

HISTORY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE IDEA OF HISTORY IN ANTIQUITY

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One of the ways the native human desire for self-knowledge comes to expression is in the desire to understand the past as a unity. The attempt so to understand one's own private past issues in autobiography, the attempt so to understand the common past issues variously in history, philosophy and poetry. In either case, what is required is knowledge of the forces shaping the past. Perhaps no force has exercised a more pervasive and sustained influence upon the actions, emotions, and ideas which define the cultural life of our civilization than has Christianity. And certainly few things have so persistently inspired investigation and reflection as has the relationship between Christianity, as the dominant cultural force in Western civilization after the third century, and that which it superseded, "pagan" or Graeco-Roman culture. The discussion of this relationship is nearly as old as the phenomena with which it is concerned: the earliest formulations of the problem had to do with the conversion of the gentiles and the extent to which Christianity could appropriate the literature and learning of the Greeks and Romans without fear of religious contamination.

A typically modern approach to the problem is to compare Graeco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian ideas in order to bring out the differences between the two cultures, and perhaps, to see how the latter is more spiritually satisfying than the former. An example of this approach is the observation, by now prosaic, of the vast differences between the "personal" God of the Old and New Testaments and the "impersonal" gods of the Greeks and Romans.¹ There are many ideas that might be compared as a way of understanding the relationship between the two cultures, but the idea of history is an especially interesting one for two reasons.

The first reason is that the idea of history seems to play a very important role in modern Western thought. During the Renaissance, history became, for the first time in Western civilization, an independent part of the educational curriculum (for example, Bacon's² division of all human learn-

1 See, for example, Windelband's *History of Philosophy* (New York, 1958), I, 238.

2 *Advancement of Learning*, Bk. II, Part I, para. 1.

ing into History, Poesy, and Philosophy) Since then histories have been written not only with the traditional subject matters of nations and wars, but also with subject matters both wider and narrower Histories have been written of civilizations, institutions, languages, and cultures, of the arts (liberal, fine, mechanical, domestic, and martial), as well as of aesthetics, art-criticism, and taste, of the sciences and technologies, of images, themes, problems, and ideas of schools of thought, of entertainments, sports, and games Reflection on the writing of history has produced a sizable historiographical literature A variety of political and social theories have found in history the evidence both for analyses of prevailing systems and for predictions or prescriptions about the future Metaphysical analyses of the whole course of history have issued in a variety of philosophies and theologies of history, and history has been taken to be the very essence of Christianity, its difference from and superiority to all other religions It is not an exaggeration to say that the idea of history is one of the most influential and important ideas in the modern Western intellectual world³

Second, the idea of history is especially interesting because there is a certain reflexivity in investigating the history of the idea of history — we are breathing down our own necks philosophically For the idea of history is surely involved in historical inquiry and understanding, thus in investigating the idea of history we are also implicitly investigating the activity of historical investigating So from an inquiry into the idea of history in antiquity one may hope to learn something not only about the idea of history itself and the relationship between the Graeco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian cultures in antiquity as a decisive phenomenon in the development of our own intellectual world, but also something about historical research and understanding

The idea of history in antiquity has interested scholars and thinkers for quite some time There is a considerable literature about it, dating at least from the late nineteenth century With minor variations, the following account is accepted throughout this literature⁴ Graeco-Roman culture, with its devotion to realities and truths outside of time and its endemic distrust of change, saw time as a circle, and since the idea of history logically depends upon that of time, history, too, was seen as circular, repetitive, and hence meaningless For if an event happens over and over again, no

3 Hajo Holborn 'Greek and Modern Concepts of History,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 10 (1949), 3

4 Among the host of books and articles that present or accept this account perhaps the best known and most influential are Lucien Laberthonniere, *Le Réalisme chrétien et l'Idealisme grec* [1904] (Paris 1966), Oscar Cullmann, *Christus und die Zeit* (Zurich, 1946) [*Christ et le Temps* (Neuchâtel, 1947)] *Christ and Time The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (Philadelphia, 1950)], and Karl Lowith *Meaning in History* (Chicago, 1957)

one occurrence of it can have more meaning than any other. Thus none of them has any meaning, only the type or form of the event, which is eternal. The pessimism generated by this repetitious, meaningless circularity explains, finally, both the failure of "pagan" culture to satisfy the spiritual needs of man and the consequent decline of the ancient world. Judaeo-Christian thought, on the contrary, affirms both a beginning and an end of time — Creation and Day of Judgment. Time, and with it history, is here understood to be linear and unique. For Christianity, then, there is an end to history in terms of which each individual event, as well as the entire time-line, has meaning.

This, in outline, is the predominant scholarly opinion about the idea of history in antiquity. However, this literature uses an idea of history which is defined beforehand — namely, history as the whole temporal process of the world, or at least of the human world. And then it proceeds *within this context* to examine "pagan" and Christian ideas of history so defined. But since the content is assumed to be the same for the two ideas of history, it would perhaps be more accurate to call these "patterns" or "views" than ideas of history. For they oppose "linear" or "progressive" to "circular" or "cyclic" patterns of history, but it is not doubted that the "history" of which these are alternative patterns is the whole temporal process. They oppose, in other words, different patterns of the same thing. Such a procedure is little likely to reveal what the ancients themselves thought history was if they happened to think that it was something other than the whole temporal process.

