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Hall, Christopher Ian

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History, Christianity and diplomacy: Sir Herbert Butterfield and international relations

IAN HALL*

Abstract. Sir Herbert Butterfield, Master of Peterhouse, Cambridge (1955–68), Regius Professor of History (1963–68), and author of *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), was one of the leading historians of the twentieth century. A diplomatic historian and student of modern historiography, Butterfield was deeply concerned too with contemporary international relations, wrote much on the subject and, in 1958, created the ‘British Committee on the Theory of International Politics’. Drawing upon published and unpublished material, this article seeks to sketch an outline of Butterfield’s career and thought, to examine his approach to international relations, and to reconsider his reputation in the field.

For historians and students of international relations, Sir Herbert Butterfield (1900–1979) remains an enigmatic figure. A Yorkshireman, the son of a mill worker, and a teetotal Methodist, he became Master of Peterhouse, Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge, and Regius Professor of History. Yet, despite these honours, and the knighthood bestowed upon him on his retirement, Butterfield wielded little intellectual or political influence outside Cambridge, the university in which he spent his entire academic career. He was no ‘fashionable don’ in the mould of A. J. Ayer or Isaiah Berlin, fêted by society and the political élite.¹ He did not fit, as one historian commented, ‘either into the ranks of the elegant Cambridge grandees or into those fashionable rebels represented by the Apostles with their glittering Bloomsbury connection.’² Widely but inaccurately credited with the orchestration at Peterhouse of a school of ‘militant conservatism’,³ Butterfield recoiled from public political debate, remained a life-long Whig, and supported the consensus politics of the post-war years.⁴ His intellectual influence was similarly limited; though ‘one of the

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¹ The phrase ‘fashionable don’ is Alan Clark’s, from his *Diaries* (London: Phoenix, 1995), p. 82.

² John Clive, ‘The Prying Yorkshireman: Herbert Butterfield and the Historian’s Task’, in his *Not by Fact Alone: Essays in the Reading and Writing of History* (London: Collins Harvill, 1989), p. 286.

³ Noel Annan, *Our Age: The Generation that Made Post-War Britain* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), pp. 365–6. See also Reba F. Soffer, ‘The Conservative Historical Imagination in the Twentieth Century’, *Albion*, 28 (1994), p. 7; Richard Brent, ‘Butterfield’s Tories: ‘High Politics’ and the Writing of British Political History’, *Historical Journal*, 30: 4 (1987), pp. 943–54.

⁴ Maurice Cowling, *Religion and the Public Doctrine in Modern England*, vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 199.

outstanding historians of his generation' and a teacher of a procession of brilliant students,⁵ Butterfield left no recognisable school or style of historiography. And though a diplomatic historian by training, he wrote little in the field, devoting himself instead to what he called the 'history of historiography', the relationship between Christianity and history, and the study of international relations.

From the late 1940s until his death, Butterfield devoted much of his scholarly effort to international relations. Amongst his contemporaries, his work on the subject, though relatively slight, was well-received and widely read. His greatest admirers, however, were American. Indeed, during the 1950s, Butterfield was courted by a string of leading scholars and practitioners from the United States. George Kennan was said to have been so impressed by his *Christianity and History* (1949) that he sent a copy to President Eisenhower with a special 'injunction to read it'.⁶ Hans Morgenthau too thought highly of Butterfield, a view reflected in his effusive praise for *Diplomatic Investigations* (1966), the volume of essays edited with Martin Wight.⁷ This admiration was shared by Morgenthau's student, Kenneth Thompson, who eight years earlier had offered Butterfield, on behalf of the Rockefeller Foundation, the money to create the 'British Committee on the Theory of International Politics'.⁸ In the years following Butterfield's death, it continued to be American scholars—and especially Thompson—who lavished the most fulsome praise on his work. In 1980, an edited volume of essays was published examining his approach to ethics, history and politics; the same year, Thompson declared Butterfield one of the 'masters of international thought'.⁹ Five years later, one of Thompson's former students, Alberto Coll, added an admiring intellectual biography, *The Wisdom of Statecraft*.¹⁰

In Britain, Butterfield's work on international relations has received neither the praise nor the attention it has attracted in the United States. Where it has been examined, however, two interpretations predominate. The first—Cornelia Navari's—is that which portrays him as an 'English Machiavellian'. There, Butterfield's work is considered in the context of a 'Machiavellian moment' in English political thought that occurred between the late 1930s and the early 1950s, when an attempt was

⁵ Clive, 'The Prying Yorkshireman', p. 286. Butterfield's students included J. H. Elliott, J. G. A. Pocock and J. C. D. Clark amongst others. Mainly through Pocock, Butterfield seems to have had some influence over the Cambridge History of Ideas 'school', according to Quentin Skinner (*Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 104–5), but cannot be seen as a key figure.

⁶ J. H. A. Watson to Butterfield, 27 April (no year—1953 or 1954), *Butterfield Papers* 531(iii)/W33, Cambridge University Library. See also Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (London: Fontana, 1957 [1949]). Butterfield returned the compliment with a laudatory review of Kennan's *Russia Leaves the War*: 'Mr. Kennan as Historian', *Encounter*, 8:1 (1957), pp. 76–80.

⁷ Morgenthau wrote that the book was an 'outstanding success' and a 'healthy corrective to our present academic priorities' (Review of *Diplomatic Investigations*, *Political Science Quarterly* 82:3 (1967), pp. 462–3). See also H. Butterfield and M. Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966).

⁸ According to Jonathan Haslam, this funding was first offered to E. H. Carr, who refused to accept it. See his *The Vices of Integrity: E. H. Carr, 1892–1982* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 31.

⁹ Kenneth W. Thompson (ed.), *Herbert Butterfield: The Ethics of History and Politics* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980); Kenneth W. Thompson, *Masters of International Thought: Major Twentieth Century Theorists and the World Crisis* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), pp. 5–17.

¹⁰ Alberto R. Coll, *The Wisdom of Statecraft: Sir Herbert Butterfield and the Philosophy of International Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985).

made, according to Navari, to generate a 'civic republican' international order.¹¹ This interpretation challenged the most widely held understanding of Butterfield's thought, that which portrays him as a leading exponent of 'Christian realism'. It is in this guise that he appears in Alastair Murray's *Reconstructing Realism* (1997), for instance, and in the work of the Canadian scholar Roger Epp.¹² Tim Dunne's work on the 'English school' also locates Butterfield as a 'Christian realist', though he casts him—erroneously, given his scorn for biblical literalism—as a 'fundamentalist'.¹³ Whether Butterfield should be regarded as a 'Christian realist', a 'civic republican', or indeed as an 'English School' 'rationalist' remains an open question.¹⁴ What follows is an attempt to sketch an outline of Sir Herbert Butterfield's career, and to examine his thought on international relations with the aim of offering an answer.

