

Chapter 3

History, Historicism, and Norms

Historicism, sacrificing reality to its historical aspect, is the fatal illness of our “dynamic” times. There is no cure for this unwholesome view of reality as long as the scriptural creation motive does not regain its complete claim on our life and thought. Historicism robs us of our belief in abiding standards; it undermines our faith in the eternal truth of God’s Word. Historicism claims that everything is relative and historically determined, including one’s belief in lasting values.

Bid it halt before the gates of your faith, if you wish. The demon of historicism will not be shut out so easily. It has bribed your gatekeepers without your knowing it. Suddenly it stands in your inner sanctum and has you in its power. It asks: do you claim that Holy Scripture discloses *eternal* truth? Do you, imprisoned in your dogmas, not understand that the Bible, which you accept as God’s revelation, itself underwent the process of historical development? Is it not true that the road from the Old to the New Testament is the great highway of history? If the Old Testament is the revelation of God, do you not understand that this revelation apparently developed historically into that of the New Testament? Or do you still believe that the book of Joshua contains the divine rule of life for today’s Christian? Can you still sing the Jewish psalms of revenge without experiencing a clash with your modern Christian consciousness? Do you really mean to say that the content of your Christian faith is [61] identical with that of the first Christian community or with that of the Bible believing Christian of the Middle Ages? If so, solid historical research will quickly end your illusion. Even your use of archaic terms cannot prevent you from coloring them with new meaning. The meaning of words changes with historical development, which no power on earth can halt. You speak of political principles and appeal to sphere sovereignty, forgetting that we live in “dynamic” times. Change is everything, constancy of principle is nothing! You live in an age that finally has overcome the dogmatic prejudice regarding the existence of abiding standards that are not subject to historical development. To feel at home in today’s society you must place yourself midstream in the movement of history. To be listened to today

you must be open to the spirit of the age. Above all you must be progressive, for then the future is yours.

These are the surreptitious ways through which historicism manages to enter the heart of modern humankind. Some unsuspecting theologians accepted its claims insofar as temporal reality was concerned but tried to preserve the eternal value of Christian truths. This, however, was a colossal mistake, because if one accepts historicism's view of temporal reality, it does not stop short of the shelter of one's faith, since faith itself belongs to temporal reality. Furthermore, historicism is driven by a religious ground-motive that takes its stance in radical opposition to the ground-motive of the Christian religion.

The Historical Aspect

Earlier we saw that at an early stage historicism partially infiltrated anti-revolutionary political thinking in its view of history. It is not an overstatement to say that the dangerous spirit of historicism permeates all of modern reflection on human society. In view of its vast influence, it is extremely important to observe once again that even though one may try to limit historicism to a view of temporal reality, historicism takes root only when the creation motive of divine revelation loses its hold upon one's worldview. Academic training or the lack of it are irrelevant here. Historicism is more than a philosophical theory. It belongs to the "spiritual hosts of wickedness" [Ephesians 6:12] which claim not only our thinking but our whole way of life.

When historicism abandoned the creation motive it made a serious error: it identified the historical *aspect* of reality with *history* in the concrete sense of *what has happened*. Even Groen van Prinsterer appealed to "it is written" and "it has come to pass" as the two key pieces of evidence condemning the idolatrous philosophy of the French Revolution. [62] But "it has happened" may not be equated with the historical *aspect* under which scholarly research concerning what has happened takes place. I can scarcely warn enough against this fundamental error that leads directly into the embrace of historicism. It is a blunder made continually, even by believing thinkers. Moreover, this first concession to historicism has filtered down from scientific theory into the worldview of the average person.

Concrete events like wars, famines, revolts, the rise of new political forms, important discoveries, inventions, and so forth, all belong to concrete reality which in principle functions in *every* aspect, without exception. Indeed, the things of our everyday experience and the various spheres of society – such as the family, the school, and the church – function in every aspect as well. If, however, one identifies the historical aspect with "what has occurred," then one forgets that concrete events display a great many other aspects not historical in character. The result is

that reality is equated with just one of its aspects (the aspect abstracted by the science of history). One then abandons the Christian motive of creation and becomes a historicist. What are the consequences of this stance?