Moreover, the whole discussion takes place within the historiographical tradition of an opposition or conflict between Graeco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian culture in late antiquity. This tradition, as the historiographical framework, brings to light a deeper problem with the usual account of the idea of history in antiquity: it is static, non-developmental. The different "ideas" of history are presented as deductions, respectively, from a metaphysical and a theological system understood as complete and unchanging. There is the metaphysical thought of the Greeks and Romans and there is the theology of the Christians. Each has its own starting point and each comes to its own conclusion. And just as the two thought-worlds are taken to be complete and unchanging, so their ideas are taken to be complete and unchanging: the result of no process of development, independent of and opposed to one another.

What is needed is to change the question that is asked: not, "What ideas have people had about (the one stable referent of the term) history?" but rather, "What different referents has the term 'history' had for these different cultures?" This question is more satisfactory for it does not presuppose a lack of development in the content of ideas, but rather begins from the quite real, if too little appreciated, permanence of the terms making up

the intellectual vocabulary of the Western tradition.⁵ As Kurt von Fritz pointed out thirty years ago,⁶ the history of Greek intellectual terms is of interest because these terms still comprise the heart of our intellectual vocabulary and because a knowledge of their development will clarify persistent problems by disclosing where, when, and in what context the terms acquired significations which made for confusions about them.

An examination of the uses of the ancient Greek words ἱστορεῖν, ἱστορία, and ἱστορικός, and their ancestor, ἵστωρ,⁷ and the ancient Latin words *historia* and *historicus* will reveal what the term "history," in its various linguistic forms, was taken to mean.⁸ This, properly speaking, is what "history" was thought to be in antiquity, and this, therefore, should be the primary focus for explicating the idea of history in antiquity. Secondly, an examination of such related terms as ΤΑ ΠΡΟΓΕΓΟΝΑΤΑ and *res gestae* and of political, religious, and philosophical attitudes toward the past would provide a more complete picture of the ancient idea of history, and, in particular, would enable us to see what, if anything, the ancients thought about the especially modern use of "history" as referring to the whole temporal process. I hope to address myself to these questions in a subsequent paper. Because this paper deliberately rejects an a priori definition of history as "the whole temporal process" in favor of an investigation of what the term "history" actually meant, the English word "history" will be used here only in connection with actual uses of the Greek and Latin words. All textual citations, therefore, will be to uses of HISTOREIN, HISTORIA, *historia*, and the like.

5 Antoine Meillet, *Aperçu d'une histoire de la langue grecque* (Paris, 1965), 269. On this point and on the idea of history in Greek historiography generally, see Arnaldo Momigliano, "Storiografia Graeca," *Rivista Storica Italiana* 87 (1975), 17-46.

6 "Noos and NOEIN in the Homeric Poems," *Classical Philology* 38 (1943), 79. Bruno Snell ("Die Sprache Homers als Ausdruck seiner Gedankenwelt," *Neue Jahrbücher für Antike und Deutsche Bildung* 2 [1939], 393-410) had already defended the analysis of the language as a source for understanding the thought-world of antiquity. The view perhaps has its source in Hegel: "Die ausgedehnte consequente Grammatik ist das Werk des Denkens das seine Kategorien darin bemerklich macht." *Einleitung in die Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte. Samtliche Werke* (Stuttgart, 1928), XI, 100.

7 Henceforth I shall use the English transliterations HISTOREIN, HISTORIA, HISTORIKOS, and HISTOR.

8 Previous studies have limited themselves to one language, one realm of discourse, usually historiography, or one period of time, and generally have not considered the words in the broader context of cultural history. B. Dombart, "Historia," *Archiv für Lateinische Lexicographie und Grammatik* II (Leipzig, 1886), 230-234; Bruno Snell, "Die Ausdrücke für den Begriff des Wissens in der vorplatonischen Philosophie," *Philosophische Untersuchungen* 29 (1924), 1-100; F. Müller, "De 'Historiae' vocabulo atque notione," *Mnemosyne* N S 54 (1926), 234-257; F. Buchsel, article "ἱστορέω (ἱστορία)" in Georg Kittel, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neues Testament* (Stuttgart, 1933); Karl Keuck, *Historia. Geschichte des Wortes und seiner Bedeutungen in der Antike und der romanischen Sprachen* (Lechte, 1934); H. Rupp and O. Koehler, "Historia, Geschichte," *Saeculum* 2 (1951), 627-638.

The ancient word HISTOR either referred to someone who was known for a capacity to "see" clearly which of two conflicting accounts of an emotionally charged matter was correct,⁹ or, used as an adjective, it attributed that capacity to someone.¹⁰ The verb, HISTOREIN, seems to have been derived from HISTOR, and in the Hellenic Age (to the mid-fourth century) it indicated the activity characteristic of the HISTOR, that is, finding out or inquiring the correct account in a case where the matter is both disputed and emotionally charged.¹¹ The noun, HISTORIA seems coeval with HISTORIN, of far less frequent occurrence in the Hellenic Age; it indicates an instance of the activity indicated by the verb, an inquiring or an inquiry of that sort.¹² After Herodotus published his account of the Persian Wars under the title HISTORIAI (*Histories*), however, the noun came to indicate the results of such inquiring, and these either written or not.¹³ What underlies these uses is an activity-idea: history as *inquiring* for accurate information about persons, things, or events.

