Hayden White and the Possibility of Faith in History

I.

In 1966, the scholar of religion Van Austin Harvey published his famous book *The Historian and the Believer*, in which he deftly explored one of the central concerns of religious thought of the past two centuries: is it possible to maintain religious faith – in this case Christian – in light of modern, critical history? This was of course not the only study concerned with this issue; others have sought to address this dilemma, both before and since. But it remains, in my opinion – even more than fifty years after its publication – one of the best formulations of a tension that seems to me to still haunt contemporary religious faith, a tension alluded to in the very title of Harvey's book, between critical history and belief.

In my remarks today, I wish to offer what some may perhaps consider an unusual perspective on this tension, alluded to but not explicitly explored in Harvey's book, guided by the thought and methodology of Hayden White (who passed away last year: 1928-2018). Since the publication of his early, polemical essay "The Burden of History" in 1966[1] (incidentally, the same year as Harvey's book), in which he called into question what he considered the historical discipline's self-satisfied view of itself as the reigning queen of the social sciences, and even more so after the publication of his *magnum opus*, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (1973)[2], White's name – or at least his specter – seems to have never been absent from any discussion on historical theory and methodology. Although rejected and criticized by many – and often for valid reasons – his ideas have nonetheless forced historians to reexamine their methodological and normative assumptions, and reflect much more deeply on the nature of their craft.

White's primary methodological innovation, explored chiefly in *Metahistory* but also elsewhere, was to turn our attention to the specifically literary qualities of the historical text. What was missing among historians, he argued in the Introduction to *Metahistory*, was the recognition that works of historiography were primarily literary products (historio-*graphy*)[3]. As such, he contended, works of

[1] Hayden White, "The Burden of History", *History and Theory*, Vol. 5, Issue 2 (1966), pp. 111-134.
[2] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Fortieth Anniversary Edition, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014 [1973]).
[3] "Preface to the Fortieth-Anniversary Edition", in *Metahistory,* p. xxvi.

history ought to be studied using the same tools employed in the study of other literary works. In the remainder of *Metahistory*, White thus examined the works of eight canonical nineteenth-century historians and philosophers of history – a distinction to which I will return momentarily – through the lens of literary criticism, directing our attention to elements in the text such as plot construction, characterization, style, tone, mode, and even genre.

White, at least in *Metahistory,* was unconcerned with the degree to which individual historians adhered in their accounts to what we could provisionally call "the Truth" – that is, the one criterion which is seemingly of interest to the professional historian. And indeed, this has been one of the main criticisms raised against his work, both at the time and ever since. White's purpose, however, was exactly to show that what we mean by 'historical truth' is much more multifaceted and multivalent than is generally realized. In directing our gaze to the literary aspects of the historical work, he thus allowed us to see that all works of history, even the ones purporting to observe the highest standards of scientific objectivity, involve a measure – often at the subconscious level – of construction and design.

Now as you may imagine, these ideas lend themselves quite easily to what may be called a 'postmodern' perspective, which claims that the very notion of truth is either a fabrication, a product of society's power structure, class or gender, or, quite often, both. Indeed, the majority of White's critics as well as admirers seem to class him among the postmodernists[4]. This is one interpretation, and it is a valid one. I believe, however, that White's work need not necessarily lead to postmodern conclusions, and in fact, could be useful also in supporting a host of other positions, as I hope to do today, when considering his work from the perspective of scholars of religion, which as far as I know, has yet to be attempted.

There is of course much in White's work that could be of interest to scholars of religion, especially considering that he started not as a theorist of history, but rather, as a medievalist who wrote his dissertation on the papal schism of 1130. I believe, however, that the aspect of his work most relevant for us today is his breakdown of the distinction between what we may call 'proper' or

[4] White's work itself has been associated with the 'linguistic turn', as well as the 'narrative turn' and other theoretical inclinations [see, e.g., Richard T. Vann, "The Reception of Hayden White", *History and Theory* vol. 37, no. 2 (1998), pp. 143-61; Robert Doran, "Editor's Introduction: Choosing the Past: Hayden White and the Philosophy of History", in idem., *Philosophy of History After Hayden White,* ed. Robert Doran, (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 16-17, ff]. White himself, however, has generally rejected the association with these fashions, preferring to associate his system, if anything, with a "discursive turn" (quoted in Doran, p. 17).

'objective' history and the philosophy of history or, to employ the term that White himself uses, 'metahistory' – the kind of historical constructions often associated with thinkers such as Marx, Toynbee and Spengler – as well as Augustine, Joachim and the Bible – which take as their scope not just a particular event, personality or time period, but rather, most or the whole span of human history. By breaking down this distinction, I wish to argue, he has allowed us, on the one hand, to reevaluate the supposed superiority of critical, 'objective' history as the final arbiter of historical truth, and, on the other hand, to begin – and I emphasize: to *begin* – to make a case for a theologically-inspired account of the nature of the historical process, be it Augustinian, Joachite, Messianic, Apocalyptic, or otherwise.

