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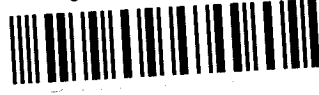
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Herbert Butterfield:

Christian Historian as Creative Critic

LEONARD LIGGIO

HERBERT BUTTERFIELD, Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge, is generally recognized as the leading British historian whose writings reflect a Christian attitude. While Butterfield's application of such an attitude to the methodology of history and to the writing of British political history is familiar, its application to international relations and to the history of diplomacy remains unknown to historians and to the educated public. Butterfield's views are scattered throughout his books on a variety of historical subjects, but, within his works certain topics and themes recur, allowing for the present investigation of his position on these questions.

Professor Butterfield has devoted much of his career to the study of historiography. This has led him to criticize what he refers to as "official history," the interpretation of foreign relations in a sense which would be favorable to a particular government and the interpretation of internal developments in a sense which would be favorable to the dominant world-view within one's society. Official history has its roots in "the arrogance of the modern pagan mythology of righteousness." The modern state and its historians have reverted to the legalism and Pharisaism which assumes "the primeval thesis: 'We are the righteous

ones and the enemy are wicked.'" Official history imagines that

masses of men on the one side have freely opted for wickedness, while on the other side there is a completely righteous party, whose virtue is superior to conditioning circumstances. The reasons for suspecting such a diagram of the situation are greatly multiplied if the ethical judgment is entangled with a political one—if, for example, the wickedness is charged against a rival political party, or imputed to another nation just at the moment when, for reasons of power politics, that nation is due to stand as the potential enemy in any case."

Lacking the urbanity and the charity of Christianity, official history plunges into the pseudo-moral judgments which the modern state, by its nature, passes upon other states and which the dominant intellectual position passes upon what lies outside the mainstream. "In any case, in the world of pseudo-moral judgments there is generally a tendency on the one hand to avoid the higher regions of moral reflection and on the other hand to make moral issues out of what are not really moral issues at all." Interacting with this myth-making has been what Butterfield refers to as an attitude of fear and suspicion. They are "not merely facts in the story, standing on a level with a lot of other factors. They give a certain quality to human life

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Leonard Liggio is an historian living in New York City.

in general, condition the nature of politics, and imprint their character on diplomacy and foreign policy."

Butterfield indicates that the historian who is a Christian is obliged to assume a position in sharp contrast to the "pagan righteousness-myth" which is basic to official history. Not only may the Christian not judge others, but he must also make a special effort to appreciate and understand the positions of other peoples and other governments or of elements which stand outside the intellectually dominant framework. Thus, "the proper study of history requires a certain giving of ourselves—requires, in fact, that we shall do something with our personalities. What society needs is every possible variation and extension of the art of putting one's self—actually feeling one's self—in the other person's place." Further, the Christian, since he is obliged to be aware of his own personality, must be made conscious of the role of fear in human activity, which it is so natural to overlook, and must "recapture the fear, and the attendant high pressure, which so greatly affect the actions of men and the policy of governments." "Yet . . . the historian, surveying the past (like the statesman surveying rival powers in his own contemporary world), is apt to do less than justice to the part played by fear in politics, at any rate so far as concerns governments other than his own." In the face of the complete development in the twentieth century of the righteousness-myth and the domination of fear, the historian who is a Christian must make a creative response to "the real test of moral courage: namely, the exposure and the condemnation of our own sins as a nation and an empire."

The strength of official history lies in three sources: the increasing influence of governments, the uncritical acceptance of authorities, and the nature of historical writing itself. The official historians are not merely the historians who work directly for the government or for a political interest, or even "that new class of so-called 'independent historians' who have first to submit their scripts to the check or censorship," directly or indirectly, of some government

agent. There are also those historians who are connected with government or party through friendships and similar backgrounds. Butterfield believes "that nothing could be more subtle than the influence upon historians of admission to the charmed circle," within which a certain "auto-censorship" occurs. Even beyond that circle "a well-run State needs no heavy-handed censorship, for it binds the historian with soft charms and with subtle, comfortable chains." Since "the relations of a government with historical study are on a different footing from those which exist in the case of any of the other sciences, it is necessary for the outside student, therefore, always to be on his guard." Where freedom in the expression of thought exists, an independent science of history, an academic history, should develop standing over against the dominant political or intellectual position, but "such an independent science of history would always tend to find the dice loaded against it for the time being."

