

HISTORICISM AS THE GHOST OF *history*

In Philosophy 101 (1936), Dr. Rosenberger said "Metaphysics is the ghost of God" (as the division of philosophy dealing with being [ontology] & order [cosmology] impersonally). This Thinksheet accuses historicism of being the ghost of God-in-history--as background for our theology studygroup's discussion of Paul S. Minear's THE BIBLE AND THE HISTORIAN: Breaking the Silence About God in Biblical Studies (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

1 First, let's get a fix on the relevant meaning of the infix "-icis-" (followed by the suffixes "-tic" & "-m"): it's **abstractive-reductive**: something being "drawn away" (Lat. "ab-tra-") leaves as less (i.e., reduced) what's drawn-away-from. EXAMPLE: A Hellene is a Greek person, a Hellenist is not but is somebody who draws away & inwardly/outwardly appropriates Greek culture (e.g., the Apostle Paul--& the cultural background of most of the NT is not Judaism but Hellenistic Judaism).

ILLUSTRATION: Simply being old makes a building **historical**. If our particular interest is in the building's historicalness, we say it's an **historic** building (& probably has a plaque to prove it): the word "historic" abstracts from the building its historicalness. We are into a second-stage of abstraction, the **historicist**, if our interest is in the building's history only, or at least mainly, for what it can tell us about the processes discernible by rational analysis of the building's story: historicism is the doctrine that history's meaning is nothing but the product of this analysis.

This product is so thin a soup it can't nourish soul or society. It is "deficient" not only metaphysically but also "in accomplishing its historical objective, the recovery and description of past events in their original sequence and significance" (Minear 48). The cure (& aim of this Minear book)? "The task of contemporary exegetes is to allow Scripture itself to criticize both the assumptions and the methods" of the historians/historicists (49). And as existentialism as the freedom-responsibility of self-determination triumphs over determinism, it also is "the moment when authentic historicity triumphs over historicism" (260).

2 The verb "historicize" (1846-) means to point to the history of; but the earliest user I could find of the noun "historicism" is Rudolf Bultmann, who meant by it (in Minear's words, 260) "the story of the past viewed as determined by the [rationally perceived] laws [in the processes of] nature" (the []s being mine). As inclusive of person/freedom/responsibility, "history" is antihistoricistic.

3 Theism & humanism are both asphyxiated in the atmosphere of historicism, a paradigm of certain 19th-c. European philosophers who, in the struggle to define their discipline up to the level of cultural respectability (hard) "science" had achieved, surrendered incommensurables (immeasurables, the hard ["natural"] sciences passively defining--at that stage of their development--as real only the measurable). As the personal is not measurable, God & human freedom are unreal: atheism & determinism are implicit in (e.g.) Darwinism, Marxism ("scientific materialism"), & Nazism....

And in historicism-entrapped biblical studies (e.g., the Jesus Seminar), beginning with D. Strauss' LIFE OF JESUS (1835). Great biblical-theologians have fought & continue to fight this (e.g., Minear in a dozen books, culminating in THE BIBLE AND THE HISTORIAN).

4 At Yale Divinity School in the late 19th-c., two biblical scholars applied hard (Baconian) science's inductive method to Bible study ("inductive hermeneutics"). One later (1900) made the method the learning-base of a seminary (now N.Y. Theol. Seminary) he (W.W. White) founded; the other (W.R. Harper), the learning-base of a university (Chicago) he became the first president of. But neither wedded this hermeneutic to historicism: *biblical studies need not commit adultery*.

