

Some Reflections on the Meaning of History

Abstract

I would like to offer a few general thoughts on the meaning of history. I will attempt, ever-so-briefly, to examine how our Judeo-Christian religious tradition has not only been the source of what we mean today by history but also how our present religious sensibilities has shaped the meaning of time itself. I will conclude with briefly commenting about the differing interpretations and goals of history through the lenses of three first rate 20th Century original thinkers as to the meaning of history, H. U. v. Balthasar, E. Voegelin and B. Lonergan.

The Symbolism of the New Year Celebration

As an introduction, first a few words on the symbolism of the new year celebration in cosmological societies and today. The cosmological myth, writes Eric Voegelin,

is generally the first symbolic form created by societies when they rise above the level of tribal organization. Nonetheless, the several instances of its appearance are numerous enough to allow for unmistakable distinctions among the ancient Mesopotamians, Egyptians, and Chinese styles of the cosmological myth.¹

In the great cultures after the Neolithic revolution -- sometimes also called Agricultural Revolution (roughly 10.000-5000 BC) when the populations started to live off their products from agriculture, and, depend more on proper timing for the growing of crops and for sowing the land a more precise calendar and as result the celebration of the new year was an enormously important and festive event.

In Assyrian, for example, it was spread over several days. Ethnologist and scholars of religion report that the celebration of the new year served as an actualization and fulfillment of the social and the cosmic order.² The king was the representative of both the social and cosmic realms. The succession of the stable constellations (in the heavens) conveyed a sense of a deep rooted social safety that had previously not existed. However, later when political and social upheavals occurred--caused by natural disasters, by wars, or by new religious and spiritual movements -- the divine-cosmic order which had existed then fell apart.

Nonetheless, the New Year celebration, symbolically, came to be understood by modern thinking no longer as an fulfillment or a reassuring of a cosmic-divine order but has now become known as the celebration in the belief of progress, a future full of better things to come. While fear always plays a part projecting

¹ Eric Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, 1969. p.14; hereafter cited as (VIR).

² As to a debate on this issue, cf: B. D. SOMMER, Northwestern University, *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*, Vol. 27 (2000); available on the Internet: <http://learn.jtsa.edu/Documents/pagedocs/JANES/2000%2027/Sommer27.pdf>

future events, the New Year celebration continues to this day as a symbol of progress anticipating still greater achievements in technology, in the economy, and in shaping our opinions. In sum: the modern idea associated with a new year is that the present is determinative of a the better and more optimistic future.

Man is spatiotemporal being, that is to say, he is conditioned by space and time. Comparing the symbolism of these two new year celebrations—cosmological vs. modern, we see a completely different relation of man with respect to space and time. For our consideration, the two different senses of time are important here. On the one hand, time is a rhythm of a constant order. And on the other hand, time is an expectation and anticipation of some imaginary future whose time-vector determines the present. How did this change in the sense of time emerge? Looking back in history, we see that, amidst a period of flourishing cosmological empires, something completely new had emerged in a small Semitic tribe--Israel. Modern experience of time and the question of the meaning of history cannot be explained without an understanding of the religious experience of Israel. Voegelin writes

...that Israelite sacred history cannot be discarded as unimportant even in pragmatic history, since by virtue of its possession Israel became the peculiar people, a new type of political society on the pragmatic plane. ... Through the leap in being, that is, through the discovery of transcendent being as the source of order in man and society, Israel constituted itself the carrier of a new truth in history. (VIR, p. 123)

Even an atheistic thinker, if he is honestly engaged in a philosophy of history, has to deal with the experience of revelation of old Israel (and of Christians) at least on the level of a history of religions. Israel's experience of God as a God of history has had far reaching consequences in the history of mankind. Let us first consider a short passage in the Old Testament (Exodus 3:1-4:17), the narrative of the thorn bush. Voegelin writes:

The thorn bush dialogue could be written only by a man who had an intimate knowledge of the spiritual events of divine revelation and human response. He was a prophetic mind of the first rank [...] (VIR, p. 408)

In offering a short interpretation of this complex dialog,³ my concern is not with theology, or much less interpreting biblical texts (exegesis). Rather, it is to illustrate an interrelation between one's experience of the God of Israel and one's consequent understanding of the meaning of history. For it is my contention here (as well as Voegelin) that it was a religious experience that caused a completely new sense of time, a scheme of time which later came to be interpreted in a purely immanent way. Immanent in a sense of: We should never forget how much the Marxist scheme of historical materialism or the ideology of progress owes itself to Israel's notion of time.

