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Making Sense of History

Henri-Irénée Marrou's Theological Scope

Henri-Irénée Marrou is a well-known French historian, who lived between the years 1904 and 1977. He specialized in late Antiquity and early Middle Ages, and wrote extensively about the Fathers of the Church, particularly St. Augustine. Among his works are *De la connaissance historique*, in which he examines history and its challenges; *Théologie de l'histoire*, which analyzes the global problems of history and time from the point of view of a Christian historian; *Histoire de l'éducation dans l'Antiquité*; and *Décadence romaine ou Antiquité tardive*.

The aim of this article is to describe Marrou's vision of the meaning of history, a vision that takes its fundamental elements from his Catholic faith, but is also shaped by his personal commitments as a citizen in his own time and place. To achieve this aim, I have studied his *Théologie de l'histoire*, but also some other of his writings, especially *L'ambivalence du temps chez Saint Augustin* and his article "Tristesse de l'historien." After a short introduction sketching Marrou's life and work, I will explain his critiques to those who forget the eschatological dimension of faith and to some philosophers, who pretend to know the laws of history or, on the contrary, think that history is nonsensical. Secondly, I will develop the main lines of Marrou's

arguments: the responsibility in the building of the *civitas terrena*; the coexistence of good and evil in this world; and the renewal of eschatology. In all of these, the influence of Augustine's teachings is clear and acknowledged by Marrou.

1. Introduction: The Man and His Work

Understanding human beings involves, as Henri-Irénée Marrou often repeated, the ability to achieve a "sympathetic understanding" of them. This implies developing genuine friendships, "inserting" oneself into the vital circumstances of a friend's life, and from that point trying to understand his or her actions and choices. Marrou was, as his disciple Pierre Riché rightly defined him, an "*historien engagé*,"[1] a committed man. He was committed to his faith, his homeland, and his profession, which he always perceived as a forum for serving the truth. Because of this, I shall begin by saying a few words about how these various commitments influenced his work.

The first aspect that should be pointed out is that he was a Christian; more specifically, a Catholic who sought to live out his life in a manner consistent with his faith and who was troubled by the vicissitudes that his Church was experiencing at the time. Referring to his *Théologie de l'histoire*, he stated that the book was "no more than a simple meditation on the second plea in the Lord's Prayer: 'Thy Kingdom come.' Yes; although we repeat them so often, do we really know what these words mean?"[2]

This work, written immediately after the Second Vatican Council, develops some of the key issues discussed at that assembly: The nature of the Church as the "People of God," together with a recognition of its community-based features (without abandoning the personal dimension of the relationship with God) and the role played by the laity in the Church and the common priesthood of the faithful; as well as the links between Church and culture.

Soon after we begin reading *Théologie de l'histoire*, it strikes us that we are being given a glimpse into the author's private thoughts, and

that he is not only posing questions about the fate of his civilization and the meaning of this never-ending flow of cultures throughout history, but also, above all, about how he, as a Christian, should live if he is to use his own life to help build the City of God:

> This is not about producing a new treatise on apologetics; before seeking the conversion of others, which is always easy (at least on paper), one should strive to convert oneself. At the doctrinal level, one should first ask oneself what one's profession of faith means and, most particularly, if this can shed light on one's path (and how this can happen) and guide one's conduct through the dense and ominous jungle that is history.[3]

The second point involves the historical circumstances Marrou was called upon to live. After reading his work, it can be said that his experience of the two world wars—particularly the second, in which he was more directly involved—marked him deeply. The following harshly realistic passage contains, apparently, not the slightest glimmer of hope:

> For the men of my generation, a vision of history such as I have outlined . . . [is] the bitter fruit of experience: . . . "We civilizations are now aware of why we are mortal." The truth is that history appears before us as the graveyard of dead civilizations or, more precisely, of civilizations that were stillborn, of developments interrupted no sooner begun, of embryonic political or social configurations, of saturated maturities untrue to the promises of youth, . . . of monstrous senilities.[4]

Théologie de l'histoire, published in 1968, is full of references to the state of the world as from the 1930s: the rise of totalitarian regimes, the lack of freedom, the transition from blind faith in progress to a philosophy of the absurd, the technical achievements of the developed world, and the poverty of the Third World. In addition, there is no shortage of references to the situation in colonial territories,

particularly, the case of Algeria. This welter of successive and overlapping events led people at that time to frequently question the sense of history: "There cannot be anyone among us who, during the course of these difficult years, has failed to perceive, on some days more tragically than on others, as if illuminated by a radiance perforating the apocalyptic night, the radical contingency of the earthly city. And this experience, like the sack of Rome by Alaric's Visigoths for Augustine's contemporaries, holds for those who have lived through it, the value of permanence."[5] Thus, a strongly existential tone pervades the whole of this work, a tone that is intensified by the wealth of contemporary examples he draws from. Actually, the fact that he is a professional historian gives his work a distinctive characteristic. It was often held that the philosophy of history was not an appropriate field for historians. In his work *De la connaissance historique*, Marrou confronts this prejudice from the start: "It should come as no surprise that I, a professional historian, should speak in the manner of a philosopher: it is my right and my duty. The time has come to react against this inferiority complex (which is also a superiority complex; psychology has exposed the ambivalence and the moral issues surrounding this pride-motivated ruse) that historians have felt for far too long with regard to philosophy."[6] And to make his position very clear, he concludes: "As a parody of Plato's maxim, we shall place the following inscription on the façade of our Propylæa: 'Let no man enter here who is not a philosopher.'"[7]

