

# BLACKFRIARS

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## SOME INTERPRETATIONS OF HISTORY

'*Circuitus illi jam explosi sunt,*' exclaimed St. Augustine, referring to 'the crushing monotony of endless cycles, period succeeding period and recommencing period, without anything ever advancing,' that theory of everlasting re-birth, and re-death, which the Indians call *samsāra*, and of which St. Augustine elsewhere says, '*qua opinione quid horribilius cogitari possit, nescio.*' With the coming of Christ 'that infernal cycle explodes. Something new incessantly takes place. The Universe has come into being, it really grows and reaches maturity. The world has also an end, thus has a meaning, a direction, a significance.'<sup>1</sup> With Christianity, thus for the first time, History becomes something to be explained and understood, and not merely something to be described and remembered; and with History proper there is also born the possibility of the new discipline of a Philosophy of History.

When the well-known Catholic publishing firm of Herder, in 1931, started its great series of a *History of the Leading Nations* (interrupted, of course, by the advent of Nazidom), the first volume bore the title *The Meaning of History*.<sup>2</sup> In a profound and masterly manner its author there treated of all the problems falling under a Philosophy of History, without naturally attempting to give a concrete exposition of human history in the light of such 'meaning.' But this latter task has never ceased to fascinate, and

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<sup>1</sup> Henri de Lubac, S.J.: *Catholicisme: Les aspects sociaux du dogme*. Paris, 1938. (Editions du Cerf); pp. 98-99; 45 frs. [A fuller account of this important book will appear shortly in BLACKFRIARS.—ED.]

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Joseph Bernhart; *Sinn der Geschichte* (Freiburg, 1931).

frequent attempts at it have been made. That non-Christians and even atheists should have made it—*vide* Mr. H. G. Wells' *Outline*—is amusing, and shows to what extent the whole world since the coming of Christ stands under the empire of Christian ideas, whether men are aware of it or not.<sup>3</sup>

Quite recently a Catholic writer has entered the lists, and the publishers of an English translation of the book<sup>4</sup> assure us that with its publication their search for a History of the World, to be placed over against Mr. Wells', has come to an end: but at least one reader must be allowed to say how little he shares their facile satisfaction. Count du Plessis is a gallant soldier, who has deeply pondered the meaning of history during a long life, and who believes that he has now been able to work out a true interpretation of the way 'the Human Caravan' (*i.e.* humanity) has come and is going. He distinguishes three stages: (1) 'Adam,' *i.e.* the story of the Creation down to the new start made with Noah; (2) 'The Cycle of Dispersion,' *i.e.* the period of conveniently called 'Prehistory'; (3) 'The Cycle of Organisation.' This latter stage, which he dates from about 3000 B.C., he divides again into four eras: (a) that of the 'Kingdoms'; (b) 'Empires of Power'; (c) 'Empires of Government' (beginning with Alexander the Great); (d) 'The Ethnarchy' from the founding of the Catholic Church.

Now, Count du Plessis obviously has read widely: and one of the good points of his book is that it is not exclusively centred upon the West, but tries to include in its synthesis both India and China. All the more must one regret that his reading apparently has never included any

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<sup>3</sup> Another striking example of this is the Millenarianism of a Russia which protests its anti-Christian ideology.

<sup>4</sup> Jean du Plessis: *The Human Caravan: The Direction and Meaning of History*. London, 1939. (Sheed & Ward; 10/6; pp. 366).

works<sup>5</sup> of the historical school of ethnology, which not merely is leading in its own discipline, but has been able to give a true perspective of the prehistoric evolution of mankind, a period hitherto sadly distorted and out of focus through the error of the evolutionists, who tried to trace a single line of evolution for mankind, from Pithecanthropus to Darwin. Fr. Wilhelm Schmidt, by substituting for this unilineal a trilineal line of evolution, has once for all changed our approach to 'Prehistory.' Primitive, *i.e.* food-collecting, man is now seen to have advanced to food-production along three lines, not merely chronologically, but geographically, distinct. The three primary civilizations of Peasants, Herdsmen and Hunters thus developed at first and for a long time in isolation: and it is only subsequently and with an increasing complexity of combination that these four distinct types of civilization (including that of the Primitives) mingled and produced secondary and tertiary civilizations, such as the Archæic Civilization, which Count du Plessis sums up as 'Memphis and Babylon,' and with which he begins his stage of 'Kingdoms.'

