

Albrecht Ritschl and the Tübingen School

A neglected link in the history of 19th century theology

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One of the lasting problems Adolf Harnack bequeathed to 20th century theological scholarship was the assessment, in his magisterial *History of Dogma*, that the Greek Church Fathers, especially Gregory of Nyssa, had introduced into theology a physical doctrine of salvation. The diagnosis, in Harnack's own words, is this:

Christ did not assume the human nature of an individual person, but human nature. Accordingly, all that was human was intertwined with the Deity; the whole of human nature became divine by intermixture with the Divine. Gregory conceives this as a strictly physical process: the leaven of the Deity has pervaded the whole dough of humanity, through and in Christ; for Christ united with himself the whole of human nature with all its characteristics. The incarnation was an *actus medicinalis* which is to be thought of as strictly natural, and that extends to all mankind.¹

Much ink has been spilled on arguments about the fairness of this evaluation.² Hardly ever has it been observed, however, that the view Harnack repudiates so fervently in the fathers has a famous parallel in 19th century theology. It is the upshot of the notorious 'Last Dilemma' at the end of David Strauß' *Life of Jesus* that no traditional, nor any modern, concept of the Incarnation that insists on the human individuality of the God-man can mitigate the contradictions entailed by classical Christology:

This is indeed not the mode in which Idea realizes itself; it is not wont to lavish all its fullness on one exemplar, and be niggardly towards all others—to express itself perfectly in that one individual, and imperfectly in all the rest: it rather loves to distribute its riches among a multiplicity of exemplars which reciprocally complete each other—in the alternate appearance and suppression of a series of individuals. And is this no true realization of the idea? Is not the idea of the unity of the divine and human natures a real one in a far higher sense, when I regard the whole race of mankind as its realization, than when I sin-

¹ Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma*. Translated from the 3rd German edition by Neil Buchanan et al., New York 1958, vol. 3, 297 and note 580; cf. id., *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 2, Freiburg im Breisgau (Mohr) ²1888, 165.

² Cf. Reinhard M. Hübner, *Die Einheit des Leibes Christi bei Gregor von Nyssa. Untersuchungen zum Ursprung der 'physischen' Erlösungslehre*, Philosophia Patrum 2, Leiden (Brill) 1974, esp. 3–25.

gle out one man as such a realization? Is not an incarnation of God from eternity, a truer one than an incarnation limited to a particular point of time?³

Is Harnack's alertness to, and criticism of, a physical doctrine of salvation then a response to Strauß' idea that Christology proper must have as its subject all humanity? It may not be entirely easy to assert this with full confidence; in any case, the heuristic value of such an observation is that it directs our attention to the internal workings of 19th century theology, some of which have hardly been noticed by more recent scholarship. In the following I shall pursue the historical background to this very particular historical and doctrinal squabble to uncover some more fundamental connections, dependencies and disagreements that have shaped theological debate from the 1830s to the end of the century.

In order to gauge the theological significance of Harnack's criticism of Patristic 'physical' soteriology it is imperative to note its background in the theology of Albrecht Ritschl. While the overall importance of Ritschl's theology for Harnack's thought has been variously assessed,⁴ it is crucial to see that Harnack's present judgment echoes almost literally words applied to the same phenomenon in the first volume of Ritschl's major work *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, published in 1870. Ritschl there, in scathing words, expresses his rejection of views that consider salvation on 'the analogy of a *chemical process of nature*, while the human nature which undergoes it is regarded only as a *natural unit*'⁵ and 'the fancies of the Church Fathers [...] about the deification of the human race as a natural unity'.⁶ The context of these words is Ritschl's proposal that in his historical account of the doctrines he sets about to study, reconciliation and justification, he would pass over the patristic period altogether to start directly with Anselm and Abelard in the 12th century.

By doing this he consciously deviated from the example set by his academic teacher and mentor, Ferdinand Christian Baur, in his groundbreaking

³ David Friedrich Strauß, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*. Translated from the fourth German edition by Marian Evans [=George Eliot], New York (Calvin Blanchard) 1860, 895 = id., *Das Leben Jesu kritisch betrachtet*, vol. 2, Tübingen (Osiander) ⁴1840, 709.

