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**NEW TITLES**


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*History***HISTORY OF THE IDEA OF PROGRESS**

by Robert Nisbet  
 Basic, 1980  
 370 pp. \$16.95

The idea of progress—intellectual, moral, and material—was an overriding concern of pagan antiquity. “Through work,” advised the late 8th-century B.C. philosopher Hesiod, “men grow rich in flocks and substance.” Later, in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, early Christian Church fathers were not so obsessed with other-worldly concerns that they failed to take note that *this* world had grown “more cultivated and populated” since the Fall. Challenging much accepted scholarly opinion, Nisbet, a Columbia historian, takes a fresh look at the thinkers who fostered—or debunked—belief in man’s steady improvement. Renaissance intellectuals, he maintains, gave up on the idea of progress. They scorned what (they thought) was their immediate predecessors’ preoccupation with the hereafter, became fascinated with the occult, and espoused cyclical theories of history distinguished by alternating epochs of ignorance and enlightenment. Nisbet also retells the familiar story of how the Industrial Revolution restored faith in progress during the 18th and 19th centuries for scholars and the general public alike. Yet, even as society became secularized, the concept of progress remained anchored to religious beliefs—in the oneness of mankind, in a guiding providence, and in the victory of good over evil. Nisbet likens the West after World War II to Europe during the Renaissance; he cites a lack of faith in traditional Western values, the notion that the past is “irrelevant,” the rampant narcissism and fascination with cults. He calls for an appreciation of the past and for a renewal of religious belief. “Only,” he speculates, “in the context of a true culture in which the core is a deep and wide sense of the *sacred* are we likely to regain the vital conditions of progress and of faith in progress—past, present, and future.”