Handicapped as he is by his ignorance of historical ethnology, this author in an altogether too *simpliste* manner traces a constant unification of mankind after its original dispersal, without any realization that this purifying process is composed of a double rhythm—a divergence and a convergence of civilizations: the first of which two factors ensures the variety, the second the unity, of human civilization taken as a whole. Again, he simply identifies civilization with royalty—and in doing so, he naturally fails to realize the fundamental distinction between two kinds of Kingship: the sacred or territorial Kingship, derived from the Peasants' Civilization, the King here being iden-

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<sup>5</sup> Such as, for instance, W. Schmidt's *The Origin and Growth of Religion* (London, Methuen, 1931; pp. 302). Of a mass of literature for the most part written by specialists for specialists, this manual is probably the best for the general reader.

tified with the son, husband or lover of the Mother-Goddess and having nothing in common with the people, made of ordinary clay, over whom he divinely rules; and secondly the military or personal Kingship, derived from the Hunters' *plus* Herdsmen's Civilizations, of a King, elected by his clansmen, to lead them in a warlike foray. The first type is characteristic of the Archæic Civilization of the great river systems of the ancient world—Indus, Hoang Ho, Euphrates, Nile; the second of the Aryan and Turanian robber-bands, whose perpetual assaults on the regions of the Archæic Civilization led ultimately to a fusion of the two types, mythologically expressed by a marriage of the Mother-Goddess to the God of War, and politically issuing in what Count du Plessis calls 'Empires of Power.' All this he ignores and therefore fails to explain—a failure which he himself is not unaware of and tries to brush aside by an easy 'Let us not bother overmuch with regard to the remote ages where there is very little that we can know certainly, and let us rather place ourselves in the centre of the [Mediterranean] regions' (p. 110).

History after the zero-hour of the Incarnation our author considers to consist of three periods, which he calls respectively 'The First Assault' (33-313), 'Trench Warfare' (313-1517), and 'The Second Assault' (since 1517). Without agreeing altogether with his chronology as regards the year 1517, one can certainly say that the general attitude of 'the world' towards the Church founded by Christ was at first an attempt of stamping her out; secondly, of enslaving her; thirdly of denying her claims. But looked at positively rather than negatively, would it not be better to speak of the first age of the Church (till 313) as that of the Martyretic, the second of the Monastic, and the third of the Missionary Ideal? (The third period one would date from the inception of the Crusades and the advent of the Friars.) These three marks, which of course have never constituted the exclusive monopoly of any one period, yet seem each particularly appropriate to the three great

epochs of Church History respectively. Unfortunately, the History of the Church, like the Faith of the Church, is usually considered (and taught) 'against somebody,' as Fr. de Lubac says in his brilliant exposition of the nature of Catholicism<sup>6</sup>—first against imperial and royal jurists, and afterwards against Protestant teachers. Instead of being, as it ought to be, a history of the growth of the Mystical Body of our Lord, Church History (at least until 1517) usually resolves itself into a pull-baker, pull-devil story of Pope *v.* Emperor.

A recently published book on the subject<sup>7</sup> is no exception. It professes to be the political history of the Papacy and thus at the best can only be expected to offer a one-sided view of the Church as a whole. Unfortunately, however, it is not written even as a monograph by a specialist; it certainly is not written by one who wishes to preserve the sense of the whole—'Katholon'; still worse, though written by a Catholic, it reads like one of the ordinary run of Protestant history books. The Concordat of Worms thus is said<sup>8</sup> to mark 'the hour when the modern spirit [!] was severed from the spirit of the Papacy'; 'the ignoble things done by the Renaissance Popes' are, according to this author, 'things not separable perhaps from the service rendered to Rome: for saints do not function as war-lords, builders and fosterers of the arts';<sup>9</sup> the Inquisition 'blackened itself for all time by interfering in the rights of the enquiring reason: Galileo, threatened with torture, renounced as erroneous the Copernican system';<sup>10</sup> and one is almost led to see in the Holy Office a continuation of this

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 239 and p. 243.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Bernhart: *The Vatican as a World Power*. Translated by George N. Shuster. (Longmans, 1939; pp. 456; 15/-)

<sup>8</sup> p. 145.