But how slippery the academic slope! Only a few years after the U. of Chicago was founded, one of its faculty (philosopher-of-religion George Burman Foster, in THE FINALITY OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION [Chicago: U. of C., 1906]) conceded the Enlightenment's knowledge/faith split (328-9): "Natural-science knowledge...affords.. certainty. But as regards all tradition, there is only probability, possibility, and no knowledge at all.... Faith views Jesus *sub specie aeternitatis* [under the aspect

of eternity]; science views him *sub specie temporis* [under the aspect of time]....the historical narratives of the resurrection [of Jesus] are not of such a nature as to produce historical-science [i.e., historicistic] certainty" but of "a religious certainty" which Foster derives psychologically: "our religious apprehension of the glory of his inner life...induces an historical certainty in excess of the competency of science to engender" (329-30). Here a soft science (viz., psychology) marries historicism with the effects of privatizing religion & neutralizing theology (333): "It is not in Messiah, and Logos, and two-nature entity, and second person of the Trinity, and host, and ubiquity, and the like, that the greatness--nay, the Godlikeness--of Jesus lies, but in the real and full human quality of his inner life; in such things, for instance, as the clearness of his moral discernment and the energy of his moral purpose": (518) in that it was the fruit of his religion, Jesus' morality authenticates our religion: "it must be that God is as good as Jesus is. Then we may have the faith which the gospel requires--faith in God the Father, in his fatherly grace in forgiving sins, and in an eternal life" (last sentence).

On his Introduction's first page, Foster rejects "orthodox" Christianity as resting "upon speculative propositions which are now entirely discredited" as moving "from authority to experience," the reverse of the movement "accorded validity in the modern world": truth comes not by revelation but by "development" emergence. Here, 1906 (!), we have historicism's triumph of analytic reason through the process (from the hard sciences, to become "process theology") of examining experience. (My hardcover copy has this on the cover before the title: "The Decennial Publications of the University of Chicago." "Composed and printed by the University of Chicago Press." "Second impression" two months after the first.)

Pathos: Foster seeks to escape "speculation" by viewing Jesus' "inner life" (on which we can only speculate!) as the font of freedom. Even Bultmann is not that constricted in foundation: by "historicity" (Minear 260) he meant "the realization of freedom from historicism when by faith in the gospel one shares in the transcendent freedom of God." But both were captive to the modern(ist) idea of progress.

5 So they could experience the contrast between the biblical-historical & the historicistic paradigms, I assigned my systematic-theology students (31 years ago) two texts: for the former, "the first...statement of religious belief produced jointly by theologians of the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches" (p.vii, THE COMMON CATECHISM: A Book of Christian Faith [NY: Crossroad-Seabury, 1975]); for the latter, Gordon D. Kaufman's SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY: A Historicist Perspective (NY: Scribner's, 1968). While for Kaufman revelation is real & therefore God must be personal, Jesus' resurrection is real only as our extension of his action, &--as he did not-- we shall not survive death. The diametrical is N.T.Wright's claim that the empty tomb is historical evidence of Jesus' resurrection: "No tyrant is threatened by Jesus going to heaven, leaving his body in a tomb" (34, 4.5.03 CHRISTIAN CENTURY); & his resurrection secures his believers'. That "this Jesus had been raised by this [viz., Israel's] God" is protection against (36) deism, pantheism, dualist supernaturalism, & panentheism; & I must add gnosticism & "spirituality" (against which, this W.R.Matthews quote after the titlepage of my U.Chicago PhD dissertation: "We are anchored in history, and no flights of metaphysical speculation or mystical religion can be allowed to cut the cable").

6 Falsely distinguishing between "faith" & "facts" ("knowledge"), historicism is unaware that it is itself a faith, a faith that began (in literature) with Kant's RELIGION WITHIN THE LIMITS OF REASON ALONE (1792). We parody faithists (fideists, ideologues) with "My mind's made up, don't confuse me with the facts" (& Pat Moynihan's "A man has a right to his opinions but not to his facts"). But we should accept as the human condition that truth that sense-making/meaning-making is perspectival, famously put by Augustine as *Fides quaerens intellectum* (Eng., "faith seeking understanding"). While postmodernism overextends this truth to deny we have access to truth or even to deny that truth exists, we can agree (can we not?) that given finitude & sin, humanity unaided by revelation/consummation cannot transcend its Babel of philosophical & religious dissensus. But Kaufman's religion is not within the limits of historicism (407): "Jesus' obedience to God was the actual breaking into human history of God's sovereign rule....the historical turning point from which shall ultimately flower God's perfect reign."