II.

White's argument in many ways builds on that of one of his intellectual heroes, the great Catholic historian Christopher Dawson (1889-1970)[5]. [Does anyone still read Dawson, by the way?] In 1951, Dawson published a short essay in the British journal *History Today* entitled "The Problem of Metahistory"[6]. In this essay, Dawson responded to a call by fellow-historian Alan Bullock to banish metahistory from the field of historical studies, which in his view should consist only of 'proper' or 'objective' history. In his response, Dawson rejected Bullock's call for two main reasons. The first, as he explains, is that 'history' and 'metahistory' have two different objectives, both of which are necessary for historical understanding: 'pure' history, according to Dawson, is concerned with historical facts, events, personalities, et cetera, while 'metahistory', on the other hand, is concerned with their *meaning*; just as Aristotle's 'Metaphysics', Dawson writes, was concerned with "the ultimate concepts that underlie his physical theories: the nature of matter, the nature of being and the cause of motion and change", "Metahistory [was] concerned with the nature of history, the meaning of history and the cause and significance of historical change"[7]. Proceeding from this definition, Dawson comes

[5] White wrote an early essay on Dawson: "Religion, Culture, and Western Civilization in Christopher Dawson's Idea of History" (1958), reprinted in idem., *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory 1957-2007,* edited by Robert Doran, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp. 23-49. I should note that I have always considered this essay, despite its lucidity, to be one of White's weaker pieces. For a critique of White's interpretation of Dawson, see Fernando Cervantes, "Progress and Tradition: Christopher Dawson and Contemporary Thought", *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, Volume 2, Number 2 (Spring 1999), pp. 84-108.

[6] Christopher Dawson, "The Problem of Metahistory", *History Today*, Vol. 1, Issue 6 (Jun 1, 1951), pp. 9-12. Reprinted in idem., *Dynamics of World History,* edited by John J. Mulloy, (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), pp. 303-10. All parge references hereafter are to the reprint cited.

[7] Dawson, p. 303.

to his second argument: there is no 'proper', 'objective' history which is not in itself grounded in a metahistory of some kind. Dawson maintains that no 'proper' historian approaches the historical data without some idea of what he is looking for, or in other words, an idea of *what is important*, which he cannot do without a 'supra- or 'meta-historical' perspective. (He mentions here specifically the example of Tocqueville, whom he says could not have reached such penetrating insights about the nature of American democracy were it not for his 'metahistorical' beliefs).

Dawson's perspective was that of an Augustinian. His defense of metahistory was thus ultimately intended to make respectable the idea of a religious-metaphysical view of the historical process, especially in light of the predominance of positivism. White's purpose was quite different, and hence his argument proceeds quite differently as well. He begins from the point of view of the *craft* of the historian. According to White, all works of history require the historian to select certain facts from the available historical data and arrange it into a pattern of meaning – a narrative or "story" of some kind. From the perspective of their "artistry" or "work", therefore, there is no difference according to White between the 'historian' and 'metahistorian'. Where they differ, rather, is in their focus, or what White calls their "emphasis": 'proper' historians focus on the historical *data* – the personalities, the events, the cultures, and so forth; that is also why their works tend to be more limited in scope. 'Metahistorians', on the other hand, focus on the *laws* that govern the historical process. These laws can be rigid, as in the case of Mechanistic philosophers of history such as Buckle, Taine, Marx or even Tocqueville, or they can be laxer, as in the case of Organicists such as Herder. Be that as it may, however, both the 'historian' and 'metahistorian', according to White, have the same intention: to create meaning out of the past[8].

White, however, does not stop there. In *Metahistory*, he provides a literary analysis of the works of some of the founders of critical, 'objective' history in the early nineteenth century, most notably Ranke – perhaps *the* founding father of 'objective' history. He shows that the way Ranke and the others shaped their presentations of historical material was ultimately the same as that of some of the great novelists of the same period – Scott, Balzac, Stendhal and Flaubert – that is, the Realists. Relying on the interpretations of literary theorists Erich Auerbach and György Lukács, White shows that the term 'realism' does not merely mean representing things "as they are", to echo Ranke's famous guiding dictum for the writing of history; realism, rather, involves a host of metaphysical and anthropological

[8] *Metahistory,* p. xxxi, ff.

assumptions about the world, namely, the belief that reality is always in flux, and that the historical period one lives in is only one in a never-ending series; the belief in historical contingency – and subsequently that humans have a certain degree of agency in shaping their own fate; and perhaps most importantly for our purposes, the ontological view that one would be able to capture and represent reality, in all its immediacy and intricacy, on paper. These presuppositions, White showed, are common to both literary as well as historical realists, and taken together, are the elements that make up historical realism's 'metahistorical' views[9].

