritual aspirations of race, but sees no evidence for an

eternal order which is their source; the race is in process of evolution, and mind and the moral consciousness are products of that process by which we are carried forward to an earthly goal where the moral struggles and aspirations of society will be realized. It is man who makes history in conflict with his physical environment and an unfriendly and heartless universe. In all such views we find the attempt to fit history into rational categories, by which every phase of historical experience shall be satisfactorily explained and the contradictions ironed out in an idealistic or a realistic dialectic.

These rationalistic attempts to understand history founder upon the personal element in historical experience. Whether they rationalize the process in terms of idea or causality, they allow these personal elements to pass through the mesh of their thoughts, or else they ignore the dimension of depth within them and attempt to resolve them superficially in a higher unity. The work of Buber and Heim upon the inner structure of the relationships in which living persons are involved has clarified the distinction between the I-it relationship, from which scientific knowledge arises, and the I-Thou relationship, in which both the related entities are experiencing subjects. As they have shown the process of objectification, which turns the living person into an object of thought, transposes the subject into time past and robs the "Thou" of that will-form which is characteristic of the living present; for in the warm-blooded moment of personal encounter—to use modern phraseology, the "existential" moment—there is a consciousness of a will countering my will, of a constraint being laid upon me, and of "another" drawing near in demand and in succour. It is this conflict and harmony of personal wills with one another and with the purpose of a personal God which lies behind history. History, as the recorded past, is the result of the decisions of such wills; it is the recorded behaviour, not of individuals subject to law and deterministic categories as in nature, but of persons possessing freedom of choice and able to make decisions which alter the course of the human story. When we survey the past in which the decisions of the living present have been crystallized, the mind inevitably objectifies such relationships and is concerned with their results; it therefore tends to iron out the paradoxes and contradictions of which we are aware in personal encounter, fitting the whole into some rational scheme. The result is the temptation to see some form of determinism in history and to forget that in personal encounter the only possible way to harmony is not by sheer compulsion but by fellowship and surrender. These elements of decision, of personal relationship and community, of contradiction

and the conflict of wills, are the stuff out of which history is made, and the historical philosopher ignores them at his peril. The personal introduces into history the irrational and the contingent; thus no understanding of history can provide a satisfying philosophic scheme unless it is realistic enough to recognize the presence of personal freedom. This implies that the Christian faith will give us an understanding of history but not a philosophy of history.

What then does the Christian faith regard as the truth about historical existence? Here we may state briefly the thesis of this book. It is that the true meaning of historical existence is disclosed by God only to faith, for this meaning is concerned with the sovereign purpose of a personal God, to a knowledge of whom reason of itself is powerless to attain. Hence the Christian finds the truth about history in a series of historic events in which God Himself acts in order to disclose and actualize His purpose in the lives of men. These events may be treated by the scientific historian on the level of history, for they are concerned with the life and thought of a nation, the Jewish people, with the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth, and with the history of the Christian Church. But to the eye of faith God has disclosed a deeper and eternal meaning in these historic facts, so that the Christian is able to find in them a divine revelation which is at the same time a fulfilment of the divine purpose in history. Hence the Christian singles out by faith a series of historical events which are pregnant with divine meaning and therefore not mere occurrences. To this chain of events we shall give the name "salvation-history", following the current usage. The centre of such salvation history is the unique and unrepeatable "event" of Jesus of Nazareth in which the eternal God enters history to fulfil His purpose. In this event the full meaning of history is disclosed, and beyond it history cannot move; it is eschatological, embodying the end of history. It is with the exact meaning of such a declaration that we must be concerned in the following pages.