Moses, we can read, amidst his daily routine, was grazing the flock of his father-in-law, and was overpowered by a religious experience. God introduces Himself:

³ For a detailed and very interesting interpretation of this episode, see: *VIR*, chapter 4 of *Israel and History* and chapter 12.

"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."⁴ (Ex 3:6a)

And further:

"I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, [...] (Ex 3:6-8)

Moses is called to go to Pharaoh in order to obtain freedom for Israel. Moses expresses reservations and dares to ask for God's name. God replies:

"I AM WHO AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Ex 3:14)

Here, God is no longer experienced as a cosmic power but as Lord of history. God is now both past, present, and future. For now all of time is united. And by God identifying with Israel's founding fathers, God is now both past and present for He knows the afflictions of His people. Moreover God is their future for He promises to deliver Israel from slavery.

If God as cosmic-divine power is no longer present in cult and life, how then can a divine reality be experienced at all? The thorn bush dialog shows that the religious experience of the people of Israel is very different from the cosmic one of the ancient world. Between the God of ancestors and the God of promise, time opens up, and is not a "void" time but, as it were, a time-vector directing past and present towards a promise, with this vector not being purely immanent but immanent-transcendent.

The people, who bind themselves in the decision to this God, become the people of history--the people of the covenant. The Hebrew term for bush (*seneh*) is likely to be an allusion to Mount Sinai⁵ whereby the covenant between God and Israel are reenacted and the dimension of history remain open toward a future. A future determined by both a promise and a law, leaving these chosen people instructions so that the people could act according to the mandates of their God of history.

The presence of Israel of the Old Testament was essentially determined by its hope of promise. Its hope is for their exodus from Egypt; for a land of milk and honey, and for a just king to rule over the land. In a long process of purification in the course of history, with many defeats and setbacks, the tangible earthly promises turned more and more to the spiritual and inner life. The prophets warned against replacing God's promise with wishful thinking. The prophet Jeremiah spoke about a covenant written in the hearts of the people of Israel.

It turns out more and more that the essence of God's promise was His Self-giving. From the line of the prophets to the way of the apocalypse branched off the hope that God would directly intervene in history and reveal Himself in this world (the Greek term *apokálypsis* means revelation, disclosure). Both the

⁴ Book Exodus, quoted after the RSVCE

⁵ VCP, .p 406.

prophets and the apocalypse found their fulfillment in the experience of Christianity.

It was a time of extraordinary crisis--the fall of Rome, when an African Christian bishop, and one of the greatest theologians of all time, Augustine wrote a book which determined the concept of history in Europe lasting to this present time. In the year 410 BC, Rome which was thought to be invincible was plundered by Alaric (370-410) the king of the Visigoths.⁶ Briefly before this disaster, all pagan ceremonies in Rome were banned by a law of Theodosius. The pagan priests lost their privileges. The Victoria, goddess of victory, was removed from the seat of the Senate. The pagan population, still very numerous at that time, blamed the Christians for this disaster.

Augustine's response to all these disasters was to be revealed in his book, *The City of God*, which states that this earthly history will never disclose the full meaning of life. God's Kingdom is present only in a hidden way on earth⁷ only to be fully realized in the heavenly city. Augustine's view was not dissimilar to that of the prophets of old Israel. The centuries following Augustine only proved both Augustine and the ancient prophets of Israel correct for eruptions and calamities continued to plague history throughout and even in our present time. Of special interest was that in the 17th century the historical collapse was so apparent during the English Civil War that the Puritans seriously tried to establish the kingdom of Heaven on earth.⁸ There is a clear line in terms of a history of ideas from these intentions to the great ideologies of the 19th and 20th century. In these ideologies the former immanent-transcendent time-vector turned into an immanent one and the concrete-transcendent promises into Utopian visions of a mundane paradise. In the gravitation field of a purely immanent time-vector, the question about a possible determination of the future became all the more urgent.

History -- Openness towards Future

With this short outline conveys is that both the idea of time and idea of history essentially owe themselves to a religious idea—an idea of God who is both immanent and transcendent—that is so all in bracing as it experienced by the culture at-large and this brings us back to the problem of history. And so for a cosmological culture, like the Mesopotamians or Egyptians, the question about the meaning of history is superfluous. Why? Because a "history" that does not include openness toward a possible promise of the future, but rather suffices to anchor itself in a divine-cosmic event is not a history as we have known it since Israel's new experience.

