

History certainly progresses. If it stood still, there would actually be no history at all. The question is whether its progress is linear and leads to some distant target, or cyclical, where historical events happen in one endless circle, moving round and round.

If you don't believe in God's promises, linear progress puts the responsibility for meeting the unknown target on our shoulders. This is threatening. If there is a beginning which our remote ancestors once saw and an end to which we should lead ourselves (or drag ourselves, for that matter), then there is the fear of missing it. That opens space to sects, prophets, or politicians (the last two categories often merge) who claim to know how to meet the target and who therefore call for masses to follow them. But the second fear is even worse: if everything is going to finish as randomly as it once began, then existence has no meaning, and we have to accept the painful fact that our lives, together with the millions of deaths and the immense suffering of our forefathers, were useless.

Cyclical progress – or as Mircea Eliade called it, the eternal return – seemingly offers more freedom and less fear. In this case, history is periodically annulled, repeatedly starts from scratch, and eternally recurs.

Such progress has factual support. A tourist facing prehistoric cave paintings in the dim light of a torch can hardly overlook the fact that the strongest worries and wishes of humans haven't changed too much. As in a Babylonian myth, people constantly make noise, eat, procreate, and produce waste, but hardly advance, since few children trust the experience of their parents enough to avoid repeating their failures.

So it can be said that history progresses, but the question of whether this progress is linear or cyclical mirrors the question of whether our lives end in a paradise or hell, or eternally rotate in a circle of new reincarnations.

JAN KOUMAR, JIHLAVA, CZECH REPUBLIC