⁴ Cf. the rather sceptical judgment in: Claus-Dieter Osthöfener, 'Adolf von Harnack als Systematiker', in: *ZThK* 99 (2002), 296–331 with the thorough, historical account in: Christian Nottmeier, *Adolf von Harnack und die deutsche Politik 1890–1930. Eine biographische Studie zum Verhältnis von Protestantismus, Wissenschaft und Politik*, BHT 124, Tübingen (Mohr Siebeck) 2004, 69–81.

⁵ Albrecht Ritschl, *A Critical History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*. Translated from the German, with the author's sanction, John Black, Edinburgh (Edmonston and Douglas) 1872, 8 = id., *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 1, Bonn (Marcus) 1870, 8 f. From the second edition onwards, Ritschl without changing his fundamental position, omitted those strong value judgments and added a historical survey from Justin Martyr via Athanasius to John of Damascus: *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 1, Bonn (Marcus) ²1882, 3–21.

⁶ Ritschl, *Critical History*, 9.

monograph on the same subject, which was published in 1838.⁷ In many ways, or so at least I shall argue, Ritschl's major work and thus his theology must be seen as an attempt to achieve what Baur sought to achieve without falling into the traps Baur had fallen into. One of the more obvious traps, as far as Ritschl was concerned, came to light in its more radical form in the thought of Baur's other famous pupil, David Friedrich Strauß. Ritschl never saw in Strauß the genuine heir of Baur's theology, but had to accept that in one regard certainly the two were in agreement.⁸ Baur's account of the development of the Christian doctrine of reconciliation led directly to his explicit endorsement of, and identification with, the Christological view formulated by Strauß in his *Life of Jesus*, first published in 1835:

Only the species, to which the individual belongs, the universal under which the particular and the singular are conceptually subsumed, can mediate between the individual and the absolute. If it is a fundamental truth of the Christian faith that the human being is of divine nature and one with God, how else can this essential unity between God and man be mediated except through universal human nature as it is in itself; the idea of human-kind which, while continuously being individuated in the infinite multitude of particulars, is also the living, substantial unity, within which is sublated all that is particular and individual.⁹

Baur is not, however, merely following in Strauß' footsteps. Substantially the same position can be found expressed already in his 1835 monograph *Die Christliche Gnosis*.¹⁰ Baur evidently saw some theological merit in the identification of the historical Christ with universal humanity. It is therefore perhaps not too surprising that, where he is dealing with the Church Fathers, he

⁷ Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Die christliche Lehre von der Versöhnung in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung von der ältesten Zeit bis auf die neueste*, Tübingen (Osiander) 1838, esp. 23–141 (for the earliest development up until John Scotus Eriugena).

⁸ Cf. Albrecht Ritschl, 'Über geschichtliche Methode in der Geschichte des Urchristenthums', in: *JDT* 6 (1861), 429–459, here: 431–437 (= Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben*, ed. Klaus Scholder, vol. 5: *Für und wider die Tübinger Schule*, Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt [Frommann-Holzboog] 1975, 474–476). Page numbers here and in the following refer to the original edition.

⁹ Baur, *Lehre von der Versöhnung*, 734: "Das Vermittelnde zwischen dem Individuum und dem Absoluten kann nur die Gattung seyn, zu welcher das Individuum gehört, das Allgemeine, unter welches seinem Begriff nach das Besondere und Einzelne gestellt werden muss. Ist es eine wesentliche Wahrheit des christlichen Glaubens, dass der Mensch göttlicher Natur oder mit Gott Eins ist, wodurch anders kann diese wesentliche Einheit zwischen Gott und dem Menschen vermittelt werden, als durch das Allgemeine, An-sich-seyende, der menschlichen Natur, die Idee der Menschheit, die zwar in der unendlichen Vielheit der Individuen sich fort und fort individualisirt, aber auch die lebendige, substantielle Einheit ist, in welcher alles Besondere und Individuelle aufgehoben ist." Unless otherwise indicated translations are my own. Cf. also: op. cit., 622 (note); 733–735 (with note 1 on p. 735).

