

A CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY?

(History, Historicism and Faith)
Biblické školení pracovníků
Český Těšín, 5th april 2014

0. INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS HISTORICISM?

- 0.1. DEFINITION OF *HISTORICISM*
- 0.2. "HISTORICISM" (ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA)
- 0.3. ESCHATOLOGY
- 0.4. OUR USE OF THE TERM "HISTORICISM"

1. WITHOUT HISTORY

- 1.1. NO GOSPEL
- 1.2. NO CHRISTIAN HOPE
- 1.3. NO CHRISTIAN FAITH

2. PROBLEMS WITH HISTORY

- 2.1. CRITIQUE OF FAITH
- 2.2. SECULAR ESCHATOLOGY

3. CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES

- 3.1. KARL BARTH
- 3.2. WOLFHART PANNENBERG
- 3.3. UNDERSTANDING THE PAST
- 3.4. EXPECTING THE FUTURE
- 3.5. BETWEEN EXTREMES

4. CONCLUSIONS

0. INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS HISTORICISM?

0.1. DEFINITION OF *HISTORICISM*

0.1.1. WEBSTER

- : a theory, doctrine, or style that emphasizes the importance of [history](#): as
- a : a theory in which history is seen as a standard of value or as a determinant of events
- b : a style (as in architecture) characterized by the use of traditional forms and elements

0.1.2. KARL POPPER

Tolstoy's historicism is a reaction against a method of writing history which implicitly accepts the truth of the principle of leadership; a method which attributes much--too much, if Tolstoy is right, as he undoubtedly is--to the great man, the leader.¹

"(1) The course of human history is strongly influenced by the growth of human knowledge. (The truth of this premise must be admitted even by those who see in our ideas, including our scientific ideas, merely the by-products of material development of some kind or other.)

(2) We cannot predict, by rational or scientific methods, the future growth of our scientific knowledge. (This assertion can be logically proved, by considerations which are sketched below.)

(3) We cannot, therefore, predict the future course of human history.

(4) This means that we must reject the possibility of a theoretical history; that is to say, of a historical social science that would correspond to theoretical physics. There can be no scientific theory of historical development serving as a basis for historical prediction.

¹ POPPER, K. *The Poverty of Historicism*, p. 147.

(5) The fundamental aim of historicist methods (see sections 11 to 16 of this book) is therefore misconceived; and historicism collapses.²

0.2. "HISTORICISM" (ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA)

- The topic **historicism** is discussed in the following articles: (Encyclopedia Britannica)

0.2.1. INFLUENCE ON 20TH-CENTURY MUSIC

- EncBritTitle: **musical** performance...One final development, the import of which would not be fully realized until the 20th century, was that of **historicism**: the active revival of old music. This incipient recognition of the validity of other styles of composition and performance is dated conventionally from the German composer Felix Mendelssohn's 1829 performance of parts of J.S. Bach's St. Matthew Passion, but it was...

0.2.2. PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

- EncBritTitle: philosophy of **science**...The historicist critique was initiated by the philosophers N.R. Hanson (1924–67), Stephen Toulmin, Paul Feyerabend (1924–94), and Thomas Kuhn. Although these authors differed on many points, they shared the view that standard logical-empiricist accounts of confirmation, theory, and other topics were quite inadequate to explain the major transitions that have occurred in the history... views of

0.2.3. FOUCAULT

- EncBritTitle: epistemology (philosophy)...Michel Foucault (1926–84), for example, wrote extensive historical studies, most notably *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), in an attempt to demonstrate that all concepts are historically conditioned and that many of the most important ones serve the political function of controlling people rather than any purely cognitive purpose. Jacques Derrida has claimed that all...

0.2.4. HUSSERL

- EncBritTitle: phenomenology (philosophy) ...On the other hand, phenomenology must also be distinguished from **historicism**, a philosophy that stresses the immersion of all thinkers within a particular historical setting. Husserl objected to **historicism** because it implies relativism. He gave credit to the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, author of "Entwürfe zur Kritik der historischen Vernunft"...

0.2.5. RANKE

- EncBritTitle: Leopold von Ranke (German historian)...continuity. This continuity is the prerequisite for the development of a culture and also for understanding historical reality. Hence, it is the historian's duty to understand the essence of "**historicism**": that history determines each event but does not justify it. In practice, however, Ranke endorsed the social and political order of his time—the European system of states...

0.2.6. ROMAN CATHOLICISM

- EncBritTitle: Roman Catholicism...was important in the documents of Vatican I. The theme of mystery was developed in response to the intellectual movements of the 18th and 19th centuries known as the Enlightenment, scientism, and **historicism**. The Roman Catholic Church perceived these movements as threats to the idea of a sacred revelation, because they appeared to claim that human reason had no frontiers or that human reason...

0.3. ESCHATOLOGY

- the view that the events described in the book of Revelation have already taken place in past history

0.4. OUR USE OF THE TERM "HISTORICISM"

- **Historicism**" is an undue attention paid to the historical facts and processes at the expense of the principles and truths that are not subject to historical change.
- historical-critical method – the stress not on the *historical* part of revelation, but there is an undue stress on the *historical determination* of biblical revelation

² POPPER, K. *The Poverty of Historicism*, pp. ix-x.

1. WITHOUT HISTORY

- “and it came to pass” 396 times in KJV
- וַיָּהִי 782 times in Hebrew
- Καὶ ἐγένετο 60 times in the NT

1.1. NO GOSPEL

- Luke 24:4 And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments
- Luke 24:15 And it came to pass, that, while they communed together and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them.