Perhaps because of the authority which the work of Herodotus had already attained,¹⁴ HISTORIA in the Hellenistic Age (ca. 323-31 B.C.) came increasingly to indicate the results of inquiring and these especially as a written account concerned with events, HISTORIA as a literary genre.¹⁵ At the same time, HISTOREIN acquired the meaning "to record, report, or relate" some information, a meaning evidently derived from HISTORIA as a written account,¹⁶ and this newer meaning began to supplant the older. Moreover, the noun was more frequently used than the verb. Thus even in uses of the verb, the product has begun to dominate the activity, and a gap has begun to appear between the product *per se*, the facts or information, and the product in writing. What appears in the uses of the Greek words appears also in the uses of the Latin transliteration *historia*: a modal distinction between an accurate factual account about events, persons, or things¹⁷ and such an account especially about events and in writing.¹⁸ Both

9 *Iliad* 18.499-501, 23.485-487; Hesiod *Erga* 792.

10 *Hymn* *Hom.* 32.2.

11 Democritus B299D-K [Clem. *Strom.* 1.15, 69]; Aesch. *Prom.* 632, *Eum.* 455, Soph. *O.I.* 1150, 1156, 1484, Eur. *Tro.* 261, Hdt. II.113.1, etc.

12 Hdt. II.99.1, 118.1, 119.3, etc.

13 Hdt. I.1.1, Plato, *Phdr.* 244C-D.

14 Meillet *Aperçu* (3rd ed.) 211.

15 Dion. Hal. *Rhet.* XI.2, *Ep.* II.2-3, Polyb. III.4.8, 57.4, 118.12, IV.28.4, etc.; Chares of Mytilene *apud* Athenaeus XIII.35 [FGrH 125, Fr. 5].

16 Theophr. *Phys. Dox.* Fr. 8 (*Dox. Graec.* 484, 17-18); Antig. Car. (ed. Beckmann) 6, 27, 80, etc.; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* V.17.4, 56.1, etc.; *Ep.* I.4, Polyb. I.37.3, II.16.13-14, 71.2, etc.

17 Plaut. *Bacch.* 158, *Men.* 247, *Trin.* 381, Nep. *Att.* 16.3, *Cato* 3.3, Cicero *Nat. D.* I.31.88, *Fin.* I.7.25, etc.

18 Nep. *Pelop.* 1.1, *Them.* 9.1, Lucil. 612, *Sempr. Assell.* *Fr.* 1 and 2 (ed. Peter), Cic. *Leg.* I.2.5-7, 3.9, *Brut.* 64, 228, *Orat.* XI.37, *Ad Att.* XIV.14.5.

in Greek and in Latin the dominant idea in the Hellenistic Age was that of the account in writing, history as a literary genre with its rules and styles, canons of greatness, and political, professional, or moral utility ¹⁹

The changed political conditions and the intensified influence of rhetoric on the educated world produced a relaxation of conceptual boundaries in the Roman Age (31 B C - A D 250). A balance seems to have been restored between the two modes, history as a literary genre and history as an informational account. Both in Greek and in Latin the gods and famous or even ordinary mortals came to be accepted subjects of history and concomitantly the requirement of accuracy or truth declined. Thus one finds a quite new use of history as *story* ²⁰. Moreover, and perhaps representing the interaction between poetry and rhetoric, history as information about past events is used in an apparently collective way, history as *the past* ²¹. In the early Christian literature of the Roman Age, which was mostly in Greek, the usage of *HISTOREIN* and *HISTORIA* is very like that of the non-Christian world. As compared with Hellenic or even Hellenistic times theirs is an idea of history whose limits are relaxed and which includes accounts of the gods as well as accounts in the Old and New Testaments ²². Accuracy or literal truth was not crucial, which suggests that with respect to both Christian and non-Christian matters history was understood for the most part as story. A history in this sense might well have another meaning ²³. The important differences between Christian and non-Christian uses are that the Christians' uses are almost always about matters of religious interest, and that these uses regularly occur in the context of apologetical attacks on the pagan gods and defenses of Christianity.

Non-Christian Greek and Latin usage during the Later Empire (A D 250-450) generally continued the developments of the preceding centuries. The shift away from history as a literary genre to history as an informational account was very marked, and the former became infrequent. The requirement of accuracy or factuality of the account continued on the wane. The Christian usage of the Later Empire revealed the divergence between Eastern and Western Christendom in the differing developments

¹⁹ For a typical comment on rules and styles, see Cic. *De Or.* II 15 62-64, and on utility, *ibid.* II 9 36.

²⁰ Greek: Cass. Dio *Hist.* 72 7 2, Herodian *Hist.* I 11 5, Heracl. *Q. Hom.* (ed. Oelmann) 77, 9-19, etc.; Plut. *Quaest. Graec.* 293B, *Quaest. Rom.* 269A, 278E, *Quaest. conv.* IX 738F, 741A. Latin: Gell. *N. A.* I 8 1, 23 1, XII 4 1. Pliny *Ep.* V 8 1. Sen. *On Anger* III 9 1, Suet. *Rhet.* 3. Tib. 70 3.

²¹ Greek: App. *BCn.* IV 67, *Hist. Pr.* 12, Lucian, *Lapsus* 7, Max. Tyr. *Diss.* 28 6. Latin: Cic. *Rep.* II 18 33, *Div.* I 18 37, *Fin.* II 21 67. Gell. *N. A.* II 2 title, X 16 title. Pliny *N. H.* XI 123, Prop. *Carm.* III 4 10, 22 20.

²² Athenagoras, *pro Christ.* 20, 26, 29, Cleo. *Protr.* II 31 4, 35 3, 36 2, *Strom.* II 4 13, 20 103, V 7 1, Just. *Mart. Apol.* 21, 4, Tert. *Apol.* 15, 4.