If on the other hand, history is seen in a wider sense, were only that which has happened in the past, then a philosophy of history would be limited to an investigation of the methods proper how to, for example, it can be shown that a historic event can be justified in its claim to truth. But this is not the way we normally view history. For us, a directed time-vector is so entrenched in modern

⁶ VCP, p. 82.

⁷ Here one would have to introduce the mystery of the god-man, of the sacraments and church.

⁸ VCP, .p. 145. Voegelin cites a document which clearly illustrates the Puritan's intention: *A Glimps of Sion's Glory* (1641), attributed to Hanserd Knollys, in *Puritanism and Liberty*, ed. A. S. P. Woodhouse (London, 1938), pp. 233-41.

thinking that we inevitably understand ourselves from a future which, at the same time, can never be grasped

Moreover, we know the promises of a classless society or those of a one world state in which suffering will be extinguished. Analyzing their promises we can see that the descriptions of the paradises are very vague and, after all, are only used as an incentive to change the prevailing conditions or to impose this or that policy. As for the history of Israel and Christianity, Can we begin to see that many of these modern attempts to determine the future by understanding the present derive from the religious experience of the people of Israel and carried forward in Christianity?

Another attempt to escape the time-vector towards a future, we can find with thinkers of existentialism. For them, man's meaning consists in choices that he freely makes. The pure exercise of freedom is important, the choice itself but not what is chosen. In this setting of freedom, past, presence and future are contracted to one point. This compression of time in a free act, however, cannot annihilate the time-vector. Man would have to delete his memory, in order to forget the points of time which are the result of the choices. The line of these time-points, detached from any truth, does not make sense at all.

In our context it is not without interest that, in modern physics, time is considered to be not quantitative and cyclic but qualitative and directed:

Much of what happened in the past and will happen in the future is unique and cannot be calculated at all. Only recently, however, came this fact to be raised into the awareness of scientists. Even Albert Einstein was conservative in his rejection⁹ of a qualitative temporality. He assured: "For us, believing in physics, the distinction between past, presence and future has no meaning but a persistent illusion." (Einstein/M. Besso, Correspondence 1903-1955, Paris 1972, S. 538) Nowadays we are convinced that time is irreversible and runs into one direction and that there are events which happened in the past but are not repeated in the presence. Hence, we must also recognize that events will happen in the future which so far had never existed.¹⁰

History -- the Concrete and the Universal

The problem of a time-vector which is open toward the future is further exacerbated by the following considerations:

Since man first began to philosophize he has sought to grasp things by distinguishing two elements: the factual, singular, sensible, concrete and contingent; and the necessary and universal (and, because universal, abstract), which has the validity of a law rising above the individual ease and determining it. This scheme of thought is at the basis of

⁹ Later Einstein admitted that this rejection was his greatest mistake.

¹⁰ My translation from German. Hugo Staudinger, Kritische Überlegungen zur Gestaltung des 3. Jahrtausends (* zuerst erschienen in: IBW - Journal Paderborn 2000; alle Rechte liegen beim Deutschen Institut für Bildung und Wissen, Busdorfswall 16, 33098 Paderborn, Tel. 05251/282821; Email dibw@yahoo.de")

Western philosophy and can be followed down throughout its history.¹¹

Thus, on the one side in the history of ideas, we find an emphasis on the essential and universal and, as a counter movement in the different modes of empiricism, the emphasis on the factual and concrete. A thinking which wants to grasp many single facts under one aspect can never do full justice to the contingent and concrete. In sciences, a highly complex calculus of probability is used to find ideal frequencies of the contingent and the significant deviations from the ideal frequency. However, such calculations are only possible provided that there are a large number of events available for a calculation. In actual history we have to deal with unique events that result from the free choices of the individual person. History reveals that completely unexpected events can and do take place which cannot be anticipated from past historical data. The different streams of empiricism in history, on the other hand, which want to do justice to the contingent and factual to the detriment of the universal, have to admit that an accumulation of mere facts does not reveal any ordering structure. Or it is maintained that man imposes a structural order on history only in an arbitrary manner. Hegel's philosophy of history can be seen as an attempt to find a way out of the dilemma between the universal and the contingent factual.