Butterfield feels that the purposes of official history are served by the tendency that "the reading of history has become less critical than it once was, the reviewing of books less scientific, and the faith in accepted 'authorities' more unthinking." Specialization has narrowed the range from which effective criticism can emerge and might result in the formation of a compact body of major historians who, from the nature of the situation, would become the official historians. Butterfield states:

The tendency to look for an historian who will serve as an "authority" is one which seems to have increased during my lifetime, though history is a realm in which trust is the enemy of truth . . . I am not sure that the professionalizing of history has not resulted in the unconscious development of authoritarian prejudices among the professionals themselves; and it could happen that by 1984, if readers are not their own critics, a whole field of study might become the monopoly of a group or party, all reviewing one another and standing shoulder to shoulder in order to stifle the discrepant idea, the new intellectual system, or the warning voice of the skeptic.

Unlike mathematics which begins with the simplest things and proceeds in turn to the more complex, history starts with the studying of the most complex things, of broad generalizations, with the result that "the mere reading of history, the mere process of accumulating more information in this field, does not necessarily give training to a mind that was initially diffuse." Rather, it initiates "all kinds of generalizations, formulas, nicknames and analogies which answer to men's wishful thinking; and these come into currency without having to be submitted to any very methodical kind of test." These broad generalizations are the result of the abridgment of history which the necessities of teaching or of simple expression in conversation and in writing often seem to require. Butterfield does not think that it is a coincidence that this abridgment has worked to the advantage of official history, since "the total result of this method is to impose a certain form upon the whole historical story, and to produce a scheme of general history which is bound to converge beautifully upon the present—all demonstrating throughout the ages the working of an obvious principle of progress." Abridgment tends to make our present political system or our country an absolute and imparts an impression of the inevitability of the existing system or of a war, since it neglects the alternatives which exist at each point and which indicate the relativity of the existing political system or the foreign policy of our country.

BUTTERFIELD SUGGESTS that modern international relations represents the "tragic element in human conflict," in which the central fact "is a certain predicament, a certain situation that contains the elements of conflict irrespective of any special wickedness in any of the parties concerned." "What is required," he goes on, "is that we should stretch our imagination to the point of envisaging this particular international predicament in a purer form than either it or anything else ever exists in history." Such an abstraction of the irreducible

dilemma would postulate two groups of states each locked inside its system of righteousness, each moved by reasonable national self-interest, each desirous of avoiding a war, but each fearful, each desperately unsure about the intentions of the other party.

Suppose you have such a situation, and then one party to the predicament becomes over-exasperated and makes too willful a decision; suppose in particular that he does it because he thinks that somebody must take a strong line at last; and we will say that he even intends to bluff, but the bluff does not come off and so a greater war is brought about.

The origin lies in the predicament and not in the action of the man. Because the predicament is irreducible, the mind seeks an answer elsewhere, such as charges that the enemy is unrighteous. The diplomacy of righteousness says that this predicament does not exist, or, which is to them the same thing, that it should not exist. But the fundamental problem exists irrespective of the morality or ideology of each side.