History and Christianity: Butterfield's life and work

The human personality is the only entity of the historian's study. Eras and epochs and events are not entities but the shorthand of the historian for the summarizing of the activities of historical personalities.¹⁵

Sir Herbert Butterfield was born in Oxenhope in Yorkshire on the 7th of October 1900. His father, Albert, was a clerk in a local mill and a Methodist lay preacher; his mother Ada Mary, was a member of the Plymouth Brethren, a small, pacifist, Protestant sect. As a child, Butterfield was encouraged by his father to enter the Methodist ministry, an ambition he had once entertained before the early death of his own father had forced him from school and into work. The young Butterfield was also encouraged in his schoolwork, his talents being rewarded first with a place at the Trade and Grammar School in Keighley, and later by a Major County Scholarship to Peterhouse. That he was, by his own reckoning, the first boy from his school to have matriculated at an Oxbridge college was a measure of his early academic achievements.¹⁶ The scholarship, however, was to read History, a subject for which he displayed no particular fondness at school: 'I have always hated history', Butterfield recalled having told a teacher, 'and, besides, I can never remember dates'.¹⁷ At Cambridge, this distaste turned into an enduring fascination, thanks largely to the efforts of two Fellows of Peterhouse, Paul Vellacott and Harold

¹¹ Cornelia Navari, 'English Machiavellism', in her edited *British Politics and the Spirit of the Age* (Keele, UK: Keele University Press, 1996), pp. 107–37.

¹² A. J. H. Murray, *Reconstructing Realism: Between Power Politics and Cosmopolitan Ethics* (Edinburgh: Keele University Press, 1997), p. 71; Roger Epp, *The 'Augustinian Moment' in International Politics: Niebuhr, Butterfield, Wight and the Reclaiming of a Tradition*, International Politics Occasional Research Paper, no. 10 (Aberystwyth, 1991).

¹³ Tim Dunne, *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School* (Houndmills & London: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 181 and 82. On Butterfield's disdain for biblical literalism see Adam Watson's Foreword to Coll, *Wisdom of Statecraft*, p. xi.

¹⁴ The relationship between Butterfield and the 'English School' is partly addressed in my 'Still the English Patient? Closures and Inventions in the English School', *International Affairs*, 77:4 (2001), pp. 931–42.

¹⁵ Butterfield, 'Over-abridged summary [of Butterfield's thought on history]', *Butterfield Papers*, 78/4.

¹⁶ Butterfield, Autobiographical Material, *Butterfield Papers*, 7, p. 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Temperley. Vellacott, whom Butterfield later described as ‘something of an aesthete’—a man who pretended that he had ‘never ridden a bus’ or ‘been north of the Trent’—had been seriously wounded on the Western Front, and was notable for his almost complete lack of published work. Despite his affectations, however, Vellacott helped the young Yorkshireman to overcome some of the social awkwardness he felt in his early years in Cambridge. The two men also held what might be described as common aesthetic ideals, including a revulsion for the dryness of the constitutional history which dominated the History Tripos in the 1920s.¹⁸ Both were deeply concerned with the literary aspect of historical work, an interest reflected in Butterfield’s first book, *The Historical Novel* (1924).¹⁹

Butterfield’s relationship with Temperley was of a quite different nature. The author of a major study of Canning, co-author of a text on nineteenth-century European history, and editor of the history of the Versailles peace conference, Temperley was perhaps the foremost diplomatic historian of the inter-war period.²⁰ During the course of long talks lasting sometimes into the small hours of the morning, he introduced Butterfield to what the latter called an ‘unconventional sort’ of history, especially to the moral and technical complexities and machinations of European diplomacy. Temperley, Butterfield later noted, ‘appreciated the anomalies in events and loved the inconsistencies in people’. Indeed,

It was the discovery of some anomaly in the delineation of an ingenious piece of scoundrelness [*sic*] that seemed to delight him most of all. He loved to show up the shady side of *Realpolitik*, and, if he crowed when an apparently respectable politician was proved to be a liar or have behaved like a card-sharper, you did not feel that he either liked dishonesty or burned with indignation against it.²¹

Having served on the Imperial General Staff and as an intelligence officer during the First World War, and attended the peace conference at Versailles as part of the British delegation, Temperley’s knowledge of diplomatic history had been enriched by practical experience. This experience, however, seemed to Butterfield not to have been wholly fulfilling:

. . . there was a time when Temperley told me that he thought it was folly in a historian to play for a connection with government. He gave the impression, however, of having made such a play and came to [be] disappointed.²²

This disappointment seems to have taught Butterfield an important lesson. The distance between practical politics and academic work, between politicians and dons, he believed, was both desirable and mutually beneficial, a conviction that he maintained throughout his career.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 64–5.

¹⁹ Butterfield, *The Historical Novel: An Essay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924).

²⁰ H. M. V. Temperley, *The Foreign Policy of Canning, 1822–1827: England, the Neo-Holy Alliance and the New World* (London: Bell & Sons, 1925); with A. J. Grant, *Europe in the Nineteenth-Century, 1789–1914* (London & New York: Longman, Green, 1927); *A History of the Peace Conference in Paris*, 6 vols. (London: Frowde, 1920–24). A biography of Temperley has been written by John D. Fair: *Harold Temperley: A Scholar and Romantic in the Public Realm* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1992).

²¹ Butterfield, ‘Temperley Biography’, *Butterfield Papers*, 9, ch. 6, pp. 17 and 15–16.

²² Butterfield, Autobiographical Material, *Butterfield Papers*, 7, p. 46. Butterfield added: ‘I have no doubt that it was a good thing for him to have been disappointed and I am sure he was conscious of this’.

While Vellacott aroused Butterfield's interest in historiography—an intellectual debt repaid by his dedication of *The Whig Interpretation* (1931) to his mentor²³—Temperley oversaw his 'technical' historical work in diplomatic history. The result was *The Peace Tactics of Napoleon, 1806–1808* (1929), an attempt to combine the literary qualities of the best nineteenth-century historiography with the technical precision required by a Rankean such as Temperley.²⁴ The book represents one of Butterfield's few efforts to put the principles of *The Whig Interpretation* into practice, albeit two years before the latter was published. There he was to assail whig historians, especially Lord Acton, for their organisation of the historical narrative.²⁵ Through abridgement and moralism, he argued, the whigs distorted that narrative, and conveyed a picture of the past as the unfolding story of progress. In *Peace Tactics*, common themes recur: the complexity of the past, the limits of the historian's ability to reconstruct its events and personalities, and the fundamental 'interconnectedness' of history. The central message of the book, however, was the sovereignty of personality over process: 'how much the course of events could be deflected by the characters and the idiosyncrasies of ambassadors and ministers who were far from home'.²⁶ This was a point as much about method as about the workings of diplomacy, for to explore the inner personality of an historical figure, Butterfield implies, requires an effort of imagination, not research, but to do so is to plumb the source of the outward events of the past.

In 1938, Butterfield travelled to Germany to deliver a lecture at four universities—Cologne, Bonn, Münster and Berlin—which sought to examine the origins of the 'whig interpretation' he had attacked seven years earlier.²⁷ The lecture and the book that grew from it, *The Englishman and his History* (1944), signalled a shift in emphasis in Butterfield's intellectual interests. *The Historical Novel* and *The Whig Interpretation* had both been explorations of the different ways in which history might be approached, interpreted and written: the first, an exploration of the value of the historical novel in conveying an image of the past; the second, a delineation of the proper boundaries of academic historiography. From the late-1930s onwards, however, Butterfield's concern with the political uses of the past became more urgent and more prominent. A group of works of the period reflected this concern:

²³ Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York & London: Norton, 1965 [1931]).

²⁴ Butterfield, *The Peace Tactics of Napoleon, 1806–1808* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929).

