

HISTORY : THREEFOLD OR FOURFOLD ?

History, like Caesar's Gaul, is divided into three parts. We have Antiquity, Middle Ages and Modern History. True enough, there have been some subdivisions, in particular in Modern History where often contemporary history has become a subject in its own right. Still, however, the basic division remains a threepartite one. It reaches back to a professor of the University of Halle, in Germany, Christoph Cellarius (1634-1707) who, in 1693, published his *Compendia of World-History*. As the main periods of history he distinguished : *historia antiqua* - *historia medii aevi* - *historia nova*. The idea in itself was already more than a century old : to the sixteenth-century humanists the 'middle ages' were a barbaric period between the splendour of Antiquity and its revival in their own age. This new principle of subdividing history finally triumphed over all others although the last adherents of an older method capitulated only at the end of the eighteenth century. Since then, the new threepartite division seems as natural as the phases of the moon - which, by the way, are also three in number.

There have been other divisions in vogue. In the beginning of the fifth century Saint Augustine divided the whole of history into six periods corresponding with the six days of creation according to Genesis (in his view signifying the six ages of the world) as well as with the six ages of man. At the same time the six ages of the world corresponded with those of man. Augustine believed himself living in the sixth and last age of the world which was, therefore, one of senility and decay. This pessimistic view of history is perfectly understandable if we realize that Augustine lived in the declining years of the Roman Empire. He saw the Vandals coming and died just one year before they captured and pillaged Hippo Regius, his episcopal see in present-day Tunisia, in 431.

The gloomy view that Saint Augustine took of history was the principal reason why medieval historiographers abandoned his periodization. Instead, not a sixfold but a fourfold division of world-history was generally accepted based as it was on the prophecies of the Book of Daniel. In this Bible-book the number 'four' is highly important. In Chapter 2 the statue of Nabuchodonosor II consists of four metals, gold for the head, silver for the chest and arms, bronze for the thighs and belly, iron (mixed with earthenware) for the legs and feet. In Chapter 7 four animals come out of the sea, a lion, a bear, a leopard (with four wings and four heads) and yet another, phantastic animal. In Chapter 8 a buck-goat appears with one horn; as soon as he comes to full dominion this one horn is broken off and replaced by four others.

With respect to our subject it is very important that these four animals

signify four monarchies : "earthly kingdoms they betoken" (7:17). These four kingdoms are : 1. the Babylonian Empire 2. the Median Empire 3. the Persian Empire 4. the Empire of Alexander the Great (with the Diadochi kingdoms). This already is an interpretation for the book itself does not say so literally. Let us again throw a look now at that enormous statue of Nabuchodonosor II. As is not unusual in the history of religions it represents an image of the world and its history. It is, therefore, a kind of 'microcosmos'. The head is the heaven, the eyes sun and moon, the brains the ether, breast and back the air, the belly the earth, the legs the sea and the feet the roots. Thus it is a sample of what is called 'astral geography'. The metals remind us of the colours of the 'planets'. The sun is of gold, the moon of silver, etc. Normally there are seven metals and seven 'planets'; each planet was said to dominate a special period of world-history. So there is not only 'astral geography' but also 'astral history'. However, this number of seven - the sun, the moon, and the five planets that are visible with the naked eye - could easily be an extension of an older division into four : four periods of history dominated by four planets - the sun, the moon and the two most conspicuous planets, Venus and Juppiter -, and corresponding with the four winds. This is a division that is more obvious and might, therefore, be the original one, being older than a more sophisticated partition into seven. We find it back in the four metals of the royal statue.