Ask people what they understand by “history.” Their prompt answer will be: whatever has happened in the past. This answer is correct. In the ordinary experience of daily life one does not direct one’s attention to the abstract aspects of reality that are distinguished in a theoretical approach. In ordinary experience, attention is focused on reality’s second, concrete structure: the structure of things, events, and so on. But it is futile to delimit the field of investigation for the science of history in terms of the criterion “what has happened.”

Consider, for example, the following event: yesterday a person smoked a cigar. Today this event belongs to the past. But is it therefore a *historical* event, fit for entry into the annals of history? Of course not. And yet, closer reflection reveals that this event does have a historical aspect. In the Middle Ages people did not smoke. The introduction and popularization of tobacco in western culture was certainly an event of historical significance. One’s own activity of smoking takes place in a historical context of culture, and one cannot ignore the introduction and establishment of this means of enjoyment in our culture. Although the event of smoking displays a historical aspect when contrasted with medieval means of pleasure, yet the event itself is not characterized *typically* by its historical aspect. Other events, by contrast, are typically historical, such as the French Revolution and the capitulation of Japan and Germany in the last world war. Typically historical events act *formatively* in world history.

Surely, the contrast between different kinds of events is known [63] implicitly in ordinary (non-theoretical) experience. No one will say that smoking a cigar is a typically historical event. Nor will one consider a natural event like a rockslide or a flood a historical event as such. Such occurrences become historically significant only in connection with their effects on human culture.

It is imperative, therefore, that we do not identify the historical aspect of reality with the concrete events which function in it and which display all the other aspects that God gave reality in his creation order. The historical aspect must be distinguished from the aspects of organic life, emotional feeling, logical distinction, and so forth. The basis for this distinction is not *what* occurs within the historical aspect but *how* something occurs in it. The primary concern of the historian, therefore, is to grasp the core of the historical *mode* of concrete events. The historian needs a criterion for distinguishing the historical aspect of reality from the other aspects. Historicism lacks such a criterion, since in its view the historical aspect and the whole of reality are one and the same.

The current criteria for carrying through this distinction are completely useless. If, for instance, one argues that the science of history is the science of becoming or development, then one forgets that the natural sciences also deal with becoming and development. When one acknowledges both organic development and historical development, then the cardinal question is this: what is the specifically *historical* character of a developmental process? Certainly, the organic development from the seed to the full grown plant or from the embryo to the mature animal is not the kind of development that concerns the science of history.

What then is the core or nucleus of the historical aspect of reality? Whoever grasps it correctly cannot fall prey to the view of historicism any longer. But it is understood only when the creation motive of Word-revelation intrinsically governs one's view of reality, for then historicism has lost its hold upon one's thought. The nucleus of the historical aspect, that which guarantees its proper nature and irreducibility, is the *cultural* way of being. Cultural activity always consists in giving form to material in free control over the material. It consists in giving form according to a free design.

Culturally formative activity is different from the activity by which lasting forms arise in nature. The marvelous rock crystals, the honeycomb, the spider's web, and so on, are not cultural forms because they do not originate through the free design and free control of a material. They arise through the natural processes and instincts that move according to fixed, unchangeable schemes and laws.

The story of creation itself indicates that the cultural mode of formative activity is grounded in God's creation order. God immediately gave humankind the great cultural mandate: subdue the earth and have dominion [64] over it. God placed this great cultural command in the midst of the other creational ordinances. It touches only the historical aspect of creation that is subject to cultural development.

The cultural way of being is the way reality reveals itself in its historical aspect. Usually the term *culture* refers to whatever owes its existence to human formation in contrast to whatever develops in "nature." It is then forgotten that the cultural way of being is no more than an aspect of concrete things and events, and that a so-called cultural object such as a chair also functions in the aspects of reality that are not themselves cultural in character.¹

The Greek culture religion deified the cultural, the nuclear moment of the historical aspect. Its form motive stood in religious antithesis to the matter motive, which deified an eternal flux of life. Still, in the Greek form motive one did not find the typically relativistic and dynamic mo-

¹ *General Editor's note:* Here Dooyeweerd once again mentions the various aspects of reality.

ments that confront us in modern historicism. Their absence was due to the fact that in the Greek form motive the cultural way of being was completely detached from the moment of development, which binds the historical aspect to the organic aspect. Since in the religious ground-motive of Greek antiquity the culture religion was absolutely antithetical to the old religions of the flux of life, the cultural form motive had to sever all ties with the motive of the older religions. Thus, for instance, the form motive led Greek thought to the belief in an eternal, immutable world of forms, a world completely separate from the earthly stream of life. In the religion of the Olympian gods this belief assumed a form that appealed to the imagination of the people; the Olympian gods were invisible, immortal, brilliant gods of form. They were personifications of the various cultural powers who lived far beyond the fate of mortals.