²³ Clem. *Strom.* V 6 32 cf. Philo, *Somn.* I 52, *Congr.* 44.

which the idea of history underwent in Greek and Latin. In both languages the term appears most often in two contexts: apology and Biblical exegesis. In both languages history is involved in exegesis because Scriptural accounts or the Scriptures themselves are considered histories.²⁴ These histories, however, are capable of bearing another meaning. Literal exegesis is "according to history," as opposed to various kinds of figurative or spiritual exegesis.²⁵ In the apologetical writings, however, there is a difference between Greek and Latin. The Greek Christians carry on the same use of history in the apologies that characterized the earlier period: namely, history as story.²⁶ But the Latin writers reassert the old requirement of accuracy, distinguish history from fable among accounts of the gods, and argue that the truth about the gods, the histories of them, show them to be utterly unworthy of worship.²⁷ Thus their idea of history, what history indicates to them: is true informational accounts or information about persons, events, and gods, and the relationship between people and their gods, and they even seem to have used *historia* in the collective sense as *the past*, implicitly distinguishing the history of the Chosen People from the history of the non-Christian peoples.²⁸

It is in this last usage that Augustine makes his great innovation. For while his usage is in no essential way different from that of his Christian contemporaries, he makes of that distinction, which they only implied, a basic theme and motive of his *City of God*: the distinction and opposition between the sacred and providential history of the celestial city and the peoples' history of the earthly city.²⁹

It follows that the accepted scholarly account of the idea of history in antiquity is incorrect: using, as it does, a definition utterly alien to antiquity. To begin with, history was not a philosophical problem to the

24. Greek: John Chrys. *Ex in Ps.* 3:1 [PG 55, 35], *Hom. in Matth.* 1, 4 [PG 57, 16]; Orig. *Princ.* 4:1:13, Theophilus, *Autol.* 2, 13, 2, 20-22. Latin: Jerome *Comm. in Dan.* II [PL 25 527], etc. Method. *Symp.* III 9 (Bonwetsch 37:16-19), *Resurr.* I 52:1 [Bonw. 307, 8-12], Theodoret. *In Jerem.* 45 [PG 81:705].

25. Greek: Basil, *Hom. in Hexaem.* II 3 [PG 29, 33], VI 2 [PG 29:120], Orig. *Cels.* I 42, *Princ.* 4:1:9-20. Latin: Filastus. *Haer.* 130:1-3 [CSEL 38, 98], 155:1-2 [CSEL 38, 130], Jerome *Comm. in Matth.* III 21 [PL 26:117], *Comm. in Ezech.* II (on 7:13) *Ep.* 53:8-4, *Hom. Orig. in Luc.* 37 [PL 26:301], Method. *Resurr.* II 25:1 [Bonw. 380:16-19].

26. *Commod. Instr.* 1:6:10-15, Method. *Symp.* 8:4 [Bonw. 86, 12-13].

27. Arnob. *Nat.* 5:8, 5:30-43, 7:46, 7:49. Lact. *Inst. Div.* I 13:8-14:8-10.

28. Cyprian, *Ep.* 75:10 [CSEL 3:816], Jerome *Comm. in Dan.* I (on 4:1a), *Ep.* 60:5:3 [PL 22:592], Lact. *Inst. Div.* 6:6:17.

29. The latter half of *De Civitate Dei* is an extended account of the origin, career, and end of the two cities, as he himself makes clear (*DCD* X 32). To the City of God pertains the *sacra* or *divina historia* (XV 8-9:17, XVI 13, XVII 8, 24), but the peoples (*gentes*) who stand outside the Judaeo-Christian world have their own history, *historia gentium* (X 16, 18; XVI 4-8; XVIII 8, and *Doct. Christ.* II 28:42-43).

Greeks³⁰ or Romans. It is nowhere discussed by the philosophers. It came in for some criticism among the Pre-Socratics,³¹ and Plato's Socrates rejected it as philosophically insufficient because it did not explain the causes,³² the Stoics, Epicureans, and Skeptics scarcely mentioned it, although Cicero often speaks of history as a species of literature.³³ Aristotle said that poetry is more philosophical than history,³⁴ but he also seemed to think that history, in the sense of accurate information about a subject, was useful or necessary as a prerequisite to the properly philosophical enterprise of learning the causes.³⁵ This view survived in the Peripatetic School long after Aristotle's death, and during the renaissance of the school in late antiquity even the Master's résumés of earlier opinions about whatever problem he happened to be considering were called histories by Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius.³⁶ But for all that, history was still not a philosophical problem. And one would not expect it to be on the account given here, for history was not considered an entity or a category of reality such that one might experience difficulty in understanding it, as one might in trying to understand time.

The way in which history was understood was, in the second place, not related by the ancients to the ways in which they understood time. Time did come in for some consideration by philosophers and others, and it is one of Aristotle's categories (in *some* enumerations of them). But if time as the "when" of something posed philosophical problems, time as the medium of history did not. Perhaps this reflects a kind of philosophical naiveté about the logical relationship between the ideas of time and history, but it seems unlikely that this problem would occur to someone who did not think about the category or entity, history, and did not think that history indicated the whole temporal process of a thing. The idea of history, then, was not understood as being dependent upon or derivative from the idea of time. Moreover, there was not a universal Greek view of time as a circle, as is supposed by the usual account.³⁷

30 On this and several other points in the present paper, see M. I. Finley, "Myth, Memory, and History," *History and Theory* 4 (1965), 281-302.