²⁵ Acton was one of the few named targets of the book; in him, Butterfield argued, 'the whig historian reached his highest consciousness' (*Whig Interpretation*, p. 109).

²⁶ Butterfield, *Peace Tactics*, p. vii.

²⁷ There was a certain irony to this, for, in part, *The Whig Interpretation* had been an assault on the organisation of historiography in just such a manner. 'History', Butterfield had famously declared, 'is not the study of origins; rather it is the analysis of all the mediations in which the past was turned into our present' (p. 47). Here his rhetorical flourish reified a more subtle point. Butterfield's concern in the earlier work had been to criticise the whigs' predilection for locating the origins of an idea in the thought or actions of a single individual: the notion that Martin Luther might be seen as the originator of the modern idea of liberty, for instance. In *The Englishman and his History* (USA: Archon Books, 1970 [1944]), however, this fault is scrupulously avoided. There Butterfield is careful to emphasise the twists and turns and ironies of the development of the whig interpretation itself. The following is illustrative of this concern: 'one man in the 18th century wrote essays on English history so full of the song of liberty that he has been called the founder of the whig interpretation; yet he is none other than the politician Bolingbroke, notorious in his day and ever since as the wildest and wickedest of Tories' (p. 2).

Napoleon (1939), *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (1940), and *The Englishman and His History* (1944).

In *Napoleon* two political interpretations of the past are explored—that of the liberal revolutionary, and that of the Emperor himself—and both are found wanting historiographically and politically. Those who thought the principles of 1789 the ‘fulfilment of Christianity’ or ‘the triumph of individualism’, Butterfield argued, neglect to properly acknowledge the manner in which the French Revolution ‘found formulas for the future enslavement of mankind’.²⁸ Napoleon, on the other hand, is found lacking in ‘elasticity’ in the way in which he studied the past and applied the maxims and political techniques he derived. The form and value of such historical lessons were also the central themes of *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* and *The Englishman and his History*. The first explored the beginnings of the modern doctrine that the examination of the past might offer concrete lessons for political conduct in the present and success in the future. Machiavelli, Butterfield noted, ‘distinguished himself by claiming that in the study of history one could discover not only the causes but also the cure of the ills of the time’.²⁹ For Butterfield, however, the technique was flawed. He was keen to emphasise, as one reviewer noticed, that Machiavelli ‘always measures the contemporary world by standards of classical antiquity’.³⁰ This predisposition, combined with a certain ‘inelasticity’ in his thought, rendered his science of statecraft problematic, and made his historiography distinctly inferior to that of his contemporary, Guicciardini. In *The Englishman and his History*, Butterfield offered an alternative, one that incorporated the better insights of Machiavelli with greater ‘elasticity’. That alternative was the Whiggism of the eighteenth century, which, he argued, had become the English tradition of political practice. It embodied a subtle sense of the limits of politics; it made, Butterfield believed, an ‘alliance with Providence’.³¹

The seepage of this religious idea into Butterfield’s writing was a reflection of the extent to which the ‘shock of 1940’—the Fall of France and the Battle of Britain—affected him. Despite occasional lay preaching in local churches, a practice he abandoned in the mid-1930s, Butterfield had previously held that to flaunt one’s religion in public was both distasteful and sinful.³² By the early 1940s, however, he had become convinced of the need to offer a Christian perspective on the contemporary world, and assumed the mantle of the ‘apologist’.³³ The finest of his ‘apologetic’ works came after the war, and began life as a series of lectures given in 1948 at the request of the Cambridge Divinity Faculty. These were, to say the least, extremely popular, attracting some eight hundred listeners each week, and such was their impact that Butterfield was asked to reproduce them in book form as *Christianity and History* (1949). Three further such works followed in the next few

²⁸ Butterfield, *Napoleon* (London: Duckworth, 1947 [1939]), pp. 13, 15.

²⁹ Butterfield, *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1955 [1940]), p. 27.

³⁰ E. H. Carr, ‘Is Machiavelli a Modern?’, *The Spectator*, 5844 (28 June 1940), p. 868.

³¹ Butterfield, *Englishman and his History*, p. vii.

³² C. T. McIntire, ‘Introduction’ to his edited *Herbert Butterfield: Writings on Christianity and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. xii.

³³ Cowling, *Religion and the Public Doctrine*, p. 204. The first overtly religious statement Butterfield made seems to have been a unpublished paper called ‘Christianity and the Democratic Ideal’, probably written sometime in 1940, and referred to by Marcus Ward in his pamphlet *The Christian Democrat: An Essay in the Christian Doctrine of Man*, ‘Valley of Decision Series’, no. 5 (Madras: Christian Literature Society for India, 1941), p. iv.

years: a volume of essays, *History and Human Relations* (1951), and two more sets of lectures, *Christianity in European History* (1952) and *Christianity, Diplomacy and War* (1953).³⁴ The central themes of these works owed much to Butterfield's Methodism and to his reading of the work of St Augustine. Theologically, they were unremarkable, reflected the 'mainstream' nature of Methodist thought. At the core was the notion of 'original sin' which Butterfield framed in conventional terms not dissimilar to those of his contemporary, the liberal cleric William Temple, in his *Christianity and the Social Order* (1942). Furthermore, like Temple, he believed that the 'assertion of Original Sin should make the Church [and, indeed, the State] intensely realistic and conspicuously free from Utopianism'.³⁵ For both, the reality of sin demanded that society—including the Church and political institutions—be ordered to channel the 'cupidity' and self-interest it generates towards moral ends.

Temple and Butterfield differed, however, on the nature of those ends, and the means by which they might be achieved. For Butterfield, the order on which society rested was Providential, the gift of God. 'Providence', he wrote, 'produces a world in which men can live and gradually improve their external conditions, in spite of sin'.³⁶ But the capacity of human agency to establish just and equitable conditions is weak, and 'cupidity' threatens always to undermine such efforts. Temple, on the other hand, was more optimistic, and convinced that through 'Freedom, Fellowship, [and] Service' a Christian social order might be achieved.³⁷ To that end, he called for the radical reform of capitalism. For Butterfield, however, capitalism was merely another Providential system by which human relations were ordered: 'the best that Providence can do with human cupidity at certain stages of the [historical] story'. To tamper with it, he argued, was to risk the unleashing of the full force of human sinfulness. The best the Christian might do was encapsulated in the famous sentence with which Butterfield concluded *Christianity and History*: 'Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted'.³⁸ For him, this injunction held as much for the Christian's relationship with the earthly Church as it did with society; here, his Nonconformity came to the fore. As Martin Wight complained, in *Christianity and History* Butterfield was highly critical of the Church and of those—like T. S. Eliot—who yearned for a return to an age when ecclesiastical authority dominated society. For Wight, the Church was 'the instrument of the Kingdom, the bearer of sacred history'; for Butterfield it was all too often a 'serious obstruction to Christianity'.³⁹ Unlike Wight, he regarded the secularisation of European society as a qualified good. Convinced of the 'inner' nature of religious faith, he held that Christians must come to God through their free will, not through outward conformity to the strictures of ecclesiastical authority.

³⁴ Butterfield, *History and Human Relations* (London: Collins, 1951); *Christianity in European History* (London: Collins, 1952); *Christianity, Diplomacy and War* (London: Epworth, 1953).