I believe that Marrou's dual nature as historian and philosopher provides him with a number of very interesting tools with which to underpin his thinking. Throughout *Théologie de l'histoire* there are precise indications of events from which he derives conclusions for his philosophical and theological position regarding history. First, as an historian specializing in late Antiquity, he cites examples of personalities and events of that period, displaying his extensive knowledge of patristic literature. In addition, toward the end of his work, his calling enables him to deliver a sharp critique regarding certain

conceptions of the Middle Ages, as well as of the "liberal Europe" period that immediately preceded his own generation.

As an historian, he can state that, due to his profession, he has grown accustomed to and even weary of recording the ravages of sin and its duplicities.[8] His experiences laid bare to him the sinister side of history: suffering, bereavement, failure, unfinished work, early death, violence, oppression, and hypocrisy. It even seemed that evil was more visible than good.[9]

This pessimistic outlook in relation to his profession is also apparent in an article published in the review *Esprit* in 1939, with the significant title "*Tristesse de l'historien*." Overwhelmed by the crisis that was about to erupt, he claimed that historians were the first to be swept away by a culture that failed to acknowledge their importance:

> When suddenly the modern spirit began to have misgivings about itself, its mission, its greatness, its future; it was not our discoveries, our teachings and our poor conjectures that seemed a sufficient buttress to which to cling. Indeed, we were called upon as witnesses one final time, witnesses of despair and uncertainty. . . . We were called upon to witness the fundamental relativism of all faiths and all human institutions: We shared with ethnologists the honor of nourishing the despair of a diseased culture, uncertain of itself and of everything else.[10]

As an historian who reflected upon the sense of history, his thinking was always anchored in reality; he avoided the excesses of abstraction and theorization in which he might have indulged had he not been sufficiently aware of the sequence of events over the course of time.

Here, we could benefit from a short review of one of Marrou's fields of study, late Antiquity.[11] This was one of those periods that played a pivotal role in history, when many things ended and many others emerged. A period that witnessed the downfall and decline of one civilization and the birth of another, the study of which is often overlooked by many in their fascination with other, more dazzling

eras. Periods such as this lead to a deeper consideration of time and the impermanence of cultures and of all human endeavors. Marrou himself made this point when he compared the unceasing succession and resumption of civilizations to the "labors of Sisyphus."[12] At the same time, this period beset by deep crises enabled him to determine

> everywhere, triumphant sin, evil that prevails over the forces of good: An empirical observation shows that the earthly city is nothing less than a distortion of that prefiguration of the City of God that might have been and that it has frequently sought to be. Once again we find in collective history the same experience of failure that we find on a moral plane in personal lives: "I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do."[13]

Before concluding this introduction, just a few words about Marrou's interest in musicology and how this may have influenced his thinking. One of the chapters of *Théologie de l'histoire* is actually called "*Le temps musical*," and in it he refers to an image that is very dear to Augustine: the course of history is *tamquam pulcherrimum carmen*, like a most beautiful song. Throughout his work he frequently makes comparisons based on music; for example, he uses the term *tempo* to indicate that the rhythm of civilization is faster than that of Christianization.[14] He confronts the "monody" of those who might wish for the entirely regular and predictable development of history with the term "polyphony," which is actually a more appropriate image, as it is impossible to get an impression of the whole melody until the final note has been played.[15]

> We should represent the development of history according to this model. God, creator of the Universe, also mandates and governs the development of time, *sicut creator ita moderator*, and history could, in truth, be compared to an immense concert directed by His almighty hand, *velut magnum carmen cuiusdam ineffabilis modulatoris*. Only God knows where it is headed:

> from within history itself we must proclaim that it has not yet concluded, that it can always be reborn and renewed, that it will not achieve its full meaning until it reaches the end.[16]

2. The Debt to St. Augustine

As we know, Marrou devoted himself very early on to the study of Augustine and his period. On the very first page of his presentation of *Théologie de l'histoire* he stated: "What follows . . . has emerged entirely from, and been nourished constantly by, my extensive contact with the works of St. Augustine, particularly with *The City of God*. Anything of value that my reflections may contain is due to his teachings: readers will be aware of this at every step."[17]