In the midst of the predicament which Butterfield describes, it is difficult for people to conceive how two mutually hostile systems can achieve a relaxation of tension. It appears outside the range of possibility. But, Butterfield tells us, it would be wrong to rule out this possibility in advance because there have been similar irreducible conflicts in the past where it was possible to achieve a relaxation of absolute deadlocks. A function of the historian in such a period of crisis is to methodically analyze other periods of history which have achieved a relaxation of tension—a *detente*. Butterfield believes that the wars of religion "provide perhaps the closest analogy to the conflicts of the twentieth century," and that the Reformation period "presents the classical example of extreme tension followed by ultimate *detente*." He recalls that the conflict of that period seems strange to us because its underlying assumptions are not understood today, having lost their importance in the face of the tensions which the assumptions produced. The possibility of religious toleration was not realized, and

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"above all, it was unthinkable that two forms of the Christian religion could co-exist within a given country." But, once the positions of stability which arose from the predicament were achieved, there was a tendency for people to actively desire its continuation. People began to work at those elements which would maintain that stability—acceptance of the principle of toleration which would transpose the conflict into the realm of persuasion, and the conduct of international relations in a way conducive to international order.

Butterfield is convinced that the historian who is a Christian is especially able to contribute to the analysis and understanding of international relations because he is "more interested in the processes and patterns of long-term history, in the principles that underlie foreign policy, in the ethical issues involved (particularly as they concern the Christian), and in the role of Christianity during an epoch of global revolution." In the first place, the role of the Christian in studying international affairs is enhanced by the fact that a certain amount of worldly wisdom has gathered around the Christian tradition and stands as a part of European civilization, especially of the tradition of European diplomacy. Since much of this wisdom has been secularized in its absorption into European civilization, there has been a tendency to lose sight of some of the Christian attitudes upon which they are based. As a result, the Christian can serve as a guardian of the elements of continuity in Western civilization and can prevent inflexible interpretations of them by the secular world which is unfamiliar with the underlying Christian attitudes. Since "Christianity in its essence is a risky religion, packed with the kind of ethical implications that are dangerous to *status quo's*, established regimes, and reigning systems," these Christian attitudes are capable of contributing to a breakthrough of the conventional framework of contemporary thinking on foreign affairs. The truths of Christianity are conducive to independence in thought and place the Christian in a position to achieve new perspectives and, by "not

turning any mundane programme or temporal ideal into the absolute of absolutes—the Christian has it in his power to be more flexible in respect to all subordinate matters." The realization that Christ "calls men to constant self-criticism" and that Christians must confess themselves to be sinners requires Christians not to "assume too easily that their morality is identical with that of the political world in general." The Christian has principles—"the treatment of love, the insistence on humility, the attitude to human personality and the doctrine of sin . . . which can rescue him from the blindness of mere partisanship" and can give him a genuine understanding of the views of another person, group or country. Butterfield considers the Christian capable of contributing to international relations "those forms of intellectual explorations which are accessible only to men in a certain frame of mind, to human beings in love, human beings willing to make fools of themselves for love."

THE CHRISTIAN is alive to the failure of pacifism, militarism, the maintenance of the *status quo* or world government to solve the tragic predicament, and is able to move in directions which will be immediately more productive. While Butterfield agrees "that passive suffering and the willingness to be a martyr seem ultimately to move the world more than the resolution which meets force with force," and that eventually "the voluntary suffering of the pacifist might be the only lantern for the re-discovery of even the things which we call human values," he disagrees with those who withdraw their country from international affairs through complete unilateral disarmament. It would be wrong for pacifists to seek to impose such a disarmament on their fellow-citizens so long as those citizens do not impose on them contributions to armaments expenditures. In any case, whenever true pacifism emerges, Butterfield presumes "that Christians would protect it in vindication of conscience, and guard it as the kind of treasure which keeps its

value when all prudential calculations fail." Butterfield suggests that the best way in which a Christian can mitigate the effectiveness of power and limit its role in history is by that spiritual and intellectual influence which, "quietly penetrating free minds, acts as the leaven which leavens the whole lump."

