CHRIST AND THE CHRISTIAN IN HISTORY

Teaching Historical Philosophy and Methodology in a Christian Environment

s the terrible events of September 11, 2001, begin to fade into history, one wonders how future historians will assess them. Were the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon the work of a handful of determined fanatics who by their actions changed the course of history? Or were these terrible deeds the (almost inevitable) product of a global system of exploitation of poorer nations by the industrialized West, with the events and those responsible being only part of a process of global socio-economic development and conflict?

If we phrase these questions more gener-

ally, they become contemporary illustrations

of two very different schools of thought about history. One emphasizes the role of the individual; the other, the importance of impersonal factors—social and economic, but also geographic (or ecological). In the past five years, the nature of historical causation, especially the roles of individualism and determinism, has stimulated renewed reflection and debate in professional historical circles.¹ Can *individuals* affect historical events? Or do impersonal forces *determine* what happens?

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BY DAVID B. J. TRIM

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academic interest to Christian scholars. We would never deny that non-human forces influenced past events, but we also believe that the actions of each individual are important, not only in world events, but also in influencing cosmic history.

Any school of thought that diminishes the position of Christ arouses an instinctive defensiveness in Christians—including Christian historians. Indeed, for those of us who teach history in higher education, where most people encounter such concepts for the first time, this defensiveness may be an attempt to protect our students. Yet theories about determinism should not be rejected without investigation. Rather, they need to be properly addressed—and for students, that will probably occur in classes on the philosophy and methodology of history. In this article, I will outline the significance of the issues for Sev-

enth-day Adventist Christians and offer some suggestions for exploring them with students.

Causation and Postmodernism

The controversy over determinism was most lively in the

1960s, when it became the subject of a notorious debate between E. H. Carr and and Sir Geoffrey Elton, with whom it remains especially associated.² The topic has been overshadowed in recent years by controversies about postmodernism and whether historical "truth" is singular or multiple (or if, in fact, it even exists). Recently, one postmodernist historian declared—perhaps a trifle smugly—that "both Carr and Elton, despite their differences, belonged to a culture in which the claim of the historian to tell a singular truth about the past went unchallenged. For better or worse, that age has passed."³

Postmodernism and deconstructionism appear to pose greater challenges to Christian historians, but postmodernist views are increasingly being challenged by adherents of the traditional approach to history, including Adventist academics such as Roland Blaich. Two questions, (1) Do real causal connections exist? and (2) Can they be discovered and interpreted? form an important part of arguments in favor of "traditional" empirical historical scholarship. Consequently, the debate over individualism versus determinism in history is once again attracting attention.4

Challenges to Christian Historians

How are Christians to respond? We certainly believe that God intervenes directly in this world. After all, as Christ said, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your father. . . . So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." Since God is so concerned with everything that occurs, and nothing occurs without His will, "belief in divine interventions is integral to a Christian perspective on the world."

However, this can be problematic for academic historians. Our "first task . . . is the quest for historical truth," as Blaich puts it. We seek to accomplish this primarily, as Elton argued, by "the treatment of historical evidence." The "hand of G

historical evidence." The "hand of God in history" is, unfortunately, a difficult thing to recognize definitively. For example: Distinguished historian J. M. Roberts' analysis of the main themes of Old Testament history is balanced and persuasive, as one would

Can individuals affect historical events? Or do impersonal forces determine what happens?

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Christians believe that God cares about each person and that individuals can make a difference in this world.

expect of a professional historian. Yet it is almost unrecognizable to those who believe in the divine inspiration of Scripture. Roberts observes, for example, that "there is only tradition" (i.e., the Old Testament) as evidence "for all Hebrew history until about 1200

B.C. . . . As evidence, it stands in something like the relation to Jewish origins in which Homer stands to those of Greece." Roberts does recognize the "unique religious vision of the Hebrews." However, when describing their adoption of monotheism, he writes that "[t]hroughout the world of the ancient Near East it is possible to see at work forces which were likely to make monotheistic religious views more appealing," which places them in the category of social rather than providential phenomena. Roberts describes Moses as a "historical original" but says that his "exact role [as] religious reformer and national leader remains impossible to define."8 Where Christians and Jews see divine inspiration and intervention, the modern historian often sees simply the action of great social forces largely because these can be measured, or at least documented, whereas the actions of "the

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hand of God" cannot.