In *L'ambivalence du temps de l'histoire chez Saint Augustine*, which was based on a course that Marrou delivered in Canada in 1950, he states that, in view of the increasing preoccupation with reflection upon the sense of history, a Christian thinker should be, as the Gospels say, "like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old." Because of this, his intention was to reflect upon history by shedding light on some of the lesser-known aspects of Augustine. When a period is in need of profound renovation, the deeper it sinks its roots into the boundless treasures of tradition, the more authentic this renewal will be. He also underscores the remarkable correlation between the doctrine contained in *The City of God* and that of Aquinas and states that Augustine's historical teachings were the common heritage of European culture until Nietzsche returned to the old idea of eternal recurrence.[18] In fact, the concept of history as a road toward and not as a circle that is bound to repeat itself endlessly is a Judeo-Christian idea systematized by the Bishop of Hippo. This idea spread throughout the Middle Ages, often with limited understanding of the real meaning of the works of Augustine. However, during the successive "metamorphoses of the City of God"—as Étienne Gilson[19] put it—the notion endured that the course of history is oriented toward a goal, a goal that was

secularized from Voltaire onward by the philosophies of progress. It is true, therefore, that this idea, so fertile in European thinking, is one of the debts that Western civilization owes to Augustine.

3. The Neglect of Eschatology

One of the first aspects addressed by Marrou in his work *Théologie de l'histoire* is the relationship between the development of eschatological thinking and the Christian sense of community. He maintains that the neglect of the theology of history is due, to a great extent, to the "religious individualism" present in a multitude of aspects; for example, in examinations of conscience, which hardly ever include social or economic moral issues.[20] An insistence on the problem of personal salvation necessarily leads to the blurring of the problem of history, reducing it to the sum of individual destinies.

He attributes the decline of eschatology to the awareness of living in a flourishing civilization, where it does not appear to be necessary to undertake a common task: Everything is going well and "people have to do nothing more than carefully cultivate their own little gardens." When catastrophe strikes, the experience of common misery helps to revive the concept of collectivism and questions about the sense of history become imperative.[21]

He cites the well-known theologian Henri de Lubac as a representative of new currents within Catholicism that take into account the idea of community. In his *Méditations sur l'Église*, de Lubac refers to the temptation that stalks Christians of avoiding the realities of everyday life and seeking salvation only for themselves. This is the trap of "pure interiority." It is the Church that helps us to escape from this trap, by reminding us of our social duties as well as of our earthly situation.[22]

The recovery of a sense of community is in line with the Second Vatican Council, which in its constitution *Lumen Gentium*, speaks of the Church as the "People of God," and also upholds its historical and transcendent nature. "In order to extend to all regions of the earth,

the Church enters into human history, though it transcends at once all times and all boundaries between people."[23] In this document, the concept of People of God goes hand in hand with the idea of eschatology: in fact, this People go on pilgrimage to eternity, through the difficulties of present life.

More than forty years after the publication of *Théologie de l'histoire*, its analysis continues to be remarkably relevant: We are, in fact, living in an age of absolute "presentism," where nothing—not the destiny of individual persons nor of society—appears to matter save the enjoyment of the momentary experience. To paraphrase Guitton, a contemporary of Marrou, it is a form of "time contamination" that he calls "pleasure," which is characterized by imagining that the present is eternal, but at the same time, dominated by feeling. The consequence of this deviation is the existence of human beings who are enclosed within themselves, ahistorical and without hope.[24]

The rest of Marrou's work is an attempt to answer the questions: about the ultimate meaning of history; about the numerous considerations concerning men and women who live in a society, are immersed in a culture, and also participate in another society, the Church; about men and women subjected to the constant flow of time, from which they cannot escape and that is, in fact, the medium they have been given with which to develop their freedom within a constant interaction with other human beings. A reflection that refers, on the one hand, to the vagaries of civilizations in their nature as collective enterprises and, on the other, to the personal development of every individual, particularly every Christian, in the construction of temporal civilizations and, at the same time, of the eternal city.

4. A Critique of the Philosophies of Progress and the Philosophies of the Absurd

Among other issues, Marrou's work focuses on a critique of the philosophies of progress that have been current in Western thinking,

particularly since the Enlightenment, as well as of the skeptical and nihilist positions that gained ground in response to the deep crisis of meaning that accompanied the two world wars.

The concept of progress is profoundly Christian and is applied to the Body of Christ, which grows until it achieves the measure of the perfect stature. To illustrate this idea, Augustine used the image of a single man spread over the surface of the earth, who would evolve over the course of the centuries. "As the good and wholesome instructions of a virtuous man take shape and are put to good use, thus the human race, as regards the People of God, grew with the passing of certain eras, just as one grows progressively according to one's age, so that they could evolve from the contemplation of temporal to eternal matters, from the visible to the invisible."[25]