Self-satisfied reliance upon a strong defense posture is not conducive to peace. Fear of our weapons by a prospective enemy will not maintain peace because "it is fear more than anything else which is the cause of war. Until very recently we ourselves had not lost the realization of the fact that mounting armaments, because they intensified fear and poisoned human relations, operated rather to provoke war than to prevent it." Much thought must be placed upon matters over and above the question of self-defense, which is something which may be pushed too far, as Butterfield indicates a supreme leader of Christianity has suggested. The paganism at the root of the "war for righteousness" has led to the psychology of total war. "The Christian doctrine of love, however, does have one important consequence which goes to the root of this type of superstition; for it carries the implication that war as a mere holocaust—war as a useless demonstration against sin—would be absolutely inexcusable."

In relation to those who would use the hydrogen bomb to secure justice, extend liberty or preserve Western civilization, Butterfield thinks that it should be clear that "the destructiveness which some people are now prepared to contemplate is not to be justified for the sake of any conceivable mundane object, any purported religious claim or supramundane purpose, or any virtue that one system of organization can possess against another." When faced with

a question of a war which would destroy mankind, or in which the effects of victory would be the same as the effects of defeat—then those people who argue that even such a war must be fought, that mankind must put itself on the altar, that we must destroy everything for a so-called righteousness of this particular sort, are not following either

Christian charity or the ordinances of Providence. What they are following is a pagan myth of righteousness; they are sacrificing mankind to the daemonic forces. In fact, there is an essential conflict, as there was in the Gospels, between Christian charity and another view of righteousness which survives from ancient dark mythologies.

The contemporary confusion of Christian with pagan elements has resulted in "a more high-powered mischief than either of the attitudes when taken separately; the corruption of the best becomes worse than anything else." Butterfield proposes that the countries who stand in direct descent from Christian civilization should take the initiative to resolve not to use or further manufacture such weapons, notwithstanding that this resolution will not be believed.

There is so great risk in having the hydrogen bomb that there can hardly be greater risk if we unplug the whole system, and if our governments refuse to have anything to do with the weapon. Even if there were, the radical difference in the quality of these risks would cancel it.

Since 1919, when the victorious Western powers systematized the international situation in such a way that any act to revise it or re-establish just relationships could be characterized as "aggression," the defense of the *status quo* has become the major means of increasing the role and scope of war. The flexibility which should be natural to the Christian in relation to mere temporal arrangements has special reference to the problems arising from the territorial and imperial *status quo*. Butterfield thinks that it is incumbent upon Christians that they realize that in international affairs, as in other aspects of life, one may share a partial responsibility for what may seem like the sins of others.

There are a number of ways in which we ourselves may provide aggression, or may so behave that we give occasion for sin. As defenders of the existing order of things, we may be committing a crime if we disdain protests and appeals from states which at the moment are not backed by power.

Dr. Butterfield indicates that in the nineteenth century statesmen recognized that responsibility for desperate resorts to violence must be attached to those who, allowing no real means of redress, strongly defend the *status quo*, and the great Western powers especially objected even to the use of international machinery to interfere with the revision of treaties or with revolutions. But, although the formation of international organizations since 1919 has given the appearance of the establishment of machinery to achieve equal justice, the real result has been "that we have devised no satisfactory machinery for the peaceful revision of the *status quo*. The new machinery tended to freeze this more definitely than the old had been able to do." The tendency of these international organizations has been the idealistic attempt to remove the unpleasant aspects of power politics, while the great powers continue to enjoy, unidealistically, the benefits acquired in the past centuries by power politics. These unjust benefits have been covered with the same cloak of international law which is supposed to bring harmony to international relations. Since the justice of revisionist demands can be screened by legalisms, "it is easier for some governments to be virtuous than for others, because the course of virtue happens to coincide with the requirements of self-interest."

AT THE BASIS of this recent situation has been the growth of legalism in international affairs and the increase of lawyers in international negotiations. This development is not without relation to the fact that recent international relations have been characterized by a legalistic mood of righteousness, and it is dangerous because "the legal mind is liable to be too rigid in the acts of judgment required." "Because there has been a tendency to take refuge in legalism, it would seem that those who desire revision can always be made to appear as aggressors." But, as Butterfield indicates, the so-called aggressor "may only be conscious of protesting against established injustices such as the other powers (and,

even in recent decades, the League of Nations itself) had often been prepared to leave untouched, out of regard for vested interests."