³⁵ William Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956 [1942]), p. 54. For Butterfield's review of Temple's book, see 'Capitalism and the Rise of Protestantism', *Cambridge Review*, 63:1551 (23 May 1942), pp. 324–5.

³⁶ Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, p. 51.

³⁷ Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order*, p. 74.

³⁸ Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, p. 189.

³⁹ Martin Wight, 'History and Judgement: Butterfield, Niebuhr and the Technical Historian', *The Frontier: A Christian Commentary on the Common Life*, 1:8 (August 1950), p. 313; Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, p. 177.

In 1949, alongside *Christianity and History*, Butterfield published two further books: *The Origins of Modern Science 1300–1800* and *George III, Lord North and the People*.⁴⁰ The first, originally another set of lectures delivered at Cambridge, explored what Butterfield regarded as the greatest revolution in thought in modern history: the scientific revolution.⁴¹ Ever acute to the ironies of history, Butterfield sought to demonstrate that modern scientific methods developed within, rather than in opposition to, the Christian tradition, before being yoked to secular conceptions of progress antithetical to religion. The second book was an offshoot of ongoing work on the life of Charles James Fox, a study that he had begun in the 1930s but which was never to be completed. *George III, Lord North and the People* was presented in part as a study of the revolution that England escaped, and, as such, reiterated the political doctrine—Whiggish and pragmatic—first enunciated in *The Englishman and his History*. The book is important also as it represents Butterfield's last venture in 'technical history'. From 1949 onwards, he was drawn by three different concerns: historiography, religion and international relations. In *History and Human Relations* and *Christianity, Diplomacy and War*, as well as in essays like 'The Scientific versus the Moralistic Approach in International Affairs' (1951), these strands were explored and drawn together.⁴²

These works, however, were not uniformly well received. *Christianity, Diplomacy and War* in particular attracted much criticism. As Butterfield noted in correspondence, the book reflected the 'feeling that we were in danger rather of being paralysed at a critical moment [in international relations] by the adherents of ideological diplomacy'.⁴³ It criticised both America and Britain for falling for their arguments—a view that found little sympathy in either country. In the United States, Butterfield incurred the wrath of *Life* magazine for his insistence on the 'universality of guilt' and his recommendation that the Soviet Union be treated as any other Great Power.⁴⁴ In Britain he was criticised on different grounds. Whilst Charles Webster hinted darkly at Butterfield's supposedly 'curious conception of Hitler', A. J. P. Taylor called him a 'Christian cynic' and asserted that his argument was 'supported by a good deal of doubtful history'.⁴⁵ Martin Wight concurred: the book was 'woolly' and repetitive, and the 'occasional felicities of historical insight do not redeem its lack of balance'.⁴⁶ Perhaps in reaction, throughout the remainder of the 1950s Butterfield concentrated on historiography rather than international affairs. In 1954, he gave the first series of Wiles Lectures at Queen's University, Belfast, in which he explored the work of two historians with whom he felt a particular affinity: Ranke and Acton. The

⁴⁰ Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science 1300–1800* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1968 [1949]); *George III, Lord North and the People 1779–1780* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1949).

⁴¹ The scientific revolution, he argued in an earlier radio broadcast for the BBC, 'reduces the Renaissance and Reformation to the rank of mere episodes, mere internal displacements within the system of medieval Christendom' ('A Bridge between the Arts and Sciences', *The Listener*, 40 [15 July 1948], p. 95).

⁴² Butterfield, 'The Scientific versus the Moralistic Approach in International Affairs', *International Affairs*, 27 (1951), pp. 411–22.

⁴³ Butterfield to M. B. Reckett, 28 August 1953, *Butterfield Papers*, 99/1. Reckett was the editor of the journal *Time and Tide*.

⁴⁴ Anonymous editorial, 'A New British Line? The Old Balance-of-Power Act gets some High-Minded and Wrong-Headed Support', *Life*, 2 November 1953, *Butterfield Papers*, 99.

⁴⁵ Charles Webster, 'Lay Sermons', *The Spectator*, 21 August 1953; A. J. P. Taylor, 'A Christian Cynic', *The Manchester Guardian*, 13 August 1953, both in *Butterfield Papers*, 99.

⁴⁶ Martin Wight, 'Morals and Warfare', *The Observer* 16 August 1953, *Butterfield Papers*, 99.

lectures were published the following year as *Man on his Past*. Two years later, in 1957, Butterfield turned to contemporary historiography in *George III and the Historians*, a powerful critique of the work of Lewis Namier and his disciples.⁴⁷

In the late 1950s and 1960s, Butterfield's duties as Master of Peterhouse (1955–68), Vice-Chancellor (1959–61), and Regius Professor (1965–68), as well as his involvement with the British Committee, severely curtailed his ability to write and to publish. Despite his desire to complete a number of planned projects, including biographies of Charles James Fox and Harold Temperley and a history of diplomacy, *International Conflict in the Twentieth Century* (1960) was to be his last book.⁴⁸ He did, however, write a number of lectures, essays and chapters, as well as a number of unpublished papers. These include the pieces on diplomacy and the balance of power in *Diplomatic Investigations*, and some essays on historiography.⁴⁹ But for Butterfield what he called his “‘business” life’ during the period up to his retirement in 1968 proved ‘too distracting’ and resulted in ‘precious little . . . for twenty years’.⁵⁰ In the eleven years before his death in 1979, he did seek to remedy this situation. He made two contributions—‘Christianity in History’ and ‘Historiography’—to *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. Two years later, Butterfield explored the notion of ‘*raison d’état*’ in the first Martin Wight memorial lecture, and in the last months of his life a Canadian scholar gathered a number of published and unpublished essays on Christianity into a book. An incomplete manuscript exploring the origins of historical writing, a topic Butterfield had addressed in the Gifford Lectures delivered in Glasgow in 1967–68, was published posthumously by Adam Watson in 1981.⁵¹

Butterfield and International Relations

H. B.’s dogmas:

1. ‘Historical’ thinking is more international than ‘political’ [thinking].
2. West must accept *status quo*: not promote revisionism.
3. International politics must be undoctinal.⁵²

In late 1935, Butterfield submitted an application for the Woodrow Wilson Chair at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, and was placed on the short-list alongside

⁴⁷ Butterfield, *Man on his Past: A Study in the History of Historical Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969 [1955]); *George III and the Historians* (London: Collins, 1957).

⁴⁸ Butterfield, *International Conflict in the Twentieth Century: A Christian View* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960).

⁴⁹ See, for example, Butterfield, ‘The Balance of Power’ and ‘The New Diplomacy and Historical Diplomacy’, in Butterfield & Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations*, pp. 132–48, 181–92; *Magna Carta in the Historiography of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Reading, UK: Reading University Press, 1968).

⁵⁰ Butterfield to Neville Temperley, 4 May 1968, *Butterfield Papers* 531(iii)/T48.

⁵¹ Butterfield, ‘Christianity in History’ and ‘Historiography’, *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York: Scribner’s, 1973), vol. I, pp. 373–412 and vol. II, pp. 464–98; *Raison d’État: the Relations between Morality and Government* (Brighton: University of Sussex, 1975); *Herbert Butterfield: Writings on Christianity and History*, ed. C. T. McIntire (see n. 32 above); *The Origins of History*, ed. Adam Watson (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981).