Pascal returned to this idea, but—in a first attempt of secularization—applied it to the progress of science in Western culture. As he said: "Hence it is that by a special prerogative not only does each man advance from day to day in the sciences, but all men together make a continual progress as the universe grows old. . . . So that the whole succession of men, during the course of many ages, should be considered as a single man who subsists forever and learns continually."[26] As this concept was handed down from the medieval philosophers to Pascal, from Pascal to Voltaire, from Condorcet to Hegel and Marx, its meaning was transformed: From the spiritual growth of humanity it came to mean the growth of humanity's knowledge or technical achievements. As Marrou stated, at every stage, the idea lost something of its real content and truth.[27]

In the face of this epoch-making crisis, he asks whether it is still necessary to "point out the mythical nature of the notion of progress . . . that prevailed in Western awareness from the *Aufklärung* to the scientism of the nineteenth century"[28] and reviews the evils that came hand-in-hand with so-called technical progress in "the oppressed proletariat and the starving Third World," in the "trivialization of existence," in the "atrophy of inner life," in the "increasing alienation of consciousness, blinded to the point of stultification by the mass

media." "Today, our forebears seem to us to be sorcerer's apprentices who have unleashed a frenzied process we can no longer control and of which we remain captive."[29]

The dogmatic philosophies that attempt to learn the secret of history are the seasoned fruit of this progressivism. "And in the name of the meaning of history—he says—we have witnessed the ruthless extermination of adversaries, opponents and deviationists: Never have tyrants been more absolute, executioners more cruel than in those countries where some men have believed themselves to be the interpreters or the agents of destiny."[30]

This approach recalls that of Hannah Arendt, who was also—albeit from a different philosophical standpoint—deeply concerned about the existential and intellectual events of the twentieth century. She relates the philosophies of secularized history to totalitarianism and shows how a belief in the predetermined sense of history leads to violence. The law of nature or the law of history, appropriately implemented, will lead to the creation of humanity as its final product, but to this end, terror is essential because it "destroys the plurality of men and makes out of many the One who unfailingly will act as though he himself were part of the course of history or nature."[31]

Marrou also censures existential philosophies; in particular, those that consider that human life is meaningless and that, in view of the disasters that took place in Europe in the twentieth century, there is nothing further to hope for. In its atheist version, existentialism is a form of thinking that is entirely devoid of hope. Life is seen as absurd and history as nothing but aimless wandering: The inanity of all existence becomes manifest in all its harshness. History cannot be understood if there is no hope; these philosophies are also, therefore, radically "anti-historical."[32]

To give history new meaning, he says, it is necessary to return to the sources, return to what is told by faith, cleanse it of everything that, over the course of time, may have led it to support erroneous ideas that are far removed from the true message of the gospel. Con-

sequently, Marrou attempts to shed light on these false representations before proceeding to rebuild a Christian sense of history.[33]

5. *Civitas Dei and Civitas Terrena*

Man is not on earth only to build empires or civilizations, but "to be reunited with Christ, to be incorporated into Him, to be saved, sanctified and deified by Him and in Him." "History has a meaning, a value, a scope; it is the history of salvation."[34]

In keeping with an ancient tradition, for Marrou, a triptych is the best representation of the course of history, with the Incarnation at the center. To the left, the period of preparation, including the history of the chosen people, as well as the history of pagan peoples, who had their own role to play in this preparation. To the right, the time of grace, the time of building the Church, the time of the development up to its culmination of the mystical body of Christ, who is the "true subject of history," of this invisible history that is genuine reality. For a further explanation of this idea, Marrou quotes Fr. Sertillanges, who considers both a horizontal timeline and a vertical eternity line: "Progress in Christianity is not linear and horizontal, but vertical. It beholds eternity, not the length of time. The purpose of time is to remove from it every soul one by one. Once the number of souls anticipated by the Creator has been reached, time will end, whatever the state of humanity at that moment."[35] This is no more than a commentary on the Augustinian conception of *intentio* and *distentio*, which he explained in book XI of his *Confessions*. There, Augustine shows how human life is stretched out between the times and completely torn out. However, at the same time, humans are elevated toward a union with God, through the *intentio*. And thus, temporal development and the elevation toward eternity occur simultaneously in every human being.[36] He develops the same idea, but applied to societies, in *The City of God*, from which Marrou draws inspiration.

History, in the Christian sense, is a mystery, inasmuch as we are

ignorant of the details of the route it will take toward the end: We know what the end will be, but not how it will get there. Neither do we know how the City of God is gradually being built throughout the vicissitudes of the earthly city: "That God is, ultimately, the master of history and that He leads it according to His will towards the end that He has determined for it, is beyond doubt, but He has not revealed to us the secrets of this path. In order to decipher this mystery, it would be necessary . . . to put oneself in God's place, where His prescience and providence come together in the present of His eternity."[37] As we know, interpretations of the two Augustinian cities have given rise to countless misunderstandings throughout history. Marrou himself acknowledged that although it is clear that these are mystical cities, the use that Augustine makes of them can lead to misconceptions.[38] Thus, the earthly city is sometimes identified as the city of evil, while in other instances it is seen as the field where both mystical cities come face to face with one another.