Under these circumstances, Butterfield thinks that it is necessary to recall the role which violence and the threat of violence played in traditional diplomacy: "to produce those marginal rectifications in the system which the system had been unable to achieve by its own automatic apparatus." In the twentieth century, the system has become even less automatic, much more frozen. "In the imperfect state of our international order, it is clear that it requires an act of violence to secure that a topic is in any effective sense put on the agenda at all." Even readiness to negotiate on the part of the possessing powers does not exclude the necessity of using those acts which we have associated with force and aggression, because once a topic is on the agenda there is no reason to concede anything in negotiations. Thus, "force is needed to jerk our attention (or the attention of the world) to the need for change in the *status quo*."

If, therefore, the Western powers have had to retreat after a violent demonstration or before the threat of violence, we ought not to regard this as necessarily a reverse or a cause of shame. It is rather a proof that, once we have been stung to attention, we are ready to listen to justice or make a concession to reasonableness.

Butterfield rejects the view that international organizations or a world government are the solution to the tragic predicament. Reference to an international conference does not solve the problem, it merely changes its position.

Where the conflict is really a cut-throat one it seems to me that the conference method does not put an end to the predicament but merely changes the locality and the setting of it. The whole method is liable to break down if either the Communists or the non-Communists can be fairly sure in advance that on critical issues the other party is going to have the majority.

Even neglecting the fact that the long-run tendency of world government would

be to become frozen and to limit human freedom or that its misjudgment could universalize the disaster, such a system cannot make the world immune from total war. Butterfield recalls that the most terrible instance of such a war before 1914 was a conflict between one half of the United States and the other. Even should we have a world-state, civil wars would still be possibilities. Attempting to control and conceal conflicts, rather than to relax them, a world government is most likely to become an agency for aggrandizement of one set of interests against another.

In the realm of persuasion which can replace the predicament of conflict, the role of the Christian will increase in importance. In such a period, the missionary spirit of Christianity will be a vital counter-balance to the missionary spirit of Marxism. Under such conditions Butterfield suggests that it is important for Christians to realize what it is that they are confronting. Much of the ideological impact which Communism can make derives from elements which are essentially Western. Just as its anti-religious elements comes from the West so also do the more productive elements. The essentially Western character of Marxism means that it is performing a service of Westernizing large portions of the world "more radically in a few decades than Western Europe has managed to do in the course of centuries." Butterfield emphasizes the importance of knowing to what degree the evils which we face at the present time are due to heresies from an original liberalism which characterizes both the Marxist and the democratic

systems. He wonders if Communism, due to its Western origins,

does not possess colossal potentialities for future liberty—a liberty that we must not expect to be achieved before an international *detente* has made it more possible to have a relaxation at home. . . . all systems are going to move in the direction of liberty, if only somebody will open a window so that the world can breathe a more relaxed air and we can end the dominion of fear. If, however, we are unable to achieve this, the very measures which we are taking to preserve liberty in the world are bound to lead to the loss of liberty even in the regions that most prize it. They are bound—if we go on intensifying them—to make us become, in fact, more and more like the thing we are opposing.

It may be a prejudice of mine, but I wonder whether Christians, if they could disentangle their minds from the conventional mundane systems that constrict them, might not within a decade contribute something creative to this deeper cause of human understanding.

One may conclude by wondering whether Butterfield has not gone far in fulfilling his own "prejudice."

The works of Herbert Butterfield which relate most directly to the topics discussed in this article are: *Christianity and History*, (1949); *History and Human Relations*, (1951); *Christianity in European History*, (1952); *Christianity, Diplomacy and War*, (1953); *International Conflict in the Twentieth Century, a Christian View*, (1960).