31 Heraclitus B129 [D.L. VIII 6], cf. B40 where history is equated with polymathy.

32 *Phaedo* 96A.

33 *Inv.* I 19 27, *Or.* XI 37, XX 66, *Bru.* 75, 262 and 83, 286, *Top.* 20, 78.

34 *Poetics* 1451a36-b6.

35 *Hist. An.* 491a12, cf. *Rhet.* 1360a37, *Cael.* 298b2, and Pierre Louis "Le Mot *ιστορία* chez Aristote," *Revue de Philologie* 29 (1955), 39-44.

36 Alex. Aph. *Comm. in Metaph.* (CAG Vol. I) 9, 5, 16 18, 23, 12 etc., Themist. *De An. Paraphr.* (CAG Vol. V Pars III) 14, 4-6, so too Philip of Opus *apud* Aetius, *Dox. Gr.* 360^b1-5.

37 See Arnaldo Momigliano, "Time in Ancient Historiography," *History and Theory*, Beiheft 6 (1966) 1-23, reprinted in *Quarto Contributo alla Storia degli Studi Classici* (Rome, 1969), 13-41, and John Callahan *Four Views of Time in Ancient Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948).

If history was not a philosophical problem for the Greeks and Romans it was also not a theological or religious problem for the Christians. It figures in their apologetical and exegetical writings but in neither case are there problems posed which relate to Christian doctrine. History does not figure in the creeds or in the anti-heretical literature in which Christian doctrine was being formulated. Speculative problems were raised and discussed in this early period of Christianity, but history was not one of them. And this is not surprising, since for the Christians as for everyone else, history was an idea of no great cultural importance and not yet of any religious importance.

If history was an idea of no philosophical interest to the Greeks and Romans and of no theological interest to the Christians, neither of them understood history as having a pattern. No Greek or Roman has been found saying that history proceeds in a circle, nor any Christian saying that it is linear. Neither has any Greek or Roman been found to say that it is repetitive nor any Christian to say that it is once and for all. In order for someone to find a pattern in history, history must be taken to be the sort of thing that is capable of exhibiting a pattern. That is, it must be a composite whole made up of parts capable of being organized in a conceivable pattern. That is, history must be understood as the collected temporal career or process of a thing. But no one in antiquity understood history in this way, not the Greeks and Romans, and not the Christians. It might be argued that Augustine comes very near or that he creates the conditions for understanding history in this new way, but this is to read Augustine from the point of view of later tradition.

This brings up another difference between the present account and the received account: no great difference has been found between what history is thought to be in Graeco-Roman culture and what it is thought to be in Judaeo-Christian culture. There seems to be more sameness than difference, more continuity than change. For both, the range of permissible subjects is extended to include the gods and their acts as well as those of notable mortals. For both, the requirement of accuracy is of diminished force, although for apologetical purposes the later Latin Fathers and Augustine return to this expectation. But importantly, neither the Christians nor the "pagans" understand by history the whole career in time of a thing, person or nation as a subsistent entity. Rather than the vast difference and opposition between Judaeo-Christian and Graeco-Roman ideas of history which the usual scholarly account alleges, then, there is substantial agreement and continuity. The older distinction between literary genre and account *per se* survives and is carried down into the modern world.

Thus there is extensive agreement about the idea of history throughout antiquity. There are, however, two new notes to the idea of history which are found in the Christian writings and not elsewhere. The first is that

history is here understood to be capable of bearing a meaning other than the literal one. This note had very wide currency in Christian writings both in Greek and in Latin, and there were disputes about the extent to which Scripture should be read literally, that is, "according to history," rather than figuratively, allegorically, or typically. The second new note, implicit in the later Latin Fathers, but explicit in Augustine's *City of God* is the differentiation between Christian and gentile history. History is different for Jews and Christians from what it is for other peoples. The late sense of history as *the past* with the two new notes that sacred and profane history are different and that history can be the bearer of another meaning, develops into a distinctively modern sense of history as the whole temporal career or process of a thing. The changes are not abrupt or sudden, but gradual and slow.

The two changes, while they are characteristic of Christian writers, are not what one should call theological or religious but rather literary and rhetorical changes. This is indicated by the training and profession of the writers, the kinds of literature in which the changed usage of history is found, and the kind of role played by the idea in these works.

Of the earliest Christian writers, Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Minucius Felix, and Tertullian were brought up in the non-Christian society and given the predominantly rhetorical education characteristic of that age. And all of them, except Clement, practiced the vocation of rhetor before becoming Christians. Both Minucius Felix and Tertullian were practicing lawyers, and the latter even attained some eminence. The Fathers of the later period too were trained rhetors. Among the Greeks, the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa were all not only trained in rhetoric, but also rhetors by profession for some time.³⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus was known as the "Christian Demosthenes" to the Byzantine scholars, and his *Orations* were a subject of commentary down to the sixteenth century. Among the Antiochenes, famed for their literal or "historical" exegesis, Theodore of Mopsuestia was a student of the pagan orator, Libanius, as well as of the Christian Diodorus of Tarsus.³⁹ And Diodorus' other famous pupil was John called Chrysostom, that is, golden-mouthed, for his eloquence from the pulpit which vied with that of Libanius in council.⁴⁰ Among the Latin Fathers, Cyprian, Arnobius, Lactantius, and Augustine, all Africans, were all rhetors by training and profession before turning their talents to the service of Christianity.⁴¹ Lactantius, a pupil of Arnobius, was

38 Berthold Altaner, *Patrology* (New York 1961), 336, 346-351. Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* (Utrecht 1962) III, 204-236, 254.