In Christian theology, it has often been attempted to identify the progress of the visible Church with the building of the "city of God," which is, by definition, a mystical being. In this way, some thinkers confused the means with the end, "the subordinate end with the supreme end, the participated being with its essential antitype."[39] Otto de Freising, for example, upon concluding his history of the Christian empire, wrote: "it seems that I have composed not a history of two cities, but of practically one alone, which I call Church."[40]

Somewhat unconsciously, Christians acquired a distorted vision of history in which the supernatural invaded the natural preventing human freedom to act. Marrou calls it a vision of history "*mutilée et par là déjà très largement profanée*" and discovers in it, as Dilthey saw, speaking about Bossuet, "an early attempt of secularization."[41] I find this argument very interesting, because although it is a common place to identify modernity with a process of secularization, it is not common to consider this process vis à vis history, and to trace this process back to the chroniclers of the Middle Ages. "It was only necessary—Marrou concludes—for a dechristianized philosophy to

emerge one day and separate this vision of the world from its supernatural reference point, for history to emerge as a whole that is sufficient unto itself. . . . This is what came about with the philosophy of the eighteenth century."[42]

Why does Marrou speak about a "profaned history"? Because it is an attempt to know more than God himself wished to reveal to humankind: Rather than penetrating the mystery in order to attempt to understand it as such, it was sought to unveil it. Consequently, a Christian would become a kind of magician who, when confronted with any event, would be able to compartmentalize it either in the City of God, or in the *civitas diaboli*, thus setting himself up as the judge of the entire universe and, unwittingly, taking the place of God. This is why, when the anti-Christian philosophies burst upon the scene, they found the process of deconsecration so easy: the field had already been prepared by Catholics themselves!

As Dilthey acknowledged, an "absolutization of the relative" had taken place; that is, the mistaken projection of the supernatural onto the profane world, a form of "clericalization" of history. In essence, what Christian scholars had done was to eliminate any natural causes from their accounts. In keeping with medieval interpretations, Bossuet attempted to discover the action of Providence in history, and to reveal it not only backwards, but also forward. In Bossuet, there is confusion between the natural and supernatural planes. When he speaks of empires, he refers to the impermanence of earthly reigns and, at the same time, he refers to the eternal nature of the empire of Jesus Christ, an empire that will subsist in the midst of the ruins of all others.[43] By the end of his work, he conceived Providence in the manner of a deus ex machina, which is capable of bending the will of men: "This long sequence of special causes, which make and break empires, depends on the secret mandates of divine Providence. God in heaven above holds the reins of all kingdoms; He holds all of our hearts in His hand. At times He restrains passions; at others, He loosens the reins, and thus he moves all humankind."[44]

In the face of this interpretation, which is incompatible with the

freedom of humankind, Marrou's explanation allows us to view the earthly city as the place where the City of God is being built, in which its members are sanctified. Thus, he reclaims the value of the "world," which had been so deeply rejected by some forms of theology or religious practice, and rightly reappraised by Vatican II in its constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. In this document, the Church is shown as a society that exists in and for the world, but with a purpose that lies beyond it. "The Church, a 'visible social entity and spiritual community,' advances together with all of humankind; it experiences the earthly fate of being of this world and its *raison d'être* is to act as the ferment and the soul of society, which must renew itself in Christ and become the family of God."[45]

6. Dualities in History

> To a philosopher or theologian who is reflecting upon it in search of an explanation, history in fact presents itself in a guise similar to the god Janus of Roman mythology, with two faces, one sad, the other smiling, one facing good and the expansion of being, the other facing evil, dissolution, destruction, non-being, *historia anceps*, *bifrons*.[46]

For Marrou, who follows Augustine in this regard and attempts to arrive at an authentic interpretation of his thinking, a number of dualities occur in history deriving from the very nature of man: he is a sinner and he has been redeemed. The acknowledgement of an essential duality in the explanation of history is interpreted by some as the remnants of Manichaean thinking. But Marrou rejects this critical view, as it would imply perceiving all duality as dualism.

Good and evil will be present throughout the evolution of human beings. This is why he often quoted one of the Bishop of Hippo's phrases: These two cities *perplexae quippe sunt*; are absolutely interwoven, like the parable of the wheat and the darnel in the gospel. It is only at the end of time that we shall know who is chosen and who

is cast out, which actions contributed to building the City of God and which delayed it. We humans down below cannot elucidate this mystery, there are only two things we can do: Work toward building the true city and remain hopeful that, despite the evil that exists in the world—which emerges in a new shape in every generation—God is a provident Father who watches over his children. The chiaroscuro of faith, therefore, gives us access to the global sense of history, not its details nor the modalities of its realization. This truth reinforces the responsibility of our actions; it is in this historical ambiguity that we must choose—indeed, undertake—to act.[47]

The dualities involving the City of God and the earthly city, good and evil in human history, are completed by a few other opposing concepts: eternal and temporal being, and grace and sin. For Augustine—as well as for Marrou—the true being is the eternal being. Temporality appears as a kind of imperfection: From the moment life begins, everything humans are involved in leads to their death. Incorporation in time condemns a being to breakdown, to destruction.