⁵² Martin Wight, handwritten note on Butterfield from British Committee meeting, 15 April 1961, *British Committee Papers*, 5, Royal Institute of International Affairs.

C. A. Macartney, Arnold Forster and E. H. Carr. The selection committee, needless to say, appointed the latter. The reasons for their rejection of Butterfield, however, remain unclear,⁵³ though his relative youth may well have played a part. Politics too probably influenced the decision, for Butterfield was no enthusiast for the League of Nations, as Carr, until his inaugural lecture, was perceived to be.⁵⁴ Neither, moreover, was he a supporter of the concept of International Relations promoted by men like Gilbert Murray or Alfred Zimmern. For the latter, the first incumbent of the Wilson Chair and later Montague Burton Professor at Oxford, IR was an interdisciplinary pursuit, drawing upon law, political theory, economics and history, aiming to expose the 'tawdry trappings of tribalism' and fostering 'civic responsibility' in the student.⁵⁵ Such ideas were echoed in the late 1940s and 1950s by a number of scholars working self-consciously within the emergent 'discipline'. Charles Manning, for instance, was keen to promote IR as a form of 'coaching' so that the young 'may judge the less unsoundly the issues of tomorrow'.⁵⁶ Butterfield, following his fellow diplomatic historians Harold Temperley and Charles Webster, disagreed. International Politics, he argued, is best studied through diplomatic and general history, and must remain divorced from the world of practical politics.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, aided by a number of younger, like-minded Cambridge dons, including Desmond Williams and Maurice Cowling,⁵⁷ Butterfield became a vocal critic of the new discipline of International Relations. At a conference held in January 1949, in a characteristic statement of his views, he lamented the decline of diplomatic history in universities and attacked the rise of IR. 'The effect of all this', he complained, 'is more unfortunate in that people nowadays do in fact talk more than ever about foreign policy and the relations between states—the most vociferous being those who despise diplomatic history'. Only advanced training in diplomatic history and international law could provide students with a proper understanding of those relations. Without such anchors, Butterfield insisted, 'the study of International Relations would have strong leanings to recent history and the contemporary world—in other words, would be too immediate and direct in its utilitarian intention'. An historical approach, by contrast, would require the student to develop a necessary and desirable attitude of academic detachment. The study of IR as conceived by its proponents, however, would not provide this; 'all the prejudices, passions, and wishful thinking which are involved in present-day controversies often make this more contemporary study a form of self-indulgence rather than a discipline of the mind'.⁵⁸

⁵³ Jonathan Haslam, *The Vices of Integrity: E. H. Carr, 1892–1982* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 58.

⁵⁴ That Carr was seen by at least one member of the selection committee to be an advocate of the League is clear from the 'shock' expressed by Gilbert Murray, a member of the panel, upon reading the inaugural. See Murray to E. H. Carr, 5 December 1936, *Murray MSS 227/136–7*, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

⁵⁵ Alfred E. Zimmern, *The Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1935), pp. 23 and 26.

⁵⁶ C. A. W. Manning, 'The Teaching of International Relations', *The Listener*, 51:1317 (27 May 1954), p. 909.

⁵⁷ See Desmond Williams, 'Some Aspects of Contemporary History', *The Cambridge Journal*, 2:12 (September 1949), pp. 733–42, and Maurice Cowling's attacks on Charles Manning in *The Listener* 51:1318 (3 June 1954), pp. 973–4 and 51:1325 (22 July 1954), pp. 141–2.

⁵⁸ Butterfield, 'Notes on: How far can and should the subject of International Relations be included in the curriculum for undergraduate students of History?', *Butterfield Papers*, 130/2, pp. 1, 2 and 3.

This frustration with the academic study of international relations was mirrored by serious misgivings as to the conduct of diplomacy and politics in the first half of the twentieth century. Despite his objections to academic involvement in practical politics, Butterfield felt compelled to give public voice to these doubts. Two factors seem to have contributed to this decision: the shock of 1940,⁵⁹ noted above, and the Christian obligation, as he saw it, to 'bear witness' without judgement. For Butterfield, as he wrote later, 'the strongest thing Christians can do is just to testify; bearing witness faithfully and leaving Providence to do the rest'.⁶⁰ This conviction underpinned his ventures into the study of international relations and his critique of practical politics, and overrode his strictures—which, as far as it is possible to tell, were sincerely held—concerning scholarly detachment. *Christianity and History*, *Christianity, Diplomacy and War* and *International Conflict* should all be seen in this light. In each, Butterfield sought to outline what he regarded as the twentieth century's failure of political wisdom, and attempted to sketch the means by which it might be recovered. In particular, he was keen to point to the failure to recognise the structures which 'help out man's imperfections, conspiring with quiet inducements and concealed checks to keep the surface of life comparatively respectable'.⁶¹ But in each also, he tried to avoid specific policy recommendations, though he did, in *International Conflict*, ponder the possibility of unilateral nuclear disarmament.⁶² What he wished to urge instead was systematic reflection on the nature of international politics, but it was an appeal aimed not at scholars, but at 'statesmen'.

By the late 1950s, however, Butterfield became increasingly convinced of the need for academic reflection to parallel and augment that of 'statesmen'. Frustration with both scholars of IR and practitioners prompted him to accept, in 1958, the Rockefeller Foundation's offer to fund the 'British Committee on the Theory of International Politics'.⁶³ Those whom Butterfield invited to join the body shared his doubts. Desmond Williams, like his former tutor, had been heavily critical of IR in the immediate post-war years, and Martin Wight too was keen to keep the committee free of what Butterfield called 'dabblers', and those with a 'purely journalistic interest'.⁶⁴ But the latter was intent too on excluding 'the ordinary kind of diplomatic historian who refuses to question current assumptions', and these were the grounds upon which scholars like F. H. Hinsley were denied membership.⁶⁵ This represented a considerable shift in his position from the late 1940s, when Butterfield was insistent that IR should only be studied through 'technical' diplomatic and general history to one in which he acknowledged the possibility of 'an analytical study of foreign policy and its bases'.⁶⁶

⁵⁹ A sense of this shock is conveyed in his memorial address for Sir Winston Churchill: 'In Memoriam Winston Churchill', *Cambridge Review*, 86:2092 (6 February 1965), p. 234.

⁶⁰ Butterfield, Hand-written draft of 'Just War', *Butterfield Papers*, 275, no page numbers.

⁶¹ Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, p. 46.

⁶² Butterfield, *International Conflict*, pp. 95–8.

⁶³ On the creation of this body, see Dunne, *Inventing International Society*, pp. 89–105.

⁶⁴ Butterfield, 'Notes on: How Far Can and Should the Subject of IR . . .?', p. 4. On Wight's doubts see Hedley Bull, 'Introduction: Martin Wight and the Study of International Relations', in Wight, *Systems of States*, ed. Hedley Bull (Leicester: Leicester University Press and LSE, 1977), p. 6, and Butterfield, *Raison d'État*, p. 5.

⁶⁵ Butterfield to Williams, 28 April 1958, *Butterfield Papers*, 531(iii)/W270.

⁶⁶ Butterfield to Williams, 11 September 1958, *Butterfield Papers*, 531(iii)/W279. By this stage, the committee comprised Butterfield, Williams, Wight, and the latter's Oxford contemporary and friend D. M. MacKinnon.