39 Altaner 370, Quasten, III, 401.

40 Altaner, 373. Quasten, III, 424-425.

41 Altaner 193-205, 208, Quasten, II, 341-383, 392-393.

named professor of rhetoric at Nicomedia by Diocletian, but was forced to resign the office when he became a Christian. Hilary, Ambrose and Jerome, though not professional rhetors, were at least partially so educated. In his famous dream,⁴² Jerome is accused of being more interested in literary than in religious achievement, of being a Ciceronian rather than a Christian. If these famous and influential fathers of the Church are Christians from the standpoint of religion, they are rhetoricians from the standpoint of education, training, and early profession.

Not only the background of the writers, but also the nature of the writings in which we find the changed idea of history points to the influence of rhetoric on the development of the idea. The passages in which the term occurs are found in three kinds of works: apologies, homilies, and commentaries or expositions of Scripture. Apologies and homilies are frankly rhetorical works, written respectively for non-Christians and Christians. They aim at persuasion, not understanding, the enterprise in which the writers are engaged in such works is not inquiry, but exhortation. This is shown not only by the persuasive form in which the works are cast, but also by the reasoning which characterizes them. For these works deal in exclusive alternations, and the reader or hearer is strongly encouraged to choose either God or the Devil, either Salvation or Damnation.

The commentaries and expositions, on the other hand, are attempts to explain the meaning of the Scriptures, especially to explain apparent inconsistencies, immoralities, or falsehoods. They are not exhortations except insofar as the reader is encouraged to find an acceptable reading of the text rather than suppose that the Scriptures are flawed. The widely accepted way of escape from these difficulties was non-literal exegesis of one kind or another, and there is discussion of the proper sort or extent of non-literal exegesis to be employed, but it was *literal* exegesis that was described as "according to history." The origin of Christian non-literal exegesis is usually traced back to the Alexandrian tradition which, through the mediation of Philo, ultimately derived from the non-literal interpretations of Homer's accounts of the gods, as far back as Xenophanes. It should be recalled, however, that textual exegesis was a large part of the standard education of the Greeks and Romans of which the Christian Fathers were products. Although, therefore, the literature of commentary and exposition had a religious motive, the enterprise itself may be seen as literary. There is another kind of early Christian literature, the anti-heretical, which is more concerned with matters of doctrine, for it was usually on matters of doctrine that there was difference of opinion severe enough to warrant separation. In this literature, however, scarcely any use of history is to be found.

42 Ep. 22.29.7 [PL 22.416]

Moreover, the uses themselves are rhetorical and literary. In the apologetical literature, history is continually used to show the inferiority of the popular religion and the superiority of Christianity.⁴³ Disagreement among the histories about Homer showed that they were false and that Homer (that is, Greek culture) was not as old as Moses (that is, Judaeo-Christian culture).⁴⁴ Histories of the gods showed them to have been mortals and unworthy of worship.⁴⁵ Histories of the popular cults showed them to be either ridiculous or reprehensible.⁴⁶ Histories of events showed that the world was no worse off with Christianity than it had been without it.⁴⁷ And, finally, in the *City of God*, the histories of the two cities are said to be different kinds of things. In all of this, history is involved in the polemic, but not in an examination of Christian doctrine. The writers are not, from their own point of view, engaged in an examination of doctrine, but in its defense. The discussions appear theological to the eyes of the modern reader because the terms and ideas utilized for the defense, whether borrowed from the "pagan" culture or devised for the occasion, have become familiar features of the literary terrain of early Christian literature, of patrology, and one loses sight of the essentially controversial nature of the writings.

It is also true of the homiletic and exegetical literature that history is not involved in theological discussion. In these works non-literal exegesis was used for edification, moral exhortation, and explanation of apparent inconsistencies or immoralities, and history indicated the literal level of the texts involved. But while history as the letter or literal level of Scripture here acquires the capacity to be the bearer of some other meaning beyond its *prima facie* meaning, and the sacred, providential history of the Jews and Christians comes to be differentiated from the history of the peoples, the changes are properly speaking literary and rhetorical rather than theological.

It is also worthy of mention that the early Christian history-writing was largely rhetorical, controversial, or polemical. Beginning with Eusebius of Caesarea, the founder of Christian historiography, the historical writings of the Christians were attempts to establish the truth of Christianity, for, as Lynn White has written, "all the historians and their readers would agree that church history was properly and essentially a record of the power of

43 Athanasius, *Incarn Verbi* 50, 1, Clem *Strom* VI 2 16, Tatian, *Or ad Graec* 1, 1, 39, 1.

44 The *locus classicus* for this view is Tatian, *ibid*, 36, 2, see also 31, 4, Clem *Strom* I 37 1-4, Just Mart *Dial* 69, 2, Tert *Apol* 19 7 [PL 1, 388], Theophilus, *Autol* III 23.

45 Athenagoras, *pro Christ* 20, 26 Athanasius, *Or c Gent* 10 1 [PG 25, 21], Just Mart *Apol* 21, 4, 22, 4, Lact *Inst Div* 1 11 61, Tert *Apol* 15, 4, Commodianus, *Instr* 1, 6, 10-15.

