

## 5. HISTORY

Are people any better today or any worse than they used to be, say 100 years ago, or 1000 years ago; 300 years ago, or 3000 years ago? It would likely be hard to prove one way or another, though one might be able to cite some things as evidence for each case. There are certainly prominent historical figures, some of whom could be considered exemplars of the best and others exemplars of the worst in human behavior and accomplishment.

But what can be said about the average common person? With no overwhelming evidence that they were either better or worse than people today in their treatment of each other or in their efforts to fulfill their station in life reasonably well, we should be able to feel some affinity with them. The majority of people in industrialized countries have huge advantages over people in earlier periods of human history in that we are beneficiaries of more advanced technologies for many purposes. But perhaps we can look at history partly in terms of how it might have felt if we had been in the places of the people of a different time and place and circumstance and had to face the problems they faced with only the resources they had available.

History as taught in the schools is typically not taught with an emphasis on what life was like in different times and places. Usually the emphasis is upon major political figures, and events such as wars. To be sure, these had important impacts upon life at the time and upon the subsequent social changes. When history is taught so that it pays attention also to the life of the average person and the cultural characteristics and achievements of a period, one can get an appreciation of what our ancestors accomplished and how they did it.

Our perspective upon human life and upon the problems of human civilization is woefully inadequate if it has no significant historical dimension. And unfortunately, the amount and character of the history many people have studied carefully is not sufficient to give them much perspective. History has left us both some good and some bad.

Part of the difficulty is also that we teach history only to children who are too young to fully understand and appreciate its full significance. We need to study history again in middle age when we can grasp its meaning more fully. And then we need to learn not primarily dates and events, though we should not mistake the medieval period in Europe for the paleolithic period, but primarily in order to ponder the possible significance of the history.

Our generation's problems are only partly unique, as each

generation's are. But some of the problems of personal life are similar, despite different environments, different circumstances and different resources. It sheds some light upon life for us if we see how life's problems were handled by others in different historical periods. Great literature furnishes us imaginative insights into life and its problems. History might also be able to give us some insights.

But in a much broader sense, the significance of history to us is that it enables us to see how different social orders and different ideas fared in dealing with their problems. In a sense, history is the record of different attempts to handle the problems of social organization.

We think we know how society can best be, and hence should be, organized. But we have had very short experience with our institutional structures and processes. So we do not yet know how they will fare over the long run or faced with new problems. We do not know how they might be developed to be sustainable through future difficulties. No previous civilization lasted, though many lasted longer than our has so far. It should be possible to learn something both about the merits and the mistakes in the ways other civilizations have handled their similar and different social problems.

It has been said that a people who do not know history are condemned to repeat it, presumably mistakes and all. The question is what are the lessons of history. Some claim history has no lessons to teach us. Indeed it seems as though some people draw the wrong conclusion from history. An example of that is the conclusion that since something has been done repeatedly in history, the same thing must and will therefore continue to be done forever. That is not only a logical fallacy, but a belief in the inability of people to learn anything of what they need to learn from history.

History certainly does not show that human beings have discovered the best way to organize themselves in order to live together peaceably, prosperously and happily. If there are some things to admire in what others have done before us, as their most certainly are, there are also prime examples of things that proved disastrous as well as of many more that were far from wise. A mature pondering of this history ought to make us at least a little wiser. The 20th century was one of the bloodiest in human history, though it also produced amazing technological advances. It also left us some serious persistent social problems.

One thing we might learn is that even if people were in some basic sense inherently no worse than us, as they probably were not, the societies in which they lived did not always reflect people's basic goodness sufficiently. Indeed they sometimes seemed to cultivate and use their worse human characteristics. The lesson is that the way societies are organized,

the ideas that drive them, and the institutions that control outward human and group behavior determine much of history. Also that institutions had to be changed to produce some important forms of progress.

For example, it was not sufficient for people to be good to their slaves and for slaves to be good to their masters. The institution of slavery itself had to be abolished because it was evil. That is sufficient reason. In addition, it was a form of social organization which was not in the long run a productive and sustainable system.

History shows some other mistakes that grew out of mistaken ideas and power structures, and from which we can learn something. It will be left until later to discuss whether any such things can happen here, in this co-called civilization and in the United States. If so, what could and should we learn from history?

Much material progress has certainly been made, of which we are the proud beneficiaries. Some intellectual progress has been made, both in the sense that science has increased our knowledge and in the sense that a much larger proportion of the population has access to more knowledge. What may well be considered cultural progress has occurred in some periods in particular, while other periods seem less impressive in this respect. Some very important social progress has also been made. Comment on the present will be reserved until later.