The problems of definitely identifying when and where God has acted and of accounting for suffering in the world have caused Christian thinkers to be wary of the traditional interpretation that God directly intervenes, at definite stages, to "overrule" in history. However, even if Christian historians argue that, apart from the first and second comings of Christ, God has let history work itself out, this has logical consequences for how they view their profession. They have implicitly accepted, at least, that no other dominant force governs the historical process, since, for a Christian, either God is in control of history (even if He does not choose to intervene on a daily basis) or no one is. Any other view assumes the existence of a force that is more powerful than the divine. Satan can influence historical developments, of

Picture Removed course, but only through his influence on human beings. He does not control the historical process.

Therefore, Christian historians and educators must challenge any school of thought that seems to argue that any force other than God governs history.

The Determinist Case

British scholar E. H. Carr, during the 1961 Trevelyan Lectures at Cambridge University, noted that: "the Bad King John theory of history—the view that what matters in history is the character and behaviour of individuals—has a long pedigree." This theory represents essentially a Christian perspective, which is not surprising, since Western society was predominantly Christian for most of its history.

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The Old Testament is filled with accounts of the disasters that befell nations because of the sinfulness of their kings. In the New Testament, Christ not only assured His followers that every individual was important, but also asserted that everything that befell them was known to and approved of by God. Carr dismisses this point of view: It "had some plausibility in days when society was simpler, and public affairs appeared to be run by a handful of known individuals," but it "clearly does not fit the more complex society of our times." It should be replaced by "a more complicated and sophisticated" methodology, and the theory of causation.10

In the published version of his lectures, Carr deals with "Society and the Individual" and "Causation in History" separately. How-

Picture Removed ever, the issues raised are common to both. Carr asserts "that everything that happens has a cause or causes, and could not have happened differently unless something in the cause or causes had also been different." This seems obvious, but Carr is in fact arguing that every event has a "fundamental" cause that is influenced by underlying trends. Things would have happened differently only if the underlying trends had been different.

Carr rejects the alternative school of thought, which holds that accidents are as important as underlying trends in influencing historical developments. In support of his view, he cites accidental explanations of historical events that he knows are absurd.

When King Alexander of Greece died in the autumn of 1920 from the bite of a pet monkey, this accident touched off a train of events which led Sir Winston Churchill to remark that "a quarter of a million persons died of this monkey's bite." Or take again Trotsky's comment on the fever contracted while shooting ducks which put him out of action at a critical point ... in the autumn The problems of definitely identifying when and where God has acted and of accounting for suffering in the world have caused Christian thinkers to be wary of the traditional interpretation that God directly intervenes, at definite stages, to "over-rule" in history.

of 1923: "One can foresee a revolution or a war, but it is impossible to foresee the consequences of an autumn shooting-trip for wild ducks." 12

In these cases, it is obvious that subsequent developments owed far more to underlying trends in Balkan and Soviet politics and society than to accidents that befell various individuals. Carr uses this to argue that "the historian is primarily concerned to investigate . . . a coherent sequence of cause and effect." He considers the accidents that apparently interrupted those sequences in Greece and the Soviet Union as "irrelevant." In summary, Carr argues that all events have two kinds of causes: rational and "real," or "irrational and accidental." The former are significant; the latter are not.

Most of the causes that Carr dismisses as "irrational and accidental" involve, or result from, individual action. He ridicules the noted German historian Meinecke's attribution of his country's disasters between 1914 and 1945 "to [such] accidents, [as] the vanity of the Kaiser, the election of Hindenburg to the presidency of the Weimar Republic,

Picture Removed Hitler's obsessional character, and so forth." Carr concluded that because personal interventions in history are accidental, they have no place in a rational interpretation of history or in the historian's hierarchy of significant causes. 16

Engaging With the Issues at Stake

This underlying assumption, by Carr and by scholars who subscribe to his views, that individual intervention in history is inconsequential, is problematic for Christians. It does not allow for divine influence on history.

Imagine how a determinist might describe the rise of Christianity:

The age into which Christ was born was one in which a great many people were oppressed by slavery or poverty and were seeking greater freedom. At the same time, the Roman Empire created a much closer and more united society than had ever existed previously, one in which new religious and philosophical ideas were eagerly exchanged. Jesus Christ, while a man of extraordinary genius, was chiefly important because his message encapsulated the will of his age. He was significant because he helped human beings become more aware of their needs and desires, and because he founded a movement that could both express the aspirations of the underclasses and satisfy intellectuals' yearnings for new concepts. In the disintegration that followed the decline of the Roman Empire, Christianity became a useful unifying force because of its internationalism. 17

In short, Christ filled a necessary niche. He was an agent, but also a product, of the historical process—the initiator, yet also the representative, not of a divine purpose, but rather of social forces operating at the time. Such a view of Christ's mission and importance falls far short of the biblical one!