The focus of that study was to be ‘ethics and . . . the question of whether policy can be more than hand-to-mouth’.⁶⁷ What Butterfield sought was an account of what he later called the ‘moral framework’ of international relations.⁶⁸ This framework was conceived in terms of a social order like those described in *Christianity and History*, one made up of half-concealed restraints and subtle inducements that organise the competing egotisms of ‘statesmen’ and states.⁶⁹ Just as the student, Butterfield argued in ‘The Scientific *versus* the Moralistic Approach’ (1951), might be tempted to steal a valuable manuscript from a college library if the security was lax, so too might a state’s leaders engage in a policy of territorial aggrandisement if the opportunity presented itself.⁷⁰ This view, of course, was intimately linked to his religious convictions, and especially to his belief in Providence. God’s Providence, he believed, acted to bring such orders into being; they were ‘a second-best gift from God’ giving a ‘certain structure’ to society that was ‘better at least than the sheer ungovernable anarchy which resulted when human cupidity was left totally unrecognised and uncontrolled’.⁷¹ But these structures are also fragile, and under threat always from human egotisms. The failure of the ‘moralistic’ approach to international affairs, the doctrine which, for Butterfield, dominated thinking in the twentieth century,⁷² was rooted in a superficial and deficient understanding of such structures.

In their different ways, ‘The Scientific *versus* the Moralistic Approach’, *Christianity, Diplomacy and War* (1953) and *International Conflict* (1960), as well as the agenda he set for the British Committee, were attempts to unveil the ‘moral framework’—the structure of international order—that curbs and channels the behaviour of states and their leaders. For Butterfield, these sketches were urgently needed when ‘moralism’ dominated international thought, and especially so in a world of nuclear weapons. Since 1914, he warned, ‘we have been refusing to examine the system which the experience of the centuries had handed down to us—refusing to consider the way in which, in former ages, men had learned to bridle power’. This failure was potentially catastrophic: another war with nuclear arms would ‘fall hardest on the centres of civilisation’.⁷³ There was, therefore, an urgent need for a radical rethinking of Western diplomacy. ‘It would be healthy for us’, Butterfield argued in the 1962 edition of *Christianity, Diplomacy and War*, ‘if instead of myth-making, we could tell ourselves that communism—in spite of its accompanying evils—is not entirely dark’. For him, ideological interpretations of international affairs masked such truths; moreover, the threatened use of ‘nuclear weapons will not rescue the victims

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Butterfield, ‘Moral Framework of International Relations’, *Butterfield Papers*, 110.

⁶⁹ See Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, pp. 49–52.

⁷⁰ Butterfield, ‘The Scientific *versus* the Moralistic Approach’, p. 411. Characteristically, it should be noted in passing, Butterfield did not name the exponents of the moralistic approach. It seems, however, that he had in mind inter-war internationalists like Woodrow Wilson who believed that liberal states were ‘naturally’ pacific, and post-war writers like Namier or Taylor who saw a particular evil in German history. For the latter, see Lewis Namier, *Diplomatic Prelude 1938–39* (London: Macmillan, 1948) and A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1945).

⁷¹ Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, p. 50.

⁷² See Butterfield, ‘The New Diplomacy and Historical Diplomacy’, in Butterfield and Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations*, pp. 181–92.

⁷³ Butterfield, draft preface to new edition of *Christianity, Diplomacy and War*, *Butterfield Papers*, 3, pp. 2 and A1.

of tyranny'.⁷⁴ What was required instead, Butterfield urged, was the re-education of Western democracy into what he called a 'proper doctrine of international relations'.⁷⁵

This effort had two aspects. The first was the recovery of the accumulated wisdom of eighteenth and nineteenth century diplomacy, the maxims and principles of which acknowledged, for Butterfield, the necessity of forgiveness for former enemies, the impossibility of absolute security, the need for the acceptance of all states, regardless of their regime, into the diplomatic system, and for flexibility in diplomacy, and an absolute prohibition on crusades. In the practice of diplomacy during this period, and in the writings of statesmen and scholars like de Callières, Heeren, Burke, Gentz, Metternich and Bismarck, Butterfield found both affirmation of these truths, and rich depository of international thought neglected, in his eyes, by his contemporaries.⁷⁶ It is this dimension of his project which attracted the admiration of Thompson and others in the United States, and which formed the core of Coll's *Wisdom of Statecraft*.⁷⁷ The recovery and examination of 'wisdom-literature', however, was only one half of Butterfield's attempt at the re-education of democracy. As he argued in 1968, in a paper given at a conference of IR theorists at Bellagio:

I have regarded myself (and certainly have been regarded) as an extreme supporter of making both history and international relations the subject of what Americans deprecate as mere 'wisdom-literature'. But, having tried to study Machiavelli's attempt to make statecraft rather more scientific and then enquiring into the later history of the endeavour—having also been interested in the thinking behind the balance-of-power in the eighteenth century—I have advocated at the same time the insertion of something more like a scientific method into the analysis of history in general and international relations in particular.⁷⁸

In the 1950s and especially the 1960s, Butterfield became increasingly concerned with the possibilities of a 'structural' understanding of international relations. It could not, he acknowledged, be achieved simply through the study of diplomatic or general history, though both had an important part in that project, if only as a warning that human beings are the agents of change and true subjects of historical inquiry. As he had urged in 1944, in an inaugural lecture, 'processes, transitions, historical structures, social systems and trends of thought' should be treated 'with superstitious terror and without the faults of infatuation'.⁷⁹ During the latter half of the 1940s, however, Butterfield's study of the origins of modern science convinced him that a form of scientific method might be utilised in the study of history and international relations. Moreover, his reading of the work of seventeenth century scientists persuaded him of the possibility that Christian belief and scientific inquiry might operate in harmony, a view which stood in stark contrast to that which developed in the eighteenth century. Unlike Martin Wight, who found the idea of the application of natural scientific

⁷⁴ Butterfield, *Christianity, Diplomacy and War*, 3rd edn. (London: Wyvern Books, 1962), pp. 125 and 123.

⁷⁵ Butterfield, 'Moralism and the Scientific Approach', *Butterfield Papers*, 109/2, no page numbers.

⁷⁶ 'The Balance of Power', one of the essays Butterfield contributed to *Diplomatic Investigations*, best illustrates this concern.

⁷⁷ Coll, *Wisdom of Statecraft*, especially pp. 63–4.

⁷⁸ Butterfield, untitled paper given at Villa Serbelloni, Bellagio, 1–7 April 1968, *Butterfield Papers* 109/2, no page numbers.

⁷⁹ Butterfield, *The Study of Modern History*, Inaugural lecture as Professor of Modern History (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1944), p. 22.

approaches to human society distasteful and even inhumane,⁸⁰ Butterfield came to the view that, provided the student maintained a conviction of the fundamental importance of human 'personality' and remained conscious of the capricious nature of the historical 'process', such methods might be employed.

