

## **TIME AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

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Historians focus their attention on the agents of change and continuity. Intellectual historians are particularly interested in what we might call the "historical consciousness" of these persons and institutions and in the "consciousness" of the communities of which they are a part. The latter -- the tradition, heritage or roots of a culture, community, or group -- provides for continuity in the midst of change and often for the inspiration by which change is instituted and given direction. The argument of this paper is that "time" and "significance" have a distinctive meaning for historians which is intrinsic to the traditions studied.

Analytic philosophers have had some very helpful things to say about these two concepts, but they tend to overlook what is emphasized here. We shall begin with some clarifications of "significance" in history made by Arthur C. Danto<sup>1</sup> in his debate with W. H. Walsh over the difference between "plain" and "significant" historical narratives. Danto's "revelatory" type will be developed to make it applicable to a cultural heritage and thus clarify a distinctive meaning it has for history.

The special focus on "time" in history is twofold. Communities attribute direction to the time process: "chosen people", "salvation history", expectation of a Kingdom of God or a classless society, or faith in social and technological progress. A study of traditions also reveals a variety of ways in which man has understood his temporal nature and the process of time of which he is a part. Three contrasting traditions -- African, Hindu and Christian -- will be reviewed to reveal the conceptual-set concerning time and significance which is presupposed by each.

The paper concludes with a theoretical model of a modern historically conscious group which, I hope, will aid the historian in the study of the conceptual system of specific groups.

### **Historical Significance**

What counts as significant or important in history is by no means easy to determine. How does a historian select from among past events and from among possible interpretations of events the ones which must be incorporated into the history? We can say that it is the historian's know-how which comes with his research experience and his attempt to "relive" a selected past in terms of the questions which he is raising about that past in his own present which is determinative.

But if we look first at the nature of historical narratives rather than at the nature of the historians who produce them, we may be tempted like W. H. Walsh to distinguish between plain and significant narrations.<sup>2</sup> A plain