Butterfield Claims Christianity Takes Realistic Approach

BY ANNE WATTS

“We decide our total attitude to the whole of human history when we make our decision about our religion,” wrote Professor Herbert Butterfield of Cambridge in his book, Christianity and History.

Power and self-interest loom large in history, Butterfield recognizes. Human cupidity will not allow a utopia, and set against actuality, “the more superficial kinds of idealism beat themselves into foam, and hang in the air as a sort of alien froth.”

CHRISTIANITY deals realistically with sin and self-interest, so Christianity can begin to illumine history. For Butterfield, universal sin means that all men are under the judgment of God. There appears to be a moral factor at work in history.

“At bottom it is an inadequacy in human nature itself,” Butterfield says, “which comes under judgment; for in the course of time it is human nature which finds out the holes in the structure, and turns the good thing into an abuse.”

STILL, the judgments of history. Man is wrong to self-right-

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People control history very little, and the judgment of God seems to fall heaviest on those who think they can play God. Butterfield acknowledges that conditioning affects the individual’s view of history, that one’s vision is narrow and limited.

**MEANING** in history, he says, is to be found in “the manufacture and education of human souls,” rather than in distant promises. Butterfield stresses the providential character of history and discusses the redemption of catastrophe through “a grand creative moment,” instead of through a chain of events or an ongoing movement.

He points out that the general chanciness and cataclysms of this century make it contemporary with the period of the Exile of the Jews, “because so many people are worried by this inability to see any meaning in the story, the difficulties of the present day are still moral-historical ones as in Old Testament times.”

**BUTTERFIELD** rejects the ecclesiastical interpretation of history. He cannot ignore the fact that the church is a human institution and as such is subject to power and self-interest.

Questions about future flexibility and an escape from contemporary systems of thought are posed in Butterfield’s interpretation of history.

“We can do worse,” he concludes, “than remember a principle which both gives us a firm Rock and leaves us the maximum elasticity for our minds: the principle: Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted.”