Modern historicism, by contrast, is dominated by the religious ground-motive of humanism (nature and freedom). It views culture in terms of unending historical development, rejecting all the constant, creational structures that make this development possible. Historicism rejects the constant structure of the historical aspect which contains the divine decrees for historical development. As a result it has no reliable standard for distinguishing reactionary and progressive tendencies in historical development. It faces the problems of the “new age” without principles, without criteria. Because of its historicistic and relativistic view of life, the slogans with which it battled national socialism and fascism had no reliable value. The same holds with equal force for the slogans “democracy,” “the rights of individuals,” “law and order,” and “freedom.”

At the same time we must acknowledge that anti-revolutionary thought also revealed its weak spot in its conception of history in particular. Certainly, the scriptural basis of its position – It is written! – provided a powerful [65] weapon against historicism. Nevertheless, as we saw before, anti-revolutionary thought allied itself with humanistic historicism in its view of history. It was inevitable that this alignment would be avenged precisely in the present phase of world history: today the historicistic spirit of the “new age” can be combated effectively only if confronted in the arena of historical development itself. This encounter requires the complete spiritual armor of the Christian religion.

In my critique I do not mean to denounce the great work of Stahl and Groen van Prinsterer. My critique has a constructive aim. It is offered in a spirit of deep gratitude for the labors of these Christian leaders and thinkers. But their work can be continued in their spirit only if the scriptural ground-motive of the *Reformation* continues to operate in it. If weaknesses in their spiritual heritage become apparent, they must be cut away without hesitation. Today’s primary need is a deeper scriptural insight into the relation between the creational principle of sphere sovereignty

and historical development. Today our culture needs clarity with respect to the ordinances that God established for historical development in creation. Therefore those who become impatient may grant us the opportunity to dedicate more space to these fundamental issues.

Cultural Power

The core or nucleus of the historical aspect of reality is the *cultural* way of being. The cultural mode of an activity consists in control over material by formation according to a free design. This free control applies to both persons and things, although the former is primary. Free control reveals itself in the historical formation of *power*. Without personal power a discovery or invention that aims at controlling “nature” cannot be historically *formative*. For example, the great Italian artist of the early Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci, was also a great scientist. It was said he already knew how to construct an airplane. But this knowledge went with him to the grave. It remained his private property. If he had gained support for his invention, it could have had a formative effect on world history. For that, Leonardo needed historical power formation and historical influence, which he had as an artist but not as an inventor.

What then is the nature of the personal power that equips the genuine molder of history? The most distorted notions present themselves with respect to this question, also in Christian circles. Many equate power with brute force. Today many Christians, misled by this identification, consider it un-Christian to strive for the consolidation of power in organizations that aim at applying Christian principles to society. They believe that power may play no part among Christians. Especially theologians in Barth’s circle – I am thinking of Emil [66] Brunner’s book *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen* – view the state as a half-demonic being because of its organization of power.¹ Christians may speak of love and justice with an unburdened conscience, but as soon as power comes into their purview they have probably lent their ears to the devil.

Such opinions indicate that the creation motive of the Christian religion has retreated from the worldview of these Christians. As a result, these Christians can no longer understand humankind’s fall and redemption through Jesus Christ in its full scriptural significance. The unbiblical impact of their view becomes apparent when we recall that God reveals himself as the Creator in the original fullness of power. God is almighty. At creation God charged humankind with the cultural mandate: subdue the earth and have dominion over it. Throughout history God reveals himself as the Almighty.

Because of the fall, the position of power to which God called humankind in the development of culture became directed toward apostasy. But

¹ Emil Brunner. *The Divine Imperative*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1947).