Historians have recorded many so-called civilizations. The term civilization has for us a connotation of a condition in which people are civilized, in which they behave in a civil manner to each other. When violence breaks out between people, that is not considered civilized behavior. One might say that civilization was born many centuries ago with the dawn of a social conscience, that is, with the birth of the idea that people other than ourselves have human rights and responsibilities. The progress of civilization has been most significantly in the broadening of that concept and in its progressive application. There is still much room for more progress in that regard. Indeed a cynic might say that a truly civilized world is yet to be developed.

Human history is strewn with violence, and we still live in a violent world. Something will be said later about violence between nations. Here sources of some other violence are to be mentioned briefly. One source of violence appears to be dogmatic certitude. The religions embodied in different cultures throughout history have tried to satisfy the ultimate spiritual yearnings of their people with dogmatic creeds. The believers in these creeds were absolutely certain of their truth. It was always claimed that their truth come from God.

This certitude has been backed by ecclesiastical power systems

which sought to impose their ideas upon unbelievers, by violence if necessary. Thus religion, which should be the source of compassion and an inspirer of all virtue, has too often led to brutality and violence. This is a possible outcome whenever people are absolutely certain that they alone are right. The minimum required for peace and human decency is enough uncertainty of one's view of truth to cause one to avoid doing to others, in the name of that truth, anything one would demand that others not do to you in the name of their truth. The fact is that every truth that claims to come from God has gone through human heads, and all human heads are fallible in their understandings. Even when several people witness an accident, they often give conflicting versions of what they claim truly happened.

Secular rulers, governmental officials, and groups holding significant power are also apt to use power indiscriminately just to maintain their hold on it. This almost seems to be a universal throughout history and today. Two things are needed to restrain the resort to violence to maintain power. One is of course the sort of legal system and institutional structure in which power can be restrained and can be made accountable to those over whom it is exercised. The other is an ethic, shared by the power holders, which is itself a restraint on the misuse of power in general and of violence in particular.

There are times when more is involved than merely crass assertion of power by a power holder. Sometimes violence is resorted to and justified by its perpetrators in the name of a secular ideal instead of a religious one. The result can be the same. Fanaticism even for a noble ideal can be disastrous. Sometimes the same violent personages are regarded in some quarters as freedom fighters and in other quarters as terrorists. And in at least some cases they resort to violence to correct what they call injustices, some of which also involved violence.

The problem that history has never solved satisfactorily for long enough is how to break the cycle of violence that can arise even in the pursuit of justice or another ideal. Both the power holder and the revolutionist may think they are in the right. And if they are so certain of their entire rightness and the wrongness of their opponent, the temptation appears to use violent means if necessary to do the right. As before, the problem requires both legal and other institutions and an ethic, both to restrain fanaticism and to confine the social process to non-violent methods for people seeking the good as they define it.

Someone has said that ends, especially good ends, are what we may live for, but the means are what we live with. The quality of life is determined by the means we use, and if these are violent, they do not produce ends that are any better. The cycle of violence is maintained by the

mistaken belief that a good end justifies even a means that is incompatible with it. But the means determine the quality of the result. History, even recent history, should have taught us that one cannot produce human brotherhood at the point of a gun.

There has been enough history of violence for peoples to have learned at least this much from history. Nothing creates so much unnecessary human suffering as the perennial resort to violence, for both good ends and bad. We still have a violent culture, even one that promotes violence in the entertainment media. The cycle of violence continues, but if mankind is capable of learning anything, it should by now have learned its high human cost.

Humanity does not yet appear to be ready to do what is necessary to break the old cycle of violence. What does it take to get people to question and reject the ideas, ideals and values that lead them to repeatedly perpetrate violence, brutality and suffering upon other human beings? The world could be made so much better by a culture that was not violent. We should develop a culture that abhors violence.

Can we not move in that direction, beginning by changing our own attitudes, and by changing the way we bring up children, so that they are less ready to resort to violence?

A violent culture cannot be changed quickly, but surely it is a gross mistake simply to accept it. It is worse to glory in it, and still worse to make money out of promoting it. Each person counts for only one, but many ones can begin to exert some influence for the better non-violent world in which people do not cause others unnecessary suffering.

History should at least teach us this--not to continue making this same mistake forever. We can produce a true human civilization in which people are civil to each other and use their resources to promote human well-being instead of creating unnecessary human suffering. But it can be done only if we develop a fully civilized ideology and fully civilized institutions to resolve all disputes in civilized ways. So far the human race does not show enough simple rationality or enough simple morality to do so.