The most grandiose attempt to master the realm of fact and history through reason was undertaken by Hegel; he interpreted the whole sequence and constellation of facts in nature and in human history as the manifestation of an all-embracing rational spirit, rational precisely in its factual manifestation. This may in one sense be regarded as the highest tribute of reason to the realm of fact and history, since the latter is then no longer mere phenomenon, outside the scope of law-giving reason, but a meaningful presentation of reason itself—which indeed requires this manifestation in order to be reason, so as to communicate itself to itself. But it may equally be regarded as the final devaluation of the historical, in that reason has finally disposed of it, leaving no room for genuine creativity or freedom in the person who acts. (BTH, p. 11)

Hegel's philosophy of history is once more an impressive attempt to determine the openness of the immanent-transcendent time-vector in order to gain a sense of history. Here the way is opened for a strictly scientific account of history in terms of a historical materialism. As a way out of the problem, does there only remain a historicism by which history is always just relative to a people or a culture? Then, a world history could no longer be written only about, say, a history of Europe or China etc. because according to this view an insight into an overarching standard of all cultures would not be possible. Or does such a standard exist?

I previously briefly mentioned Hans Urs v. Balthasar who provides insights that, in a strictly theological understanding, the absolutely unique can be at the same time the most universal -- the man-God-logos. He even thinks that he can show

¹¹ Hans Urs. von Blathasar, *A Theology of History*, 1994, p. 10; hereafter cited as (BTH). The introduction to this book by v. Balthasar might be helpful for people who are interested in a philosophy of history although not so much in a theology of history.

in history that the saints witness his thesis in so far as all of them, in their religious life, always realized one aspect of the earthly logos.

For Eric Voegelin (another profound thinker of history and of consciousness) there is an overarching standard of world history that is given according to the degree of the openness of a given culture toward a transcendent reality. He renounces, however, to give any further determination to this reality. Simply out of an openness towards a transcendent reality, Voegelin speaks of the attitude of an "in-between", demands and claims emerge which have to be fulfilled if man wants to live in harmony -- and only this grants a harmony of soul -- with his anticipation of a transcendent reality. Further, according to Voegelin, an increasing differentiation of consciousness can be detected in history. Each cultural stage of differentiation expresses itself in symbols. There are symbols of compactness and such of transcendence. In the modern period with its ideologies that want to determine the future, Voegelin means to detect a relapse into symbols of compactness, a turn away from an openness towards a transcendent reality. He speaks of a new gnosis.

For Lonergan, in line with Voegelin, there is no known end of history from which guidelines for the presence could be gained. Utopian visions of a future would be called picture thinking by him, an indulging in wishful thinking and imaginations. In his demythologization of Utopian visions, Lonergan stands, together with Voegelin, on equal footing with the prophets of old Israel. Similar to Voegelin, Lonergan speaks of an increasing differentiation of consciousness in history. Lonergan's insight into this differentiation, however, is not a result, as with Voegelin, of an interpretation of the symbols of consciousness, of philosophy and religion but the result of a clear analysis of man's mental operations.

Unlike Voegelin, for Lonergan it is in our operations of experiencing, understanding, judging and loving, we follow a dynamism which is characterized by an invariant structure: From experiencing to the need to understand, from understanding to the need to judge, from judging to the need to live responsibly, from a responsible life to the acceptance of the gift of experiencing a transcendent reality. Thus, we arrive at a directed vector which can be related to the immanent-transcendent time-vector of history. A man who lives according to the demands of his inner dynamism--his desire to know and to love--is that which determines himself *in* time. By actualizing himself *in* time, he gains his meaning *in* history.

Furthermore Lonergan moves beyond Voegelin, in that a meaningful act of man *in* history is only possible under the assumption of an ultimate ground of the universe, of man, and of history that is absolutely free, intelligent, rational and loving. Without man's full participation in such grounding, his performance of himself would be nothing but a leap into a dark void. **This free intelligent and loving ground, which at the same time is the end of the universe and man, would be the philosophical equivalent to the theological term of providence.** For Lonergan, this anticipation of the end of history is a result of his analysis of man's mental (cognitional) operations and not some Utopian vision of the future. The renouncement of such an ultimate ground and the violation of man's inner dynamism would be an offense against the meaning of history which is always followed by decline.

Putting Lonergan notion of the philosophy of history differently—the meaning of history present and future come about by living in accord of one's own inner commands—by one's inner desires to know everything about everything and to achieve fulfillment in loving the one absolutely free, intelligent, and loving person and the experience of being loved by Him. It is by and through this inner dynamism that time-vector will reach its goal.