¹⁰ Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Die christliche Gnosis oder die christliche Religionsphilosophie in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, Tübingen (Osiander) 1835 (Reprint: Darmstadt 1967), 721.

gives a more positive account of what he calls their ‘mystical’ (and what Ritschl and Harnack will later call their ‘physical’) doctrine of salvation.¹¹

Why then are Ritschl and Harnack so much opposed to the ‘physical’ doctrine, and why is the same view more attractive to Baur? Pursuing this question, I should suggest, leads directly to their understanding of nature, spirit, and history and thus to some of the most fundamental philosophical notions underlying their respective theologies. Expounding these notions, as far as is possible within the confines of this paper, will hopefully contribute to a clarification of the complex relationship between the two major historical theologies the 19th century produced. My account will start from an exposition of some of Ritschl’s central philosophical tenets (1). Their reconstruction serves to perceive Ritschl’s theology as what I call a strong version of historical theology. It is then argued (2) that in precisely this project Ritschl was and remained deeply indebted to Baur’s historical theology while, rightly, perceiving it as ambiguous and ultimately flawed. Ritschl therefore sought to bring the project back on track by means of a modification of the very philosophy underlying the Tübingen version of historical theology (3). A brief analysis of the most important historical debate between Ritschl and the Tübingen School, concerning the historical reconstruction of primitive Christianity, will provide a glimpse of how those philosophical differences influenced historical and exegetical theories (4) and lead to a brief conclusion (5).

1. Albrecht Ritschl on Nature, Mind, and History

In many ways, the conceptual duality of nature and mind (*Geist*) underlies Ritschl’s theology as a whole.¹² Derived from, and co-ordinated with, that duality is the conceptual difference of ‘physical’ and ‘ethical’. For Ritschl, the world is ‘nature’ insofar as it is governed by effective causality, and thus any description of reality that rests on the mechanism of cause and effect is ‘physical’.¹³ Ritschl was aware, of course, that all phenomena are susceptible to this kind of explanation, but should such a naturalistic theory have the final word? Ritschl thought there was an alternative viewpoint, which perceived the world as mind (*Geist*). In this perspective, the world’s structure

¹¹ Baur, *Lehre von der Versöhnung*, 111–118.

¹² Cf. Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation. The Positive Development of the Doctrine*, transl. H.R. Mackintosh/A.B. Macauley, Edinburgh (T&T Clark) ²1909, 238: ‘Now things are either mind [*Geist*] or nature. There exist no things-in-general, which are neither the one nor the other’ (with amendments) = Ritschl, *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 3, Bonn (Marcus) ³1889, 226 f.

¹³ Cf. Ritschl, *The Positive Development*, 222: ‘...while mental [geistiges] life is subject to the laws of mechanism so far as it is interwoven with nature, yet its special character as distinct from nature is signalled by practical laws which declare mind [*Geist*] to be an end in itself, which realises itself in this form.’ (with amendments) = *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 3, 211.

is teleological, and it is this teleological understanding of the world as governed by mind, which Ritschl, somewhat idiosyncratically, calls ethical.¹⁴

In the case of human beings the two perspectives collide most obviously: we can look at them merely as parts of nature, but we will also, inevitably, think of *ourselves* in a different way when we address issues such as moral responsibility or the wholeness and meaning of life. It is Ritschl's view that the possibility of, and the tension between, these two conflicting accounts of ourselves precisely is the human predicament and that religion has always been an attempt to address, in theory and praxis, this existential problem.¹⁵

Christianity, in this perspective, occupies a special place in the history of religions precisely because it offers the most coherent *ethical* worldview, in which our self-understanding as moral persons is consistently given precedence over our entanglement in the physical world, which is reduced to the status of a means towards the former as an end.¹⁶

Christian theology therefore must be 'ethical' in the sense of 'teleological'; the use of effective causality in the construction of doctrine is always suspicious and, more often than not, evidence for borrowings from philosophies that corresponded, historically, to nature religion and will therefore, by default, be unsuitable for the elucidation of the Christian truth. Unsurprisingly perhaps, this happened most frequently in the earliest period of Christianity, when the only philosophy available was pre-Christian in character, which incidentally is the background to Ritschl's (and again Harnack's¹⁷) charge of undue 'hellenisation' of Christianity in the Patristic period,¹⁸ but be this as it may, it also meant for the working out of Ritschl's own theology that the 'ethical' concern *as a methodological principle* had overriding importance for the construction of his own theology. All major doctrinal relations had to be presented as teleological, and Ritschl's systematic theology is