46 Athanasius, *Or c Gent* 23 4 [PG 25, 48], Clem *Protr* 3 36 5-6, 19-20, 47 2, 47 6, etc.

47 Arnob *Nat* 1 3, 5 8, Tert *Nat* 1 9 [CSEL 20 73].

God and of the action of God in human affairs."⁴⁸ This task — as distinct from the task of the Greek or Roman writer of history, which was to investigate and relate the facts, to inform — is the task of ecclesiastical historiography throughout the Middle Ages. And it is interesting to note that it was pursuant to this persuasive task, to which history-writing was turned by the early Christian writers, that history-writing first came to rely on extensive use of documentary evidence. What had first been the tool of the Jewish apologetical historian, Josephus, became the tool of the Christians, and thence a regular feature of the discipline called history. Eusebius is famous for this, but it is also characteristic of the less famous church historians, Socrates and Sozomen.⁴⁹

All of these disagreements with the accepted scholarly account may be reduced to two fundamental and negative insights about the development of the idea of history in antiquity. First, the idea of history in antiquity was not an *important* idea, not one of the formative and widely influential ideas either in the Graeco-Roman or in the Judaeo-Christian culture. There are such ideas in both cultures. In the Graeco-Roman culture, nature (*PHYSIS*, *natura*), wisdom (*SOPHIA*, *sapientia*), and the good (*AGATHON*, *bonum*) continue to be objects of inquiry and action throughout antiquity and in all facets of culture. Similarly, the Christians began in the third century an examination of their beliefs, in which the ideas of love (*AGAPÉ*, *caritas*), faith (*PISTIS*, *fides*), and the tri-unity and perfection of God (*THEOS*, *deus*) figured prominently. One might give other lists of the important ideas, there are other matters frequently discussed. And the interrelationships between the two cultures with respect to such ideas are many. Sometimes an idea prominent in Graeco-Roman culture is taken over whole cloth into Judaeo-Christian culture, sometimes an idea originally formulated in Graeco-Roman culture is carried over and reformulated in Judaeo-Christian culture. And there are differences between the two cultures as to the importance attached to various ideas. The idea of God, for example, is found in both cultures. The interpretations given in the two cultures are quite different, but in addition to that, it does not seem to be the case that the Greeks and Romans attached anywhere near as much importance to the idea as did the Jews and Christians. This is not to say that the Greeks and Romans did not have or did not attend to their gods and their religious duties as they conceived them, but rather that they did not experience them as great mysteries, puzzles, or problems to be discussed and analyzed. In the remains of Greek and Roman literature discussions or observations on the nature of the godhead are relatively infrequent and seldom of first-rate

48 "Christian Myth and Christian History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2 (1942): 145.

49 See Arnaldo Momigliano, "Pagan and Christian Historiography in the Fourth Century A.D." in *Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, ed. Momigliano (Oxford, 1963).

importance⁵⁰ And it is a measure of the retrospective misunderstanding of these discussions that they are often excerpted and examined by modern writers as though they were as important to ancient civilization as they are to modern On the other hand, there are ideas which are prominent in Greek and Roman thought but which, carried over into early Christian thought, have little importance Such, for example, is the idea of nature

Given all of these different kinds of relationships between the cultures as regards ideas, and given the prominence which the idea of history has had in Western culture for the past three or four centuries, it is all the more interesting to observe that the idea of history was not an important idea in antiquity History does not pose any theoretical or speculative problems History neither explains anything nor itself needs explanation Indeed, there is an opposition between history and reason or explanation that lasts throughout antiquity (reborn in the Christian opposition between literal or historical and spiritual or rational exegesis) and provides the basis for the continuing rejection of history as philosophically insufficient When history was discussed by the Greeks and Romans, the literary genre was meant and the discussions were carried on by rhetoricians The problems that history posed for them were problems of art, not problems of science or knowledge There was "natural history" and, in the later period, "history of opinions", but history in these uses was just accurate information, the facts, or an account of them Such knowledge as this indicated was knowledge by acquaintance History was discussed by the Christians not directly, but rather in the context of Bible criticism Here history, similarly, was the literal dimension of Scripture, and it was to be understood straightforwardly There was no problem about understanding "according to history" the problems in exegesis had to do with non-literal exegesis The Christians had a history, found in the Scriptures, which served them as their equivalent of the histories of the Greeks and Romans and which they accepted on faith But here too there were no speculative or scientific problems, one needed only to be acquainted with the facts

The second negative insight about the development of the idea of history in antiquity is this the idea of history that has been so important in modern thought is of history as goal-directed, as aiming at something And this idea is found to be entirely lacking in antiquity However, it is lacking *not* because the ancients thought that history was circular and meaningless, as opposed to the Jews and Christians, who thought that it was linear and meaningful, but rather, because in order for there to be patterns of *any* sort found in history, history must first be understood to be the sort of thing that *can exhibit a pattern*⁵¹ That is to say, history must be understood to