His notion of scientific inquiry rested upon a methodological commitment to inductive empiricism. It was a method Butterfield encountered, and found congenial, if not unproblematic, in the work of Sir Francis Bacon, a figure who dominated *The Origins of Modern Science*.⁸¹ Baconian inductive empiricism had a double appeal for Butterfield. Firstly, it was a method that he considered required no philosophical justification by its user, and thus compatible with his faith. Bacon's application of the method, Butterfield noted, resulted simply in generalisations or axioms which formed the basis for further observation and experiment. 'The highest generalisations of all, however, are out of reach, too near to God and to final causes', he observed, 'they must be left to the philosophers'.⁸² Secondly, Butterfield was attracted to the supposed flexibility of the method, and the 'extraordinary elasticity of mind' of Bacon himself; as I have argued, in science as in politics and historical thinking, he was deeply convinced of the need for 'elasticity'. In IR, Butterfield thought, inductive empiricism could be employed to ascertain the 'diagram of forces' of the international system without asserting that such forces were a natural or perpetual feature of international affairs,⁸³ just as in history, it could identify the 'established' facts around which a narrative might be woven.⁸⁴ But in neither case did Butterfield think that the observer utilising this method was entirely independent of the object of his study. He was insistent that the scholar undergo a process of 'self-emptying', of the identification of the prejudices and present-minded convictions that might condition its process—an idea that, as one historian has noted, comes close to the notion of 'reflexivity'.⁸⁵

What Butterfield sought through 'inductive empiricism' was an understanding of the 'geometry' of international politics sensitive to the vicissitudes of the historical process and immune from ideological infection. His aim was the methodical exploration of the 'pressure of conditioning circumstances', 'the background out of which the great acts of decision emerge'.⁸⁶ In its pursuit he made a systematic and thorough study of contemporary American social scientific approaches to IR, reading and annotating a variety of works including those by Morton Kaplan, Herbert Kelman, Karl Deutsch and Thomas Schelling, as well as more 'traditional' accounts by Hans Morgenthau, Arnold Wolfers and Stanley Hoffman.⁸⁷ His verdicts on these works

⁸⁰ On Wight, see Michael Howard, 'Hedley Norman Bull', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 72 (1986), p. 396.

⁸¹ Butterfield wrote of Bacon in an unpublished fragment: 'one would willingly be wrong as often as Francis Bacon if, by intellectual adventurousness, one could continue to be so often right' ('Francis Bacon and History', *Butterfield Papers*, 213, p. 1).

⁸² Butterfield, *Origins of Modern Science*, p. 105.

⁸³ Butterfield, untitled paper given at Villa Serbelloni, Bellagio, 1–7 April 1968, *Butterfield Papers* 109/2, no page numbers.

⁸⁴ Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, p. 23.

⁸⁵ Michael Bentley, 'Butterfield at the Millennium: The Sir Herbert Butterfield Memorial Lecture, 1999', *Storia della Storiografia*, 38 (2000), p. 18. On 'self-emptying' and religion, see J. Munsey-Turner, 'The Christian and the Study of History', *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, 46 (1987), p. 3.

⁸⁶ Butterfield, *International Conflict*, pp. 51, 55.

⁸⁷ Butterfield, undated notes, probably from 1965, *Butterfield Papers*, 109/3.

were mixed, but he acknowledged that in its discussions the British Committee had done 'less than justice to the method that is commonly associated with Galileo'. This compliment seems to have been intentionally back-handed, for he went on to note that Galileo's quest had been for rules that have 'reference to purely geometrical space' unverifiable by experimentation, and divorced from empirical reality. Geometry, he warned, does not offer an understanding of this real world, and there was a danger that readers of Schelling or Kaplan might confuse their elegant systems with the realities of international relations. These were better served by 'wisdom-literature' and empirical observation rather than theoretical abstraction, lest the latter be taken as 'prescriptions or pressing pieces of advice' encouraging 'statesmen' to bring the 'real world . . . as close as possible to the "geometry"'. Like Machiavelli's teachings, those of Schelling and Kaplan were, to Butterfield, insufficiently inflexible, insensitive to the importance of "'wisdom" . . . grounded in general experience, common sense, etc'.⁸⁸

In terms of both published and unpublished material, however, Butterfield's efforts to sketch an account of the wisdom required in the conduct of diplomacy and a picture of the 'geometry' which lies at the heart of international relations came to little more than a few scattered insights. By 1971, he had retreated significantly from the indulgent position he adopted towards American social scientific method, concerned above all at the impact it was having on policy. Since the early 1950s, he declared:

. . . there has been progress with a vengeance in the field, and the scientism with respect to political and military action, particularly as it has developed amongst the academics in the United States, has aspects so inhuman as to be somewhat frightening—doubling the terror which no doubt all of us fear when we hear of another professor going to the White House or the Cabinet Office.⁸⁹

The themes of this lecture—and of his contribution to *The Aberystwyth Papers*—was one common to his earlier writing, especially that in the 1950s: the importance of 'inherited political experience' and the 'more sophisticated attitude to foreign affairs' found in the international thought of writers and 'statesmen' before 1914. It was to these notions that Butterfield returned in his Martin Wight memorial lecture, the last substantive statement he made on IR.⁹⁰ There he traced the idea of *raison d'état* and its changing meanings through the work of Machiavelli and Richelieu, taking a distinctly different approach to the history of ideas than Wight himself. The aim was not only the recovery of past political wisdom, but also the demonstration of the unlikenesses of past and present—the central idea in *The Whig Interpretation*, published some forty years previously.⁹¹ In both, it is Butterfield the historian, keen

⁸⁸ Butterfield, untitled paper given at Villa Serbelloni, Bellagio, 1–7 April 1968, *Butterfield Papers*, 109/2, no page numbers.

⁸⁹ Butterfield, *The Discontinuities between Generations in History: Their Effect on the Transmission of Political Experience*, The Rede Lecture 1971 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 12–13. See also 'Morality and an International Order', in Brian Porter (ed.), *International Politics 1919–1969: The Aberystwyth Papers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 336–60.

⁹⁰ A lesser piece, 'Global Good and Evil', was subsequently published in the Festschrift for Hans Morgenthau, *Truth and Tragedy: A Tribute to Hans J. Morgenthau*, eds. K. W. Thompson and R. J. Myers (London & New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1984 [1977]), pp. 199–202.

⁹¹ Butterfield, *Raison d'état*, p. 9.

to study the past for its own sake, and acute to the dangers of anachronism, rather than Butterfield the theorist that is the dominant voice.

Butterfield's legacy

International order is the precondition of justice.
Order is the condition of all values.
Order and justice are not alternatives.⁹²

What Butterfield bequeathed to International Relations is difficult to judge. Few scholars of IR studied under him, Adam Watson and the late Peter Savigear being perhaps the only examples. He left no institutions at Cambridge explicitly designed for the study of the subject, and may, indeed, have resisted such a creation. His call, half-hearted and inconsistent though it may have been, for a more 'scientific' approach to IR, moreover, went largely unheeded, at least in the terms he set out, as the animus against any form of 'scientific' inquiry gathered strength at the LSE and elsewhere. With Hedley Bull's 'case for the classical approach' in 1966,⁹³ the terms of debate between British and American scholars were set for years to come, and Butterfield's wish that they might come to an understanding of the proper relationship between the 'scientific' and 'classical' approaches was to remain unfulfilled.⁹⁴ Worst still, the overtly religious tone of much of his post-war writing made it unpalatable for the largely secular contemporary academic audience, and allowed the dismissal of his work as commonplace 'Christian realism' to be lumped with that of Niebuhr or Kennan.