Up to this point, Augustinian theology as interpreted by Marrou seems to be tremendously pessimistic, and to a certain extent, I believe it is. Both are overwhelmed by the events of their time: Barbarian invasions in one case; Second World War in another. However, time, that unceasing unfolding of events, that imperfection of being, is the setting in which human beings are sanctified, the setting of their redemption, the setting in which the City of God is built. Thus is time redeemed, according to St. Paul's advice: *redimentes tempus quoniam dies mali sunt*.[48] But it is only through the action of grace that time is "redeemed" and acquires the role of preparing humans for eternal life.

Time, as it is experienced in history, is presented under a double semblance: It is, simultaneously, the time of (wounded by sin) nature and the time of grace; time of sin and time of salvation. Nonetheless, much as these values belong to two differing ontological orders, they are, in fact, inseparably linked. This ambivalence of time endows

history with a radical ambiguity that cannot exceed current human knowledge. An ambiguity with dramatic or, more appropriately, in Aristotelian terms, tragic characteristics.[49]

7. *History and Eschatology*

Using Ranke's words as a springboard, "Every age is next to God, every generation is equidistant from God" (in which the Platonic influence is noticeable), Marrou attempts to explain the relationship between time and eternity. On the one hand, this phrase acts as a curb to progressivism by assigning value to each of the historical ages, to each generation. On the other hand, the author wants to show how every moment of our lives has, at the same time, the value of eternity, "eschatology is always present, confronting every one of us, on our immediate horizon," something of the solemnity of the final hour "is projected upon each of the instants of my life," "it is time as a whole that appears to be imbued with an eschatological quality."[50]

This truth, which is applicable to each of us, can also be applied to the history of humanity: Although the full culmination of God's plan will not be achieved until the final day, "it is false to imagine that everything is reserved for that future. In fact, this culmination accompanies and supports the development of the course of history."[51]

Marrou refers to this eschatology as "inchoate" or "inchoative," in keeping with the words of the gospel: "The kingdom of God is within you."[52] This is an active waiting (which explains the use of images such as building a city or a temple, the development of the mystical body): "the notion of inchoateness, of progressive development, makes it possible to understand that while it is perfectly real, its Messianic character is still in process, *in fieri*."[53]

8. *Christian Freedom and Action*

The concept of inchoate eschatology leads to a better understanding of Marrou's statements regarding the actions of Christians in history.

This Kingdom of God, which "is now," but, in a sense, "is not yet," invites Christians to do all they can to turn it into a reality in their personal and social lives, rejecting any form of passiveness: "At every crossroads over the course of time, new initiatives can once again set in motion the ineffable melody, the *pulcherrimum carmen* that seemed, perhaps, to head towards a conclusion that was thought to have already been attained."[54]

In this respect, Marrou places particular value on the common priesthood of the faithful. We are "part of the holy nation, of the race of priests, responsible for praying and ensuring worship and, in sum, of sanctifying humankind in its peregrination through temporality."[55] Here, too, the coincidence with the doctrine of Vatican II is discernible. In its constitution *Lumen Gentium*, the truth regarding the "race of priests" is rediscovered:

> Christ the Lord, High Priest taken from among men (cf. Heb. 5:1–5) made the new people "a kingdom and priests to God, His Father" (Apoc. 1–6; cf. 5:9–10). The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light (cf. 1 Pt. 2, 4–10).[56]

In light of this truth, Christians must return to a consideration of the meaning of being "the salt of the earth." Salt is imbued with profound liturgical meaning, since Mosaic Law established that salt should be added to every offering. In view of this, Marrou concludes: "Indeed, the earth, humanity, history cannot constitute acceptable offerings if they are lacking in the seasoning of our salt."[57]

This will be even more apparent in the times ahead, when Christians will doubtless be a minority. It seems significant that Benedict XVI referred to this very matter in his book *Salt of the Earth*, an interview published when he was still Cardinal Ratzinger: "Christian-

ity will offer models of life in new ways, and will once again present itself in the wasteland of technological existence as a place of true humanity."[58]

So, as a minority but at the same time as the "salt of the earth" and participating in Christ's priesthood, how must Christians conduct themselves? They should avoid any kind of false otherworldliness; any thought that the course of history is a time that should be devoted only to penitence, to sanctity, without regard for the work carried out in that time by men:

> Owing to our human condition, we are inserted within the world; that is, in temporality, in history and, specifically, in that of a particular social environment, of a nation or an empire, and of a civilization. Nobody can avoid this; nobody, without deceiving himself, can expect to escape. The potential of our nature as human beings is not realized; the man that I am truly becomes a man only from the moment when and to the extent that this potential takes shape, making use of the means of action provided by the different techniques available in his surroundings and in his civilization.[59]

In keeping with Augustine, *totum exigit te qui fecit te*—he who made you demands the whole of you—Marrou strongly rejects any proposal that attempts to establish a division in human beings between what can be sanctified and what belongs only to the worldly sphere.