¹⁴ If Ritschl is often credited with an 'ethical' theory of Christianity, it must not be forgotten that this is how he employed that term; cf. Johannes Zachhuber, 'Friedrich Schleiermacher und Albrecht Ritschl. Kontinuitäten und Diskontinuitäten in der Theologie des 19. Jahrhunderts' in: *JHMTb* 12 (2005), 16–46, here: 34–37.

¹⁵ 'In every religion what is sought, with the help of the superhuman spiritual power revered by man, is a solution of the contradiction in which man finds himself, as both a part of the world of nature and a mental [geistige] personality claiming to dominate nature': Ritschl, *The Positive Development*, 199 (with amendments) = *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 3, 189.

¹⁶ 'Christianity, by its completely rounded view of the world, guarantees to the believers that they shall be preserved unto eternal life in the Kingdom of God, which is God's revealed end in the world – and that, too, in the full sense that man is thus in the Kingdom of God set over the world as a whole in his own order': Ritschl, *The Positive Development*, 200 = *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 3, 191.

¹⁷ Cf. Harnack, *Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 1, 45–54.

¹⁸ Cf. e.g. Ritschl's critique of the 'Areopagitic conception of God', which is *physical* insofar as it is Platonic: *The Positive Development*, 271 = *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 3, 257 f.

an impressive attempt to do precisely this.¹⁹ Rejection of a ‘physical’ doctrine of salvation is merely one of many applications of this principle. Ritschl’s charge then that such a doctrine considers humanity as ‘a natural unit’, is not (or not primarily) individualistic; the emphasis is not on ‘unit’, but on ‘natural’. From the Christian point of view, humanity must indeed be seen as one, but united on the basis of a teleological, not a ‘natural’ principle, namely the spirit of love.²⁰ Ultimately, the value of such a teleologically conceived unity is that it does not obliterate individuality; it rather puts it into its proper place.

While the confrontation of a natural and an ethical perspective on human beings is familiar enough, the link perceived by Ritschl between the ethical and the historical may not seem equally obvious. Yet for Ritschl this is crucial. Having history, being historical is one of the defining marks of humanity, and history therefore, rather than nature, has a claim to reveal God to us.²¹ Ritschl’s obsession with natural theology is almost as pervasive as it will later be in Karl Barth,²² but Ritschl’s concern is once again derived from his juxtaposition of natural and teleological: natural theology is un-Christian because it is physical, because it constructs the relation between God and world as one of cause and effect.²³ Adopting a ‘natural’ perspective blurs historical distinctions depriving specific phenomena of their individual form, whereas the teleological perspective of Christian theology reveals the relationship between God and world as fundamentally historical, leading to a common goal, the Kingdom of God.

In this sense, history is the medium of religion, and a proper understanding of religion—and thus of the place of Christianity as a religion—can only be achieved by studying it historically. Consequently, Ritschl states in § 2 of the third, systematic volume of *Justification and Reconciliation*:

¹⁹ A good example is provided by Ritschl’s strictly teleological reconstruction of the doctrine of God in: *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 3, 262–265 = *The Positive Development*, 275–279.

²⁰ ‘In order to prove its kinship with God, it would be necessary to conceive the human race as a unity in spite of its natural multiplicity, a unity which is other than its natural generic unity. The conception we are in search of is given in the idea of Christian community, which makes the Kingdom of God its task. This idea of the moral unification of the human race, through action prompted by universal love of our neighbour, represents a unity of many which belongs to the realm of the thoroughly defined, in other words, the good will’: *The Positive Development*, 280 = *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 3, 267.

²¹ This was already Schleiermacher’s position. ‘History, in the most proper sense, is the highest object of religion’: Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion. Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, ed. Richard Crouter, Cambridge (CUP) 1988, 42 = id., *Über die Religion. Reden an die gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern*, Berlin () 1799, 100 = KGA I/2, 232,38–233,1.