In fact, as Carr's great opponent Elton (himself no Christian) shrewdly recognized: "When Mr. Carr, and others, seek a purpose in history, they are trying to fill the vacuum created when God was removed from history." Carr vigorously rejected this. '9 Yet his philosophy of history effectively elevates "underlying trends" and "fundamental causes" to the status of providence.

How, then, are Seventh-day Adventist history teachers and researchers to respond to the challenge of determinism? It cannot be ignored; its influence is too widespread. Despite its shortcomings, there is much of value in its methodology. However, there is no need to accept the whole package, since it has many inherent problems—and not only from a religious perspective.

Determinism assumes that "accidents" in history are less con-

sequential than other causes. Yet its advocates do not satisfactorily explain why. Elton suggests that "in the understanding of the past, the accident is just another point to be explained, considered and accommodated."²⁰ Instead, determinism ignores accidents and tries to explain only what it considers important.

Opponents of determinism are especially fond of asking "What if?"—often in connection with some great individual—and

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Sir Walter Raleigh, like many other philosophers and Christians, struggled to identify when Providence intervened in world affairs.

then writing "alternative histories." To Carr, such "suppositions are theoretically conceivable; and one can always play a parlour game with the might-have-beens of history. But they have nothing to do with determinism; for the determinist will only reply that, for these things to have happened, the causes would also have had to be different."²¹

However, while historians may rightly sneer at "playing parlour games with history," there *are* instances when serious scholars can reasonably argue about what might have been.

Hypothetical Histories

Hypothetical history provides recreation for professional historians, but it can also be put to serious uses. It is an excellent way

to engage students because it allows them to use their imaginations.²² Thus, when teachers address the issue of historical causation in class, it is valuable for students to explore some might-have-beens.

These can be divided into three categories. First, those where the long-term results of the alternative events would probably have been the same as what really happened. What if Oliver Cromwell had crowned himself King of England? Or named his far abler younger son Henry as his Protectoral heir instead of his inept elder son Richard? Either could have happened and would have created quite different consequences for many people living at the time. However, the overall pattern of English history would, in all likelihood, have remained fundamentally the same.

A second kind of might-havebeen arises from situations where history would very probably have changed if things had happened differently—although that alternative was unlikely. Again, we can look at the English Civil Wars for a case study. What if Charles I had won the Bishops' War with Scotland (1640), so that he did not have to summon the Long Parliament, whose defiance of their arbitrary monarch led to civil war? Prominent historians have actually addressed this possibility.²³

The English Civil Wars led to the Glorious Revolution, the political principles of which formed the basis for the American Revolution. So students could ask whether, lacking a successful defiance of Charles I, we would have the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution? Such an outcome, however, was unlikely—Charles I's policies throughout his reign made it almost certain that he would fail to beat his Presbyterian Scot subjects into submission.²⁴

The life of Alexander the Great provides another good example. Alexander's exploits were *individual* achievements. They did depend on the quality and loyalty of his troops, but there was no underlying trend that would have brought about Macedonian imperialism without Alexander and his father. The efficiency of Alexander's armies rested largely on his example and generalship. We know that his likely successor, had Alexander died younger still, would have been content with far less than Alexander's conquests. Since Alexander died at age 32, it is only natural to wonder what he might have achieved had he lived; and indeed, this sort of speculation existed among his contemporaries, as well as modern scholars.²⁵

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Did God intervene directly or indirectly in the American Civil War?

Alexander's lifestyle, however, made it likely that he *would* die young. Apart from his hard drinking, he deliberately took extreme risks to ensure the devotion of his soldiers. He constantly drove himself because the nature of his autocratic court made it necessary for him to do so, in order to achieve his conquests. Had Alexander *not* lived this sort of life, he almost certainly would not have accomplished as much and thus would probably not be the subject of historical speculation in the first place!