> When He bids us to love Him with all our heart, all our soul and all our mind, God has not left out of that love any part of our lives to repose in the possession of anyone other than Himself; all that we are capable of loving must be carried along as if by a torrent, the torrent of true love of God, which does not allow for any outflow that may diminish it.[60]

Marrou perceived that Christian spirituality had not insisted as much as it should have on this historical condition of human beings. It is

not enough to offer our actions to God, we must also act fittingly, and this implies respecting the nature of things, handling ourselves effectively in order to have a good command of specific techniques:

> If we are not content with sprinkling our activities with pious intentions, but, conversely, aspire to insert value—in terms of the City of God—within and in the very heart of our actions, our efforts in search of spiritualization must respect the autonomy of technical methods, with their own rules, their internal logic and, it has to be said, their inertia and solidity, before arranging them in keeping with the ultimate purpose.[61]

This work that we offer to God should, therefore, have its own value, and, for this sake, it must be technically well done and must be a contribution to the benefit and improvement of society. This proposition seems to be well suited to Christians of our times, who must assimilate into a secularized society and within it be capable of bearing witness "to the Kingdom." In fact, there are many similarities between Marrou's discourse and those of the last popes.

All of which leads to the conclusion that Christians must love their own time, the time in which it is their lot to live. Because of this, Marrou reacted strongly against nostalgia, such as that evinced by authors like Chateaubriand, who yearned for the days when all of society seemed to be imbued with Christian values. As an historian, he knew that this was not the case and he devoted several chapters to proving it.[62]

This is the time that must be sanctified; it is the customs and institutions of this time that Christians must attempt to improve. This leads to a further important issue regarding the relationship between the Church and culture. "Represented by men, and having to act upon men, [the Church] cannot remain indifferent to the evolution of this civilization, in the heart of which history has inserted it. She must pray for it, evangelize it, make it the object of its preaching, call it insistently to conversion, purify it."[63] Each Christian is therefore

responsible for searching to infuse Christian values in the civilization in which he lives, without fearing modernity but, instead, becoming fully involved in his own time.

9. Conclusion

At the end of this article, it will be useful to recall some of the main ideas developed by Marrou on the subject of theology of history.

1. History is a mystery, in which two freedoms—divine and human—appear intermingled. However, it is ultimately God's will; he is the Lord of history.

2. This dualism can be represented as the two faces of the god Janus: City of God and earthly city; grace and sin; good and evil. Eternal being and temporal being are always intermingled, *perplexæ*.

3. For this reason, human progress is always mixed up with evil, and true progress in history is mostly the pilgrimage of humanity to eternity.

4. Though "civilizations are always mortal," this is not enough reason to suffocate hope: Christians maintain hope because they know they are always in God's hands.

5. Marrou's insistence on God's dominion over history does not mean he diminishes human roles. On the contrary, he states there has been a "profanation" or "clericalization" of history, whenever it has been interpreted as the invasion of the supernatural on the natural, thus suppressing human freedom.

6. Christians should be in our times "salt of the earth," that is, they ought to be involved in every human concern, always respecting the particular rules of techniques and human labor, and seeking to transform the world in an offering to God.

7. By "inchoative eschatology," Marrou means that the kingdom of God starts in this world: all Christians should be aware of the building of this kingdom, which requires bearing in mind eternal life, as well as the true responsibility of each Christian for the community as a whole.

It has been the desire of many to hold all of the threads of history in their hands, to turn that polyphonic song into a monody whose evolution and ending are known. However, history will not reveal its true meaning until it ends: this is its mystery.

Notes

1. Pierre Riché, *Henri-Irénée Marrou, historien engagée* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2003).
2. Henri-Irénée Marrou, *Théologie de l'histoire* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2012), 13. The translations, in all cases, are mine.
3. Ibid., 14–15.
4. Ibid., 176–77.
5. Ibid., 16–17.
6. Henri-Irénée Marrou, *De la cnnaissance historique* (Paris: Du Seuil, 2009), 8.
7. Ibid., 9.
8. Marrou, *Théologie*, 159.
9. Cf. ibid., 52.
10. Cf. Henri-Irénée Marrou,"*Tristesse de l'historien*," *Esprit* (1939), reprinted in *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d'histoire* 45 (1995): 109–32, accessed October 15, 2014, http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/xxs_0294-1759_1995_num_45_1_3388. It was originally published with his pseudonym Henri Davenson.
11. In fact, one of Marrou's best works is *Décadence romaine ou Antiquité tardive? (III^e–VI^e siècle)* (Paris: Du Seuil, 1977), in which he uses the German concept "Spätantike" to describe the period of formation of the new European culture. See a discussion on this concept in J. Liebeschuetz: "Transformation and Decline: Are the Two Really Incompatible?," ed. Jens-Uwe Krause and Christian Witschel, *Die Stadt in der Spätantike Niedergang oder Wandel?* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2006), 476–77.
12. Marrou, *Théologie*, 159.
13. Ibid., 176.
14. Cf. ibid., 171.
15. Cf. ibid., 52.
16. Ibid., 80.
17. Ibid., 13.
18. Cf. Henri-Irénée Marrou, *L'ambivalence du temps de l'histoire chez Saint Augustine*, 1ère partie, transcription of a course conducted in 1950, http://agora.qc.ca/Documents/Augustine--Lambivalence_du_temps_de_lhistoire_chez_saint_Augustine_re_partie_par_Henri_Irenee_Marrou.
19. Étienne Gilson, *Les métamorphoses de la cité de Dieu* (Paris: Vrin, 2005).
20. Cf. Marrou, *Théologie*, 18–20.
21. Cf. ibid., 23–24.
22. Cf. Henri de Lubac, *Méditation sur l'Église* (Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1953), 155–