⁵⁰ An exception is Lucretius *De Rerum Natura* V 110ff and VI 50ff

⁵¹ See J. G. A. Pocock, "The Origins of Study of the Past: A Comparative Approach," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 4 (1962) 213

indicate the whole temporal process or career of a thing taken collectively. History in this sense is something rather different from the various senses of history that have been examined in the previous discussion. In Greek and Roman and Christian writings alike, history meant an informational account or accurate information about various sorts of things. There was a general distinction between uses in which the form was emphasized and those in which the content was emphasized — that is, between history as a literary genre and history as an informational account. The latter genus came to have some modified senses in later antiquity: an informational account in which accuracy was far less important than entertainment or instruction, history as story, and the information about something or someone taken as a collective whole, history as the past. It is this last sense which most nearly approximates history in the sense that it might exhibit a pattern. But in antiquity and even in the writings of Augustine this does not seem to be the same sort of history. For all of the ancient histories are human productions. Written works called histories are, of course, the products of human art, and history as a literary genre is largely concerned with the rules and styles for producing them. History as informational account is also a human product, both in the earliest sense that it is the result of someone's inquiring and in the later sense that an account of the information about something is possessed by or known to someone, handed down or reported by someone. Here a very great difference between the ancient and modern ideas of history appears. For while in the ancient world there is no history apart from human thought and art, in the modern world there is such history, and it is this to which human thought and art are applied. The difference is between someone giving writing or knowing the history of something, and something *having* a history, which someone might attempt to learn or to communicate. The difference might be described as one of independent existence or subsistence. In modern thought there is history independent of any knower or writer as an aspect or dimension of the subject, thing, person, or nation whose history it is. History thus has become a category of reality, and in that sense a subsistent entity. And just as one may theorize about time, space, and number, so one may theorize about history.

But history was not thought to be this sort of thing in late antiquity or by Augustine. Their usage of history as the past is closely connected to the notion of information or the facts as human productions and possessions, not as possessions of the subjects of the history. Augustine seems to want to talk about the history of the two cities in this later sense as the whole temporal career or process, but he never uses *historia* or any cognate word for this purpose. His words are *cursus*, *excursus*, and *procursus*.⁵² But

⁵² He speaks of the "course (*cursus*) of the most glorious city" (XV 15) and the "course

Augustine's rhetorical and apologetic differentiation between the temporal careers of the two cities and the notion that each has its own beginning, course, and end, provides the starting point for that particular phase in the development of the idea of history from which it emerges as, in one sense, this subsistent entity. So that the later idea of history as a subsistent entity, which is the idea involved in the modern fascination with history, developed from — and *only* developed from — the rhetorical interpretation that Augustine adumbrated in his *City of God*.

I have argued that the development of the idea of history in antiquity cannot be understood as the replacement of a circular by a linear pattern, that the ideas of time and history were not seen as logically related nor discussed in connection with each other, that there was no philosophical interest in history among the Greeks and Romans, nor any theological interest in it among the early Christians, that what changes there were in the idea between the two groups were gradual rather than abrupt and the product of rhetorical rather than philosophical or theological motives and problems, and, in sum, that throughout antiquity history was not an important or formative idea and was not thought to be an entity, not the sort of thing that is capable of exhibiting a pattern.

These conclusions suggest two observations, inversely related to each other, about the ways in which we often go about understanding our past. First, the accepted account of the idea of history, as has already been observed, reflects an accepted account of the relationship between Graeco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian culture. Briefly it is this: that the Graeco-Roman culture and the Judaeo-Christian culture were fundamentally different and opposed. The present inquiry, to the contrary, suggests that there was extensive continuity of ideas and that, at least as regards the ideas which are the tender of communication within the community of users of a language, there was more continuity than change. It seems that the popularity of the accepted account of late antiquity can be traced back to the early Christian apologists themselves, whose stock in trade was the (rhetorical) opposition between Christianity and "paganism," itself a term invented for polemical purposes. But what was for them a political necessity in their struggle for survival against ridicule, slander, or persecution has become for modern thought a pair of distorting glasses through which we tend to look at this part of our common past. The opposition between Judaeo-Christian and Graeco-Roman thought as a pattern for understand-

(*cursus*) of the two cities" (XV 27), of "the origin and career (*excursus*) and final end of the two cities" (XI 1), and their "career (*excursus*) until human beings cease to reproduce" (XV 1), their "origin, and progress (*procursus*), and final end" (I 35), cf. X 32. The very first sentence of the work declares Augustine's intention to defend "the most glorious city of God both in this course of times (*in hoc temporum cursus*)" and in eternity (I praef.), similarly, X 15.

ing the cultural history of late antiquity is not corroborated by the results of this inquiry into the development of the idea of history in antiquity. And the pervasiveness of the pattern itself in historical studies is a measure, even in our time, of the hold which early Christian thought has upon our understanding of our past. So a first suggestion is: beware of uncritical acceptance of inherited patterns of historical interpretation, especially those invented by the participants themselves.

Second, as regards the different patterns of history allegedly found in antiquity, circular versus linear: the present inquiry holds that such patterns were attributed to *history* in antiquity by no one. What recommends the usual scholarly account, however, is the perception of the importance that the idea of history as exhibiting a pattern has for modern thought and the hope of illuminating this modern idea by comparison with ancient ideas about the pattern of temporal events.⁵³ But what the ancients — Christians and “pagans” alike — understood by history was *not* the whole course of temporal events. To read the ancient materials in this way is, therefore, to impose upon them our ideas and problems. Antiquity can, of course, be looked at this way — extrapolating *their* views about *our* problems — and there are very many such studies of antiquity and of every other age in our cultural history. But one should not be misled by the possibility of doing this into supposing that their problems were the same as ours. Earlier philosophers and earlier ages have had their *own* problems to deal with and have used their *own* ideas in doing so. Their works can shed light on our problems, but not by the gratuitous assumption that their problems were the same as ours.

In the present case, it seems to me that we may learn more about our cultural past — and thus more about ourselves — by seeing that history *has come to be* a philosophical problem than by (falsely) supposing that it has always been so.

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⁵³ See George H. Nadel, “Philosophy of History before Historicism,” *History and Theory* 3 (1964), 292.