In his prophecy Daniel is harking back to this venerable idea of four periods of world-history corresponding with the very structure of the cosmos itself. It was seen by medieval historians as biblical and, therefore, as revealed by God to mankind. This fourfold partition of world-history into four monarchies continued to dominate historiography till far into the eighteenth century. Not only the Reformation but even the Renaissance clung to it. We find the four monarchies in the first historical handbook, the 'Chronicon Carionis Philippicum' (1558-1560) by Philippus Melanchthon, and, by definition, in 'De quatuor summis imperiis' (also known as 'De quatuor monarchiis')(1556) by Johannes Sleidanus. These two, contemporaneous, works gave the last great impulse to the already challenged notion of a fourfold division of history, the more so since both works were used as textbooks for the study of history. The Chronicon was reprinted and translated over and over again; of 'De Monarchiis' there are more than eighty editions (often with additions) and translations (five editions in English). It was only in the later eighteenth century that they began to lose ground. The last historian to use the fourfold division in an original work was the German professor J.G. Jan in his 'Antiquae et pervulgatae de quattuor monarciis sententiae' that appeared in 1712 and was reprinted in 1728. This work, however, already has a distinctly defensive ring.

That the time-honoured scheme of the four periods of world-history lost ground and finally was abandoned : is the outcome of irrefutable criticisms levelled against it. The first of these, but not the least important, is that the Daniel prophecy is a prophecy 'ex eventu', after the event, that is to say, no prophecy at all. Medieval authors neglected the fact that the Hebrew Bible grouped Daniel not with the 'prophecies' but with the 'writings', together with Psalms, Job, Proverbs, etc. - that is, therefore, not with the prophesying books but with the works of religious interpretation. The old thesis that 'Daniel' was written by a Jew (called Daniel) who was deported to Babylonia in 605 B.C. had already been attacked by Porphyry in 304 B.C. It was only after Anthony Collins had resumed the attack in 1724 that it became generally accepted that the Book of Daniel was written between 167 and 163 B.C. - centuries after Nabuchodonosor II. Its aim was not to prophesy but to fortify the Jews of that period who were cruelly persecuted by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Seleucid king of Syria.

A second point is that Daniel's original division is not fourfold but five-fold. For in the Bible text the fourth kingdom (and this is, of course, the Seleucid kingdom) will be followed by the Kingdom of the Son of Man whose reign will be everlasting (7:13-14). The meaning is obvious : all earthly powers are finite, they will all end ingloriously, even the reign of those horrible Seleucids; God is the Lord of history, and in the end the just will enter the Kingdom of the Son of Man. It is not only in our utterly secularized historiography that this last and most essential kingdom has been completely forgotten!

This fourfold scheme is often seen as fundamentally Christian; Karl Heussi even called it 'the specifically Christian picture of history'. But how Christian, or rather how biblical, is it really? First of all, Daniel's author surely did not intend to provide historians with a handy scheme of world-history. Still more important is the fact that the original scheme (if it is a scheme) has been noiselessly but substantially modified. The two kingdoms of the Medes and the Persians were combined in order to create room for a new fourth one, the Roman Empire (which for Daniel played no role at all). A second drastic innovation was that the Holy Roman Empire 'deutscher Nation' of the Middle Ages was assumed to be the direct continuation of the Roman Empire. Only in this way the original 'prophecy' could be adapted to Christian historiography. The steadily diminishing importance of the Holy Roman Empire unsettled the old notion still more; other peoples became less and less ready to accept this phantom empire as the pivot of world-history.

Opposite, but also underneath, this venerable fourfold scheme we find another partition, one into three. This too has a Christian and biblical background. In the preface of the *Chronicon* its author, Melanchthon, tells us that the world will exist six thousand years. The first two thousand of these were 'empty', two thousand were the years of the (Jewish) Law, the last two thousand form the period of the Messiah. When Melanchthon wrote his book the Messiah period had already lasted more than three quarters of its allotted time. He had found this piece of information in Jewish Bible commentaries (he knew Hebrew); they, in their turn, had found it in the Talmud. It is called the 'vaticinium Eliae', the 'maxim of Elijah' and has an eschatological ring since the third period will also be the last. The 'vaticinium' has nothing to do with the biblical prophet Elijah nor can it be found elsewhere in the Bible; the Talmud book in which it occurs for the first time dates only from the second century A.D. Although he does not mention it, Sleidanus too must have known the 'vaticinium' since also in his work there will be two thousand years after the advent of the Messiah. Like Melanchthon he detected many signs of the impending end : the diminishing power of the Emperor, the impact of popish superstition, and the onslaught of the Turks.