What if the Spanish Armada had landed in England in 1588? I sympathize here with the traditional English Protestant explanation that God intervened to defeat the Catholic threat. After all, as Geoffrey Parker points out in one of the best-known explorations of counter-factual history, a successful Spanish invasion could have put the cause of the Reformation throughout Europe in dire straits. ²⁶ However, since two additional Spanish armadas in the 1590s both failed and an English counter-invasion attempt (in Portugal in 1589) also met with disaster, the "Invincible Armada" met the most probable of its potential fates.

The third possibility for counterfactual speculation is a situa-

tion when a different outcome was very possible, even probable—and it would have almost certainly have changed history. Thus, for example, William of Normandy's conquest of England was indubitably a milestone in the history of England. Yet his undertaking was highly unusual, dangerous, and likely to fail; we cannot dismiss as irrelevant the "accidents" that ensured it did not. Furthermore, any analysis must take personalities into account because William was such a dominant figure in Normandy and the invasion was almost entirely his idea—one which his own subjects took up reluctantly. If William had died at Hastings as he

almost did, or if Harold had survived to lead a resistance, as he could easily have done, then the Norman Conquest would have been as unlikely as pigs flying.

Similarly, we might well wonder, with the distinguished Reformation historian Diarmaid MacCulloch, what might have happened if Edward VI had not died at age 16? His evangelical version of the Reformation would then presumably have become dominant in England instead of the *via media* between Roman Catholicism and Genevan Calvinism adopted under Elizabeth I, after the interlude of the persecuting "Bloody" Mary. What might the long-term consequences have been for religion in England—and therefore its former colonies?²⁷ Because the nature of dynastic rule is such that events can always be affected by the chance deaths of kings and princes, such an outcome was always possible and perhaps even predictable. However, the developments that followed cannot be ascribed to "fundamental causes," as determinism would suggest.

Determinism and Christians

Ultimately, then, determinism is flawed, and Christian historians can find reasons for rejecting it other than its challenges to faith. However, we can find much of value in its approach. For example, its stress on finding appropriate causes, rather than viewing all events as contingent, is a helpful corrective to postmodernist extremes and one that can be reconciled with Christianity.

Using determinist insights can actually help us resolve the great problem of whether God intervenes in history. I believe that He does, but as an historian, I find it difficult to identify when and where He has done so and precisely how His actions changed history. This is hardly a new problem. Sir Walter Raleigh, a veteran of the campaign against the Spanish Armada in 1588, was a philosopher and historian, as well as explorer, courtier, and poet. He had no time for those who tried to explain events in the world only in worldly terms, and emphasized "accidents which as being next their eye and ears, seem to them to work every alteration that happeneth." Yet he could not find a way to answer the question of how the divine will controlled history or to identify when Providence intervened (if in fact it did so). The issue has vexed Christian thinkers and historians ever since.²⁸

In fact, the counterfactual examples we considered earlier bring out an important point: The laws of cause and effect apply

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as much to individuals as to economical, ecological, and geographical forces. This brings us back to the importance of individual choice—a basic principle of Christianity.

Thus, Alexander the Great *chose* a particular lifestyle. If it brought him a mighty empire, it also brought him an early death and ensured that his empire did not outlive him.

A similar point emerges if we consider why the Confederacy lost the American Civil War. Was it because God intervened directly to punish the South for slavery, as many Protestant Northerners, including Seventh-day Adventists, believed? Or was it because

the Northern economy was so much more industrialized than that of the South? In fact, the Southern economy was the product of choices made by numerous individual Southerners to rely on the South's "peculiar institution" of slavery.

In vision, Ellen White saw God intervening in the early battles of the war. Was this meant literally or figuratively? I feel it is possible to argue either way. In fact, the Confederacy lost the war largely because immoral individual choices led to prosperity for a time but then to eventual destruction.

In this sense, we can be sure that God is in *control* of history, regardless of whether He directly intervenes. We can recognize, along with the notable scholar (and Christian) Herbert Butterfield, "that every man has it in his power to make himself an exception to the rule, and some have a special power from heaven to enable them to do so," yet we can also agree that "certain conditions will produce . . . outrages, human nature being what it is, and that the evils are to be remedied by altering the conditions." This conclusion reflects determinist thinking but shows that it need not affect one's faith in God. The best way to change the human condition and (perhaps more importantly) human attitudes is for humans to surrender to Christ. Christ's power to save remains paramount in the larger scheme of things, regardless of how we view historical causation.