²² Cf. Hans Joachim Birkner, ‘Natürliche Theologie und Offenbarungstheologie. Ein theologiegeschichtlicher Überblick’, in: *NZStH* 3 (1961) 279–295 = id., *Schleiermacher-Studien*, ed. Hermann Fischer, Berlin/New York (De Gruyter) 1996, 3–22, here: 11–17.

²³ Ritschl, *The Positive Development*, 271 f. = *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 3, 257–259.

The specifically peculiar nature of Christianity, which at every turn of theology must be kept intact, can be ascertained only by calling the general history of religion to our aid.²⁴

How does the history of religion come ‘to the aid’ of the theologian? Ritschl thinks that historical comparison reveals the unique place Christianity holds in the world of religions:

The observation and comparison of the various historical religions from which the general conception is abstracted, likewise shows that they stand to one another not merely in the relation of species, but also in the relation of stages. They exhibit an ever more rich and determinate manifestation of the chief features of religion; their connection is always more close, their aims more worthy of man. Such a way of looking at them opens up more fruitful vistas than are offered by the abstraction of a general conception of religion, followed by the comparison of the historical religions as species of this genus. For in this case, the various religions are treated merely *as natural phenomena*; in the other case they are viewed as elements in the spiritual journey of humanity.²⁵

In order for such an approach to work, of course, the history of religions must yield normative results. Will it do this, however? Is not this the upshot of historicism that history is a realm of relativity thus creating the abyss between ‘historical’ and ‘dogmatic’ method which Troeltsch would decree only a few decades later²⁶ and whose existence had, 100 years earlier, been declared equally categorically by Lessing, who famously spoke of the ‘ugly ditch’ between the two?²⁷

Evidently, Ritschl’s view of the relation between history and theology rests on the assumption that such an antagonism cannot be the last word. Rather, he believes it is rather *just another remnant of natural/physical thinking, which Christian theology must overcome in order to become what it is meant to be*.²⁸ Yet this means that a theological interpretation of history and historical theology must go hand in hand; one cannot exist without the other. Theology (and only theology) generates an understanding of history that shows a way beyond ‘historicist’ relativism, but theology can do this only by being itself fully and entirely historical. I call this historical theology in the strong sense of the term, and it is precisely this strong version of historical theology for which Ritschl remained indebted to Baur’s work, however much he wished to dissociate himself from its results.

²⁴ Ritschl, *The Positive Development*, 8 = *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 3, 8 f. That the different wording of this definition in the various editions indicates Ritschl’s declining interest in the history of religions has been argued by Caius Fabricius, *Die Entwicklung in Albrecht Ritschls Theologie von 1874 bis 1889*, Tübingen (Mohr) 1909, 101–108.

²⁵ Ritschl, *The Positive Development*, 196 = *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 3, 187. Emphasis mine.

²⁶ Ernst Troeltsch, ‘Historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie’ (1898), in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, Tübingen (J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck]) 1931, 728–753.

²⁷ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, ‘Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft’ (1777), in: *G.E. Lessing’s Gesammelte Werke*, hg. K. Lachmann/F. Muncker, Bd. 13, Leipzig (Göschen) ³1897, 1–8 here: 5; ET: Henry Chadwick (ed. and transl.), *Lessing’s Theological Writings*, London (Adam & Charles Black) 1956, 53.

²⁸ Cf. Ritschl, ‘Geschichtliche Methode’ (as in n. 8), 444 f.

2. Historical theology in F.C. Baur's book on Christian Gnosis

It may be useful for the present purpose to consider Baur's historical theology on the basis of the one monograph which Ritschl himself singled out as the climax of Baur's academic achievement.²⁹ *Die christliche Gnosis oder die christliche Religions-Philosophie in ihrer historischen Entwicklung* was published in 1835; like most of Baur's works it has never seen a second edition³⁰ nor is there an English translation. In 1832 Baur had made the acquaintance of Hegel's philosophy,³¹ and this influence is discernible (and acknowledged by Baur) in this study already.³²

Nevertheless, the customary assessment of Baur as a theological Hegelian is a rather gross