However important this threefold division may have been, it was not the one that had the future before it. At the end of the twelfth century an abbot lived in the southernmost part of Italy, Calabria, called Joachim da Fiore (he died in 1202). This man developed a view of history that was radically different from that of his medieval contemporaries and later authors. According to him world-history had to be divided into three parts. The first part was the period of the Old Testament, and this he called the age of God the Father. The second period is still going on; it had started with the coming of the Messiah and was called by him the age of the Son. The third dispensation was still to come (soon, Joachim thought), the age of the Holy Spirit. This third age would last until Doomsday; religion would be completely purified and the pope would be a deeply spiritual and holy, even an 'angelic', person.

Of course, it is not difficult at all to see a wish-dream in Joachim's scheme - what with the inextricable entanglement of spiritual and worldly interests in the Church of the Later Middle Ages. But this must not be our focus of attention. Two other things may claim our attentiveness still more. First of all, contrary to the current schemes, this is a trinal division which, inevitably in this Christian era, becomes a Trinitarian one. Second, this scheme too has an eschatological meaning for the third and most important age was still to come. This means that Joachim, as the only medieval historian, was looking forward instead of backward as all others did. For even in the opinion of the Reformation and the Renaissance the really essential revelations (Pytha-

goras, Plato, the Bible, etc.) were given in the past; the olden times could never be equalled. This is exactly what Cornelis Verhoeven meant when he wrote : "In the conception of the Ancients history is an attempt to reconstitute an ideal from the past, in the modern view it is an attempt to reach a mythical future". This brings us to a third new element : contrary to the gloomy Doomsday expectations of medieval and later historians, Joachim's view of history is optimistic and progressive.

His brandnew ideas did not create a furore. It is true that this new view of history did not go completely unheeded; for dreamers and visionaries of the following centuries they often were 'gefundenes Fressen'. This is what Marjorie Reeves tells us in her excellent book 'Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future' (London, 1976). But the historians mainly disregarded what he had brought forward and continued to utilize the traditional fourfold scheme. More than six centuries later, however, Joachimite ideas came to the surface again in Hegel's 'Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte' (being his lectures 1820-1831 at the University of Berlin). In these lectures there is still a distant echo of the division of world-history into four parts. This occurs where he describes the ancient eastern empires as the childhood of history, the Greeks as the adolescence, the Roman world as full maturity, and the 'Germanic' (not the German) Empire as its old age. However, Hegel is taking liberties with the old scheme. The Roman Empire has now become the third kingdom, and the Germanic Empire an independent fourth one. Furthermore, he does not call them 'empires' but 'moments of world-history'. What is more important, the sequence has now assumed a definitely different character because the criterion has become a biological one.

The essential thing, however, is that, like Joachim da Fiore, Hegel divides world-history into three main sections : 1. the submersion of the Spirit into naturalness 2. the emergence of the Spirit to the consciousness of freedom 3. the lifting up of the Spirit out of the realm of individual freedom into that of general freedom. This is no longer a division on a biological basis but a theological one. Literally Hegel says : "We may distinguish those periods as the realms of the Father, the Son and the Spirit". Once again we are confronted with a Trinitarian system of world-history; once again the third dispensation, that of the Spirit and of general freedom, is still to come (although Hegel considered the Reformation to be its first true beginning). Hegel's view of history too was optimistic and progressive, in accordance with his dialectical philosophy.

Progress and optimism became the catchwords of modern historiography. This includes some measure of eschatology for the best is still to come : the fulfilment of democracy, general world peace, the equality of all men, fair chances for everyone, the perfectly harmonious life. Here we are not so far

from Joachim's and Hegel's 'triumph of the Spirit'. However, it is a thoroughly secularized eschatology for the historical fulfilment will take place 'in hoc saeculo', within the context of world-history.

Did Hegel borrow his ideas from Joachim? On the surface of it this seems very probable since the Joachimite and Hegelian versions look so similar. However, there is no indication whatsoever that Hegel ever consulted the tomes of Joachim themselves. Even to-day they are difficult to come by; there are no modern editions of them. In the excellent 'Hegel-Lexicon' compiled by Hermann Glockner (Stuttgart, 1935-1939) there are no references to Joachim da Fiore, neither under the heading 'Joachim' nor under that of 'Fiore'. There is also no mention of them in Hegel's letters (edited by Johannes Hoffmeister, Hamburg, 1925-1966, which collection has an excellent register). However, Hegel certainly knew Lessing's 'Über die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts' (1780) in which the author writes of 'enthusiasts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries" whose ideas on "the 'Three Ages of the World' were not so empty a speculation after all". But the name of Joachim da Fiore is not mentioned by Lessing.