Considering then that 'objective' history, as we established, is similarly grounded in a 'metahistory', wherefore then the reigning preference for 'objective' history as a more truthful account of reality? The reasons for this, White claims, are historical and ideological. Historical realism, he argues – just like literary realism – emerged at the same time as the liberal state – in the era after the French Revolution, with the ascendancy of the bourgeois middle class. Unsurprisingly, it also has the same normative implications required by a liberal perspective: that one could only gain access to part of the truth, not the whole truth; and that whatever truth we come to only has provisional validity. 'Objective' accounts of history thus tend to support a conservative-liberal view of the world, in the nineteenth-century sense[10]. Further, he argues, 'objective' history emerged at the same time as the academization or professionalization of historical studies – which also took place in the early nineteenth century – and reflect the historical discipline's desire to carve out an autonomous position among the human sciences, unthreatening, so to speak, to any of the others through its profession of "disinterestedness and objectivity"[11].

Metahistories, in contradistinction, tend to present a *totalistic* version of truth, and as such, they could be – and often are – threatening to the liberal order (and the liberal university) and its normative assumptions. Moreover, 'metahistories' tend to be the product of times of flux. White notes that there were certain periods in which men of letters often preferred metahistorical accounts, since these were

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[9] *Metahistory,* pp. 38-9. White's views on the genesis, and to some extent definition, of realism seem to me to be expressed most succinctly in his magisterial article "Romanticism, Historicism, and Realism: Toward a Period Concept for Early Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History", reprinted in *The Fiction of Narrative,* pp. 68-79. See also his essay "The Problem of Style in Realistic Representation: Marx and Flaubert", in ibid., pp. 169-186.

[10] White discusses the liberal worldview and its literary representation also in "The Culture of Criticism: Gombrich, Auerbach, Popper", reprinted in *The Fiction of Narrative*, pp. 98-111.

[11] White, "The Politics of Contemporary Philosophy of History", in *The Fiction of Narrative,* p. 140. This article is White's most articulate elaboration on the differences between 'proper history' and 'philosophy of history'. See also the anthology devoted to this subject, *Philosophy of History After Hayden White,* edited by Robert Doran, (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

able to make sense of reality in a way that simply exceeded the abilities of straightforward histories[12]. Examples which come to mind – and which White himself mentions – are the Fall of the Roman Empire, which gave us Augustine, and the Fall of the British Empire, which gave us Toynbee[13]. His final word on the matter, therefore, is that one could criticize 'metahistories' on the grounds of their ideological implications, but one cannot claim, as many historians still do, that they are a less legitimate source of truth than the kind of history practiced in most history departments today.

III.

At this point, I want to come to a consideration of the possibility of a theological view of history in light of White's analysis. Now, I said in my introductory remarks that we may only *begin* to use White's analysis to make a case for a theologically-inspired account of the historical process. This is because White does not try to promote in his writings a specifically theological account. In fact, he does not promote any one view of the historical process, religious or otherwise. Personally, he was probably more inclined towards a Marxist interpretation, but ultimately, he did not claim for himself the ability to judge – or advise – on what is a more "correct" view of the past; as I mentioned earlier, he was unconcerned with "the Truth". All that he has done is show us that 'history' and 'metahistory' are not as different as one may at first assume, and thus hopefully dispel some of the prejudice that exists in favor of the former, in particular in academia.

This leaves us with several problems. One of them is the problem of Scripture. For even if he enables us to be more disposed towards an Augustinian or Biblical conception of history – or at least not to be biased against them – he does not provide us with tools to assess the validity of the Sacred Texts on which such conceptions of history are based.

Another problem is one alluded to earlier: his "agnosticism" towards the ends of history. In other words, White does not provide us with tools for choosing between Augustine and Marx. This reminds me of the conundrum faced by the liberal philosopher Richard Rorty after considering the full implications of his own philosophy; after spending years advocating a relativistic approach in the

[12] Dawson makes this point to some extent as well: "Historians today are in revolt against the metahistory of Hegel and Croce and Collingwood, not because it is metahistorical, but because they feel it to be the expression of a philosophical attitude that is no longer valid; just as the liberal historians of the eighteenth century revolted against the theological metahistory of the previous period" (p. 305).

[13] *The Fiction of Narrative,* p. 16.

hope that it would create a more humane and tolerant world, ultimately had to concede that at bottom, his thought was "neutral between Hitler and Jefferson". Now I am not saying that White's ideas suffer from the same implications – although I recognize that many have. I merely want to point out that as scholars and perhaps as individuals of faith, can we really discard the choice between Augustine and Marx?

There are of course many other problems one can think of. Nonetheless, disabusing us of our prejudices about the supposedly-proper way to conduct historical research is no small feat. For now we may perhaps begin to find our way out of the dilemmas that have plagued us since the emergence of modern, critical history, and once more to take religious interpretations of history seriously. Even further, we can perhaps stop being dogged by so-called fidelity to history, and return once again to address the values that guide it.