Implications for Seventh-day Adventist Teachers

Because the *prima facie* case seems to suggest that concepts like determinism and the role of the individual are inherently anti-Christian, and because even historians who argue *against* determinism are, like Elton, often far from Christian, ³⁰ Adventist teachers may be tempted to simply avoid such issues as "dangerous" and too associated with "the world." On the contrary, however, these issues must be addressed.

First, it is unscholarly (and arguably unchristian) to dismiss a case unheard. Thus, in outlining the desirable qualities of Seventh-day Adventist Christian educators, Ellen White argued for "high literary qualifications. The more of true knowledge the teacher has, the better will be his work. The schoolroom is no place for surface work. No teacher who is satisfied with a superficial knowledge will attain a high degree of efficiency." In setting out the original principles of the Adventist educational system, she described its mission as being "to develop [the power to

think], to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thought."32

Second, only after proper scholarly investigation of any intellectual concept can one mount a rigorous defense, in case that proves necessary. Therefore, concepts such as those discussed in this article should be taught in a Christian academic environment, where biblical principles can be applied to the investigation.

Finally, proper analysis of even the most apparently unpromising academic theories need not shake our faith. Such ideas can often be explained in a way that fits a Christ-centered worldview. For example, Eric Ives (both a noted historian and a Christian) points out that "what the Marxist sees as the working of the dialectical process of history . . . may be equally intelligible in terms of providence"; or, if these processes do indeed exist, "they could themselves be exhibitions of the working of providence"!³³

Peter Abelard recognized in the 12th century that: "There are many seeming contradictions and even obscurities in the innumerable writings of the church fathers" and that "our respect for their authority should not stand in the way of an effort on our part to come at the truth." This is as true today as it was then—about not only writers of theology, but also all authorities, in every branch of knowledge. As Abelard also wrote, "The master key of knowledge is, indeed, a persistent and frequent questioning." We should use our divinely given intellect to engage secular thinkers: in part to ensure that we don't surrender the intellectual high ground to those who deny God, which seems to me to be absolutely crucial in this postmodern world. In addition, however, secular theories may well end up helping us to understand the nature of God more clearly (even if this is not what their authors and adherents intended!).

I hope that this brief study of determinism provides a new affirmation of the saving power of Christ and the possibility of divine agency in the world, as well as some new ways of thinking and teaching about the historiographical issues at stake. In the words of Ellen White, "Whatever line of investigation we pursue, with a sincere purpose to arrive at truth, we are brought in touch with the unseen, mighty Intelligence that is working in and through all." "

Picture Removed David J. B. Trim is Lecturer in History, Department of Humanities, and Associate Director, Centre for the Study of Religious and Cultural Diversity at Newbold College, Bracknell, Berkshire, England. He is also Associate Editor of the Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research.

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- 4. See Richard J. Evans, In Defence of History (London: Granta, 1997), ch. 5; Eric Hobsbawm, On History (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997); Roland Blaich, "Teacher of the Church: The Adventist Historian," Journal of Adventist Education 62:4 (April/May 2000), pp.15-19; Smith, ibid. See also Quentin Skinner, "Sir Geoffrey Elton and the Practice of History," Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 6th ser., 7 (1997), pp. 301-316, esp. 302, 303, and 309. It is no coincidence that Carr, the most prominent apologist for determinism, and his debate with Elton were the subjects of several seminars at the University of London's School of Advanced Study (the flagship institute for historical research in the United Kingdom) in late 2001.
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- 7. Blaich, p. 17; Geoffrey R. Elton, *Return to Essentials* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 30.
- 8. J. M. Roberts, *The Penguin History of the World* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), pp. 105, 107.
 - 9. Carr, p. 45.
 - 10. Ibid., pp. 45, 49.
 - 11. Ibid., p. 93.
 - 12. Ibid., p. 98.
 - 13. Ibid., p. 99.
 - 14. Ibid., p. 106.
 - 15. Ibid., p. 100.
 - 16. Ibid., pp. 100, 103.
 - 17. Cf. Roberts, pp. 254-260, 264, 265.
 - 18. Elton, Practice of History, p. 40.
 - 19. Carr, p. 49.
 - 20. Elton, Practice of History, p. 40.
 - 21. Carr, p. 97.
- 22. See Niall Ferguson, ed., Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals (London: Picador, 1998), a collection of essays by professional historians exploring counterfactual historical possibilities.
- 23. John Adamson, "England Without Cromwell: What If Charles I Had Avoided the Civil War?" in *Virtual History*, ibid., pp. 91-124.
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 - 35. Education, p. 14 (cf. p. 130).