That Butterfield's thought shared much with 'Christian realism' should not, however, be doubted, but it is where it diverges from this tradition that it is of particular interest. Whereas Reinhold Niebuhr's 'realism' sought to refute the two 'dubious articles' underpinning 'idealist' thought⁹⁵—the ideas of the perfectibility of man and of progress—Butterfield sought only to point to their dangers. For the latter, human nature was not congenitally depraved, and the *animus dominanti* not all powerful; rather, human nature is weak and prone to cupidity. Through moral fortitude, such sinfulness might be curbed: 'if all the world were like St. Francis of Assisi', Butterfield wrote, peace would be possible, universal and lasting.⁹⁶ The problem was not the 'lust for power', but the temptations that power offers to those who wield it. Like Acton, Butterfield believed that 'power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely'.⁹⁷ Ethical behaviour is conditioned by the struc-

⁹² Martin Wight, notes on Butterfield's criticisms of Hedley Bull's 'Order versus Justice', a paper delivered to the British Committee, April 1971, *British Committee Papers*, 5.

⁹³ Hedley Bull, 'International Theory: The Case for the Classical Approach', *World Politics*, 3 (1966), pp. 361–77.

⁹⁴ This wish was expressed in Butterfield's untitled paper, delivered at Bellagio in April 1968, *Butterfield Papers*, 109/2, no page numbers.

⁹⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), p. 13.

⁹⁶ Butterfield, *History and Human Relations*, p. 22. See also *Christianity, Diplomacy and War*, p. 7.

⁹⁷ Lord Acton, *Essays in Religion, Politics and Morality*, ed. J. Rufus Fears (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Classics, 1988), p. 519. In *The Whig Interpretation*, Butterfield called this maxim 'the wisest of truths' (p. 110).

tures and institutions that channel and constrain power, whether in social relations within states, or international relations between them. In blurring the two spheres—in making them different in degree rather than type—Butterfield again departed from the ‘Christian realist’ position, for he was keen to deny the existence of a separate political morality or ‘ethic of responsibility’.⁹⁸

Despite his Augustinian insistence on sin and cupidity, the appeal to put one’s faith in Providence alone and the assault on the *naïveté* of secular ideas of progress, what is striking in Butterfield’s work is his optimism. His thought embodies a strong sense of human agency, and an emphasis on the ‘vast efforts of human contrivance’ required to maintain a civilised international order.⁹⁹ Ever the good Methodist, Butterfield believed that staunch, unbreakable faith and sound education could produce persons capable of not only of sustaining order, but doing good. ‘It has been preordained by the Providence of God’, he wrote in 1962, ‘that all of us may promote justice or establish mercy in our own little corner of the world’. It required tolerance, persuasion and a proper understanding of the distribution of power, however, for it would be folly to pursue justice when ‘we lack the power to redress the distant evil’. Where injustice cannot be remedied, Butterfield argued, it is wrong to threaten the perpetrator, and thus also international order, with destruction: that is the ‘arrogance of thwarted power’.¹⁰⁰ ‘The destruction of all order’, he warned, ‘would merely put the weak more than ever at the mercy of the strong’.¹⁰¹ *A modus vivendi*—a ‘creative and inventive thing’—must precede the pursuit of justice.¹⁰² This, of course, is a doctrine of limits rather than a denial that a just order was possible, and Butterfield was keen to point out that the pursuit of justice does not necessarily lead to the destruction of order, as Hedley Bull and the more pessimistic of the classical realists suggested.¹⁰³

For Butterfield, the primary concern of ‘statesmen’ was not the pursuit of power and narrow national interest, but the maintenance of the international system, its delicate norms, procedures and diplomatic conventions. He was highly critical of modern political theory, as was Wight, for what he regarded as the ‘doctrine of obligation that is centred upon the individual state’. Scholars and citizens, he argued, had thus been distracted from serious consideration of the international system, and had reified ‘the concept of the state as an end in itself’.¹⁰⁴ Through ‘historical thinking’, ‘scientific’ reflection on the structures of the international system, and the exploration of past international thought in the work of statesmen,

⁹⁸ For the Christian realist idea of an ‘ethic of responsibility’, see Murray, *Reconstructing Realism*, p. 110. For Butterfield’s denial of the notion, see his unpublished paper, ‘Moralism and the Scientific Approach’ (*Butterfield Papers* 31, p. 1), where he argued: ‘when I hear it asserted that there is a separate ethic for statesmen, a peculiar thing called political morality, I am not sure that I can fit this into my thinking or even understand what it means’.

⁹⁹ Butterfield, ‘Morality and an International Order’, p. 352.

¹⁰⁰ Butterfield, *Christianity, Diplomacy and War*, 3rd edn., p. 124.

¹⁰¹ Butterfield, ‘The Discontinuity between Generations’, p. 31.

¹⁰² Butterfield, ‘Moralism and the Scientific Approach’, p. 1.

¹⁰³ For Bull’s formulation of the problem of order and justice, see his *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 2nd edn. (Houndmills & London: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 74–94.

¹⁰⁴ Butterfield, Notes of the discussion of Martin Wight’s ‘Why Is There No International Theory?’, *British Committee Papers*, 1. As Butterfield later noted, Wight’s paper started from the point that ‘“political theory” is the diabolical thing’ (Undated paper in ‘Why Is There No International Theory?’, *Butterfield Papers*, 29).

diplomats and historians, Butterfield sought to remedy this failing. ““Political theory””, he noted repeatedly in meetings of the British Committee, ‘is the enemy’; ‘if all thought had been historical from the beginning things might have been better’.¹⁰⁵

In this light, it is difficult to see Butterfield as a ‘Christian realist’, still less a ‘civic republican’. Rather, as Wight more plausibly suggested, he might better be viewed as ‘the most restrained, gentle and unpessimistic of Burkeans’.¹⁰⁶ Like Burke, Butterfield made an attempt to steer between what David Boucher has called ‘Empirical Realism’ and ‘Universal Moral Order’, between Machiavelli and moralism.¹⁰⁷ Deploring the revolutionary upheavals and total wars of his own times, Butterfield sought a restoration of the ideas of a community of states, the balance of power and limited war. He sought, too, restatements of the value of prudence—or co-operation with ‘Providence’—and of the dangers of moralism.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, Butterfield was keen to urge tolerance, and the extension of that principle, grounded in the belief of the value of human personality,¹⁰⁹ to states as well as persons. His concern, like Burke’s, was for the securing of states’ liberty against the tyranny that would arise from the creation of a universal state. In such ‘whiggish’ ideas, Butterfield was not alone: Martin Wight’s ‘Western Values in International Relations’ was, after all, originally entitled ‘The Whig Tradition in International Theory and Western Values’.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Butterfield’s comments, noted by Martin Wight, on Michael Howard’s ‘Sovereignty’, 15 April 1961, *British Committee Papers*, 5.

¹⁰⁶ Martin Wight, review of Butterfield, *Liberty in the Modern World* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1952) in *International Affairs*, 29:4 (October 1953), p. 475.

¹⁰⁷ David Boucher, *Political Theories of International Relations: From Thucydides to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 308–29.

¹⁰⁸ Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, p. 131.

¹⁰⁹ Butterfield, *The Historical Development of the Principle of Toleration in British Life* (London: Epworth, 1957).

¹¹⁰ Martin Wight, ‘The Whig Tradition in International Theory and Western Values’, British Committee paper delivered on 7 October 1961, *Butterfield Papers*, 337.