There exists a book by the Italian scholar Galvano della Volpe that may bring us considerably further ('Le origini e la formazione della dialettica hegeliana. Vol. I Hegel romantico e filosofo (1793-1800)'. Firenze, 1929). Della Volpe bypasses Lessing and brings us straight to the source of Hegel's Trinitarianism, this being the ideas of the medieval German mystic Meister Eckhart. Hegel was then (1796-1797) 'Hauslehrer' in Berne; he had just freed himself from the shackles of the Enlightenment and its rationalism. Under the influence of his friends Schiller and Hölderlin he had turned to a mystical pantheism. At the end of his period at Berne the young erudite made excerpts of Eckhart.

According to Eckhart's doctrine the Trinity is not so much a state of the godhead but rather a process (and processes suited Hegel's philosophy better than states). In the process of the Trinity God knows himself because He thinks himself. He is the Father in the way He knows; in the way He knows himself, He is the Son (or the Word); the Holy Ghost is the connection between the Father and the Son. The union between the Father and the Son is the unity of the Intellect, of Thought. These are Hegelian concepts, couched in terms that are distinctly Hegelian. But the remarkable thing is that their origin is Eckhartian. Hegel was influenced very much by this (not orthodox) doctrine. He uses his cardinal concept of the 'Geist' for the first time in the 'Fragment des Systems', dated October 14, 1800. According to Della Volpe this is the very first beginning of Hegelian dialectics. It would be a fine thing if we could find a (direct or indirect) link between Eckhart and Joachim da Fiore.

If a reader could give me information on this subject I would be delighted.

Hegel's Trinitarian concept, as he presented it, did not strike root. The fact is that he probably was already too late whereas Joachim was too early. The threepartite division of history, introduced by Cellarius in 1693, had been steadily gaining ground since then and was, in Hegel's days, completely in control of the situation. Hegel's Trinitarian notion might have provided it with a new theology but Cellarius' scheme was an utterly secularized one leaving no room for biblical or theological speculations of any kind. Its most intriguing characteristic is not so much that it treated the Middle Ages so denigratingly (which certainly was one of its objects) but rather that, after the reign of the number 'four', it reinstated the rule of the number 'three'.

In the mental history of mankind 'three' has older rights than 'four'. Four certainly has a special meaning but 'three' was really a sacred number. It is difficult to say what precisely is the origin of this sacred character. Anyhow, it is not the Trinity - this being a very late, so to speak only recent, conception. As I already suggested in the beginning of this essay we may think of the three phases of the moon. The different shapes of the mysterious 'Queen of the Night' doubtless played their role in this respect. Probably older, because less 'sophisticated', is the 'holy trinity' of father-mother-child, the most original and authentic 'chain of being'. Of the several sacred numbers 'three' has always been the most sacred, from the three steps that lead up to a Greek temple to the theological notion of the Holy Trinity. Even we, urbanized and secularized mortals of the twentieth century, say 'three for luck' and 'third time lucky', we cheer three times, and let races start by counting to three. We still consider it the most propitiate number.

However, sacred as it is, three is not an originally Christian number. By choosing it as the basis of his new historical system Cellarius took one more long stride in the direction perhaps not yet of the secularization of history as rather of its dechristianization. It is true, of course, that the fourfold division was not authentically Christian or biblical either. The important thing, however, is that Cellarius and his contemporaries, just like most historians of our own day, considered it as a perfectly Christian scheme. Anyhow, if the fourfold scheme was an 'ideological' one - as it assuredly was -, the threepartite division is exactly as 'ideological' and not at all self-evident or natural. Therefore, it seems necessary to me that we reconsider it, in particular with respect to the needs of modern historical education.

Piet F.M. Fontaine
Amsterdam NL