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Carr and Providence

Although Fea and Carr differ on their beliefs about religion, their understanding of the goals of studying history are the same. Neither of them wishes to resort to a deus ex machina to bypass logical explanations and say that human actions and events can be explained as simply the result of providence. They consider that reasoning undetailed, unscholarly, and completely unsatisfying. As Fea points out, it is difficult to distinguish the will and actions of God as they relate to history. “Those who lived in the early modern world often made bold statements about God's providence, but they could never be certain about what God was doing” (Fea 65). Instead, they both focus on the significance of human lives and human actions and how these interact to form the events of history. They put great importance on details and explanations rather than references to evidence of a supernatural power.

Although there are many events and interpretations that a person could observe, Fea and Carr agree that history is only concerned with studying those events and explanations which are related to humans and human actions, choosing to not speak about providence at all. In doing so, they are making the claim that history is for and about humans. While Fea believes that providence exists and simply chooses not to focus on God’s role in history, Carr does not believe in God at all.

For Christian scholars, it has always been a challenge to balance an understanding of a sovereign God with the pursuit of knowledge and rational explanation. This is a problem in any field of study; for example, evolution was considered by many people to be in direct opposition to Christianity because it conflicted with strict creationism. The historian also struggles with understanding where to draw the line between acts of God and acts of humanity. Fea states that the two should be considered separate; that although there is a “special providence”, historians are not concerned with it and thus should only focus on human actions (Fea ).

However, failing to consider God is not an easy viewpoint for a Christian. Instead, it is possible to consider that rather than working independently of human actions, God works through them. He does not intervene in a clearly observable manner; rather, He takes what humans have already done and uses events to His purpose.

This is not to say that the hand of God is invisible or insignificant, but that it is difficult for historians to distinguish. The presence of God is, by definition, not falsifiable. Because of this, an assertion that an event is the will of God is an assertion that cannot be proved or disproved and thus offers an unsatisfactory explanation. Because providence is an unsatisfactory explanation for history, history must rely on other explanations that focus on humans and human events. In essence, then, Fea’s assertion is reasonable; although God works through history and has a significant part in history, it is not the historian’s ability or responsibility to determine how, why, or what God does in this respect.