1.2. NO CHRISTIAN HOPE

- **Phil 3:20-21** For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; ²¹ who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

1.3. NO CHRISTIAN FAITH

- **1 John 1:1-3** ... what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life-- ² and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us-- ³ what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.

2. PROBLEMS WITH HISTORY

- „All history is 'contemporary history', declared Croce,' meaning that history consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of its problems, and that the main work of the historian is not to record, but to evaluate; for, if he does not evaluate, how can he know what is worth recording?“³

2.1. CRITIQUE OF FAITH

- LESSING: “...contingent truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.”⁴

Das ist: zufällige Geschichtswahrheiten können der Beweis von notwendigen Vernunftswahrheiten nie werden.
- TROELTSCH: in his 1898 seminal essay on *Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology*, articulated the three fundamental principles of this method: (1) criticism/probability; (2) analogy; and (3) correlation.

1. CRITICISM/PROBABILITY

Troeltsch explained this first principle as follows: “...in the realm of history there are only judgments of probability, varying from the highest to the lowest degree, and that consequently an estimate must be made of the degree of probability attaching to any tradition” (1898, p. 13). ...Obviously, this approach precludes the possibility of complete, historical accuracy of the biblical text.

2. ANALOGY

³ CARR, E.H. *What Is History?* p. 21.

⁴ LESSING, G. E. *On the proof of the spirit and of power*, In: LESSING, G.E. *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, p. 85.

The second basic principle—that of analogy—is the key to historical criticism (Troeltsch, 1898, p. 13). This idea suggests that all legitimate, historical phenomena must have a present-day analogy. Underlying this principle is the uniformitarian assumption that all events in history are similar. In other words, like those in Peter’s day, it assumes that “all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation” (2 Peter 3:4).

3. CORRELATION

The third basic concept of history, according to Troeltsch, is the “...interaction of all phenomena in the history of civilization” (1898, p. 14). This concept implies that all historical events are “...knit together in a permanent relationship of correlation...in which everything is interconnected and each single event is related to all others” (Troeltsch, 1898, p. 14). In other words, all historical events form a unified web of immanent causes and effects.

2.2. SECULAR ESCHATOLOGY

- Hegel → Marx
- Marx was persuaded that an atheistic state built according to his philosophy would be a perfect realization of the essence of Christianity. He insisted that “the perfect Christian state is an atheistic state *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*”
- → liberation theology (the problem of social criticism!)

3. CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES

3.1. KARL BARTH

Jesus is the Christ: that is to say, the particularity of God is illuminated by His existentiality. Therefore, in spite of all believing and unbelieving historicism and psychologizing, we encounter in Jesus the scandal of an eternal revelation of that which Abraham and Plato had indeed already seen. The Truth of God is not liable to the 'flux of history'. His action can neither be perceived everywhere nor be dismissed as being nowhere. It can be neither described historically, nor dissolved in a myth, nor treated pragmatically. In Jesus, and precisely in Him, the Love of God breaks through all historical and psychological analysis, and in directness and in mediation transcends both, for it is bound neither to this or that thing nor to this or that place. Because God is eternal and omnipotent, He is unique and oncefor'all. To this, Jesus, the Christ, the eternal Christ, bears witness.⁵

- The issue for Barth is not whether this event is historical, but whether it is accessible to us, and if so, how. According to Barth, revelation “does not become a predicate of history in that God reveals Himself through the medium of history. God remains ontologically distinct (or ‘other’) than the various media He takes up in revealing Himself. (Van Til⁶)

3.2. WOLFHART PANNENBERG

- “Historical revelation is open to anyone who has eyes to see. It has a universal character.”⁷

3.3. UNDERSTANDING THE PAST

3.3.1. A HISTORICAL REPORT NEEDS CONFIRMATION

- **Hb 2:3-4** how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard,⁴ God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.

⁵ BARTH, K. *Epistle to the Romans*, p. 277.

⁶ <http://theologyoutofbounds.wordpress.com/2012/01/25/revelation-and-history-cornelius-van-tils-critique-of-karl-barth/>

⁷ PANNENBERG, W. *Revelation as History*, p. 135.

3.3.2. WE HAVE MORE THAN JUST A HISTORICAL REPORT!

- **2 Cor 5:16** Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know *Him in this way* no longer.

3.3.3. INTERPRETING THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH?

- analogy with Israel?
- the seven letters of Revelation – church history?

3.4. EXPECTING THE FUTURE

- **Acts 1:7** "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority
- **Mt 16:2-3** "When it is evening, you say, '*It will be* fair weather, for the sky is red.'³ "And in the morning, '*There will be* a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot *discern* the signs of the times?
- **Mt 24:32-36** "Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near;³³ so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, *right* at the door.³⁴ "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.³⁵ "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.³⁶ "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.

3.5. BETWEEN EXTREMES

- between: (1) you cannot read the signs of times? and (2) it is not for you to know the times...
- between: (1) knowing the prophecies and (2) refusing the time-tables
- between: (1) complacency – triumphalism (2) rejection of the Church

4. CONCLUSIONS

- God is involved in history and works his salvation through history.
- Knowing history is never certain – we always need the confirmation of the Word in the Holy Spirit.
- "Understanding the times" must not mean we think of ourselves as the final interpreters of human history or