57: "Un piège subtile guette l'homme qu'aspire à la délivrance: le piège de la pure intériorité. . . . Se détourner de ce monde, l'abandonner à sa vanité, rompre la solidarité humaine, s'évader seul dans l'esprit. . . . L'Église nous fait échapper au piège. Elle nous invite, elle aussi, à l'intériorité. . . . Mais en même temps, elle nous garde du court-circuit trompeur. Corps à la fois mystique et visible, par le seul fait de son existence elle nous arrache aux illusions d'une spiritualité solitaire et désincarnée. . . . Sans cesse Elle nous rappelle à l'exigence de notre vocation sociale comme à la réalité de notre condition terrestre."

23. *Lumen Gentium*, §9, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.
24. Cf. Jean Guitton, *Justification du temps* (Paris: PUF, 1961), 29.
25. Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, X, 14.
26. Blaise Pascal, *Préface pour le traité du vide*, http://matiereapenser.free.fr/philo/docs/preface_pour_le_traite_du_vide.pdf, 3: "De là vient que, par une prérogative particulière, non seulement chacun des hommes s'avance de jour en jour dans les sciences, mais que tous les hommes ensemble y font un continuel progrès à mesure que l'univers vieillit. . . . De sorte que toute la suite des hommes, pendant le cours de tant de siècles, doit être considérée comme un même homme qui subsiste toujours et qui apprend continuellement." Cf. Marrou, *Théologie*, 45.
27. Cf. Marrou, *L'ambivalence du temps*, 1ère partie.
28. Marrou, *Théologie*, 46.
29. Ibid., 47.
30. Ibid., 17.
31. Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, Part 3 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 164.
32. Cf. Marrou, *Théologie*, 17.
33. Cf. ibid., 18.
34. Ibid., 32–33.
35. Antonin Sertillanges, quoted in ibid., 41.
36. Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, XI, 29, 39.
37. Marrou, *Théologie*, 63.
38. Cf. Marrou, *L'ambivalence du temps*, 1ère partie.
39. Marrou, *Théologie*, 29.
40. Otto de Freising quoted in Marrou, *Théologie*, 29.
41. Marrou, *Théologie*, 29–30.
42. Ibid., 30.
43. Cf. Jacques Bossuet, *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), 352: "On y voit ces fameux empires tomber les uns après les autres, et le nouvel empire que Jésus-Christ devait établir y est marqué si expressément par ses propres caractères qu'il n'y a pas moyen de le méconnaître. C'est l'Empire des saints de Très-Haut, c'est l'empire du Fils de l'homme: empire qui doit subsister au milieu de la ruine de tous les autres, et auquel seul l'éternité est promise."

44. Ibid., 427: "Ce long enchaînement des causes particulières, qui font et défont les empires, dépend des ordres secrets de la divine Providence. Dieu tient du plus haut des cieux les rênes de tous les royaumes; il a tous les cœurs en sa main: tantôt il retient les passions; tantôt il leur lâche la bride; et par là il remue tout le genre humain."
45. *Gaudium et Spes*, §40.
46. Cf. Marrou, *Théologie*, 58.
47. Cf. Marrou, *L'ambivalence du temps*, 5ème partie.
48. Eph 5, 16.
49. Cf. Marrou, *L'ambivalence du temps*, 5ème partie.
50. Marrou, *Théologie*, 85–86.
51. Ibid., 86.
52. Ibid., 88–89.
53. Ibid., 91.
54. Ibid., 81.
55. Ibid., 102.
56. *Lumen Gentium*, §10.
57. Marrou, *Théologie*, 105.
58. Joseph Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth: The Church at the End of the Millenium; An Interview with Peter Seewald*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 126–27.
59. Marrou, *Théologie*, 126.
60. Augustine, quoted in ibid., 128.
61. Marrou, *Théologie*, 133.
62. See ibid., 161–71.
63. Ibid., 156–57.

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