<sup>9</sup> p. 228.

<sup>10</sup> p. 297.

'sinister' institution, since we are told<sup>11</sup> in shocked tones that 'its jurisdiction extends even into medicine'—why? Because it forbids abortion!

We have shown at the outset that Dr. Bernhart is capable of better things: perhaps the most charitable view to take is that this last book of his was written as a pot-boiler for transatlantic consumption. His translator has from time to time committed lapses which at least provide some unconscious humour. For instance, what is 'a beleaguered conscience'?<sup>12</sup> Probably Mr. Shuster has mistaken 'belagertes' ('beleaguered') for 'beladenes' ('guilty') *Gewissen*. 'It was the age of triumphant feudalism, when the new romantic ministers were rising,' we read<sup>13</sup>—but presumably are meant to understand 'romanesque minsters'! The final chapter, on the Curia, is just tittle-tattle—sar-torial for the most part, and not even accurate at that.<sup>14</sup> At all events, the Catholic reading public ought to be warned, what not to expect, in spite of the blurb's glowing description of the book as one distinguished by 'balance and accuracy.'

Balance and accuracy! It seems a difficult ideal to live up to. Where the German author fails by defect, the French one, previously referred to, does by excess. Count du Plessis in fact writes like a pamphleteer: for pages on end the reader is exposed to a torrent of words, which leaves one dazed, if not convinced. That the cause he espouses is the truth makes one all the more regret that he expounds it in such a propagandist manner. Apologetics and rhetoric are not the best methods by which to inspire confidence in one's scientific conclusions. The Lord Himself was not in the whirlwind, but in a still small voice.

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<sup>11</sup> p. 418.

<sup>12</sup> p. 440.

<sup>13</sup> On p. 127.

<sup>14</sup> Thus we have on p. 308 the wholly apocryphal three knocks with a silver mallet on the forehead of a dead Pope.

In fact, if there is one thing more to amaze man than any other, it is surely the contemplation of the infinite care taken by God, in His dealings with man, not to do violence to man's free-will. 'All is possible for God, but the congenital infirmity of the creature limits the latter's acceptance of the Divine gifts; hence God does not want man to be done violence to, but to be persuaded,' as Fr. de Lubac so finely paraphrases a passage from St. Gregory Nazianzen.<sup>15</sup> Especially the historian should realize the Divine 'pedagogy,' shown by God towards slowly evolving humanity. Man had in Eden refused to be led entirely by God's counsels and even precepts: he had known better. What else has human history been ever since, but an account of the slow and painful un-learning process of mankind, that after all it does not know better than God and that the reed of human self-sufficiency, upon which it tries to support itself, merely pierces the hand leaning upon it?

When the Evangelist tells us that 'the times were fulfilled,' this fulfilment means that a point had been reached by the world of Græco-Latin civilization, in which he lived, when it felt itself bankrupt. 'Who will deliver us from ourselves?' was the despairing cry so faithfully voiced by St. Paul. His world was ripe to listen to the Good News: it had at last come of age.<sup>16</sup> Is China perhaps ripe to-day? If so, it is only because she is coming to realize the insufficiency of Confucianism, Buddhism and modern atheism alike. If India and Islam still tarry, is it not because they have not yet reached the point of saying: 'Lord, I perish—deliver me from myself, for I am a sinful man'?

And so the Lord waits in His longsuffering forbearance and loving kindness. He, the Head of a Body which He would build up of all human beings, waits for the living stones to be incorporated of their own free will; waits in

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<sup>15</sup> *Loc. cit.* pp. 187, 201, and 346.

<sup>16</sup> *Cf.* a magnificent passage from an address of Fr. Charles Miel, S.J., quoted by Lubac, p. 349.

our own days for those smitten with that latest folly which consists in asking man to immolate himself for a new society to be;<sup>17</sup> waits, until haply they come to see that no human society under its ephemeral cover shelters anything but frail human individuals, and that to constitute an Absolute, around which to cluster, is not the work of man, but the gift of God—God Who became man for this very purpose, that they might become His own, human Body in the glory of Eternity.

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<sup>17</sup> Lubac, p. 278.