

## HISTORICISM

In philosophy, historicism is an approach to history that assigns a particular meaning to an event according to that event's context within the arc of history. In some cases, this results in viewing historical change as a power in and of itself. Historicism can be as extreme as claiming that certain changes are "historically inevitable," as though history were a force on par with gravity or magnetism. In most cases, however, the term historicism simply refers to a careful interpretation of events with a mind to their cultural, historical, and political contexts.

In theology, historicism is an approach to eschatology and prophecy in general. In historicism biblical prophecies are interpreted as representative of literal historical events. Historicism looks at the whole of Bible prophecy as a sweeping overview of church history, from Pentecost to the end times. This approach involves interpreting symbols or figures in the Bible as metaphors for actual events, nations, or persons of history. Historicism was especially popular during the Reformation, when it was used to suggest that the Catholic Church was part of the end-times apostasy, with the pope as the Antichrist.

Historicism is distinguished from other views of eschatology: idealism (the events of Revelation are entirely symbolic of the cosmic struggle between good and evil); preterism (the events of Revelation were fulfilled in AD 70); and futurism (the events of Revelation await a future, end-times fulfillment during the tribulation and beyond). Historicism falls between preterism and futurism in its approach: according to historicism, most of Revelation is symbolic of persons and events in world history. The book of Revelation was prophecy when John wrote it, according to historicists, but most of the book has already been fulfilled in our day.

Here are some examples of how historicism usually interprets events in Revelation: the seven churches in Revelation 2–3 are symbolic of seven ages of church history, starting with the apostolic church (the church of Ephesus) and ending with the modern-day, lukewarm church (the church of Laodicea). The seals in chapters 4–7 represent the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. The “little scroll” given to John in chapter 10 is a picture of the Protestant Reformation. The beasts of chapters 12 and 13 represent Catholicism and the papacy. Other passages in Revelation are linked to the invasion of the Huns, the spread of Islam, and the rise of the modern missionary movement.

Historicism has varied applications to the concepts of a rapture, tribulation, and second coming of Christ. In some cases, historicism has been abused by those attempting to predict a specific date for the return of Jesus, such as the Millerites in 1844 and Harold Camping in 1994 and 2011. As one would expect, all such attempts at pinpointing the return of Christ have failed, and they will continue to fail (see Matthew 24:36).

Historicism, so popular with the Reformers, remained a dominant perspective on eschatology through the 19th century. However, due to its nebulous interpretation method (no two historicists agree on what symbols go with what historical events) and the fact that John’s original readers could not have understood the book of Revelation in a historicist manner, the historicist view is not widely held today.