ESCAPE FROM HISTORY II:
Follow-up to Interpretive Review of and Commentary on Mircea Eliade

The Outlook article, entitled “Escape from History I” (Prequel 1997.1), stimulated much reflection, raised a few “eyebrows,” and led to a number of provocative questions. All the responses were helpful. Some were constructive. Others seemed skeptical. For example, we were asked, “What are you really getting at?” “What’s the big deal?” “Why make an issue of history?” These questions reminded us of Nietzsche (1844-1900), who declared that “History is nothing more than belief in . . . falsehood.”¹ Or Augustine Birell (1850-1933), who referred to “That great dust heap called ‘history’.”² Or Henry Ford (1863-1947), who observed that “History is more or less bunk.”³ Or the novel, Ulysses, by James Joyce (1882-1941), who had one of his characters state that “History . . . is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.”⁴

In response, we repeat the premise that history is the only stage for conscious existence, for ethical choice and freedom, and for meaning, purpose and value. Thus, to reject history is to reject human reality. It is to rob mankind of its true, “human” destiny.

Rejection of History

The rejection of history leads to three tragic conclusions:

1. Rejection and Death. The only certain way to permanently escape from history is to demand extinction. Those who irrevocably insist on rejecting human reality and returning to the lost “paradise of animality”⁵ and its consequent “nothingness” are free to do so. God respects the premeditated, considered wishes of man (male and female). To adamantly demand escape from conscious existence with ethical choice and freedom, with human meaning,
While Creation is not yet finished, it is not expendable. It is not contingent. It is not an accident.
As Martin Buber so presciently recognized, “In the beginning . . . was relationship.”

Implications of Historical Reality

What are some implications of the premise that human history is the fundamental reality? Briefly:

bodies with their attractions and repulsions, of nonliving and living entities. Modern science recognizes that space and time are the irreducible foundation of the universe. Thus, to reject history is to reject the created order itself. It is to consign Creation to the dust heap, to the dunghill, to the profane, the fallen and the demonic.

In the face of this rejection of Creation, we affirm that the created order is not profane, fallen or demonic. While Creation is not yet finished, it is not expendable. It is not contingent. It is not an accident. We also contend that the created order is not simply the cage for an imprisoned god or internal divinity. This universe has infinite possibilities yet to be explored!

c. For man to reject history is not only to deny himself and the created order, of which he is composed. To reject history is to reject God himself. God alone is the Architect and Builder of the created order. In the “beginning” God moved from the isolation of his own “self-existence” to the enormous potential of “self-limitation.” By creating the universe of space and time, God made room for that which is not himself. This act of self-limitation was an act of love, of giving, of sharing. Paradoxically, such self-limitation does not reduce possibilities. It creates possibilities! God’s initial self-limitation inaugurated the infinite possibilities of relationship. As Martin Buber so presciently recognized, “In the beginning . . . was relationship.”

God is not static Being. He is dynamic Becoming. Once God had brought forth the created order out of nothing (creatio ex nihilo), he continued his work of creation (creatio continua). This gave God himself the opportunity to further his self-limitation through a covenantal relationship with his chosen people (Israel). A covenant, compact or contract cannot exist with only one party (cf. Galatians 3:20). There must be recognized, individual parties to the agreement. The divine self-limitation of covenant further expanded the possibilities for both parties — God and man. Through covenantal relationship God acted with respect to his own relational personhood and to man’s relational personhood.

But this was not the end of God’s self-limiting love for mankind. In the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4) God acted to become Jesus Christ. In this creation event (creatio ex vetero — creation out of the old) God irrevocably accepted his own eternal self-limitation in order to become the Human One. In an act of unfathomable love God himself “changed” from self-existent deity to relational humanity — within space and time, within history. This anticipated and inaugurated the creative transformation of mankind from predatory animal to true, self-giving, relational humanity. The Human One is even now “among” (cf. Matthew 28:20; Colossians 1:27) us in history, inviting our faith-response to his eternal love.

Implications of Historical Reality

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Escape from History II: Follow-up
1. If human history is the fundamental reality, we must reject the traditional, orthodox view — dating from the early church fathers — that “God became man, that man might become God.” We replace this view with the conviction that “God as self-existent deity became human, that man as predatory animal might become human.”

2. In light of the fundamental reality of human history, we must reject the Gnostic view of a fallen, profane Creation with a fallen, profane history. We replace this view with the contention that Creation is still in progress. As someone has said, “God is not through with us yet.”

3. If human history is the fundamental reality, we must reject the Christ event as being an apocalyptic event which inaugurated the end of history, as Gnostics also would have us believe. Rather, the Christ event was the redemption of history, the further inauguration of an unending history with unfathomable possibilities, meaning, purpose and value. And all this because the Creator himself adopted history for the manifestation of his own reality. As the French philosopher, Ernest Renan, observed, “. . . [T]he whole of history is incomprehensible without . . . Jesus.” In her recent novel, Absolute Truth, Susan Howatch has one of her characters, Anglican Bishop Charles Ashworth, state:

“We are here in order to become. It is the essence of the creative process; it is in the deepest nature of things.”

“I knew I was being called to believe in a creator who never gave up, a creator who suffered alongside his creation, a creator who was driven by ‘an indestructible sort of fidelity’, by an ‘insane sort of hope’ and above all by the most powerful form of creative love to bring order out of chaos and ‘make everything come right’.”

“The creation,’ as St Paul wrote, ‘groaneth and travaileth in pain,’ but nothing worthwhile can be created without blood, sweat and tears, and at least we know that our Creator is alongside us, sharing our suffering and never abandoning that enormous struggle to ‘make everything come right’.”

“I console myself with the knowledge that in every ending there is a new beginning, and that out of death comes redemption, resurrection and renewal.”

“. . . [I]n our mysterious world of being and becoming, death and resurrection are perpetually linked, the present falls away into the past . . . , but the future opens up ahead of us even as the present dies before our eyes.”

“We are here in order to become. It is the essence of the creative process; it is in the deepest nature of things.”

“I sensed the indestructible fidelity, the indescribable devotion and the inexhaustible energy of the creator as he shaped his creation, bringing life out of dead matter, wresting form continually from chaos. Nothing was ever lost . . . nothing was ever
wasted because always, when the work was finally completed, every particle of the created process, seen or unseen, kept or discarded, broken or mended — everything was justified, glorified and redeemed.”

With this conviction comes the unshakable hope that history itself will not be terminated or annihilated. Rather, history will be fully redeemed, fully vindicated, fully transformed, so that the Human One with man, and man with the Human One, might endlessly explore the infinite possibilities of Creation.

Therefore, we accept our Friend (John 15:15), Jesus Christ — You, the Human One; You, who have ineluctably, irreversibly joined history. We respond to You, we choose You, we are determined to be eager witnesses to Your full and ultimate participation in history.

Endnotes

7. Ernest Renan (1823-1892), in Bartlett, Familiar Quotations, p. 593.
9. Ibid., p. 642.
10. Ibid., p. 655.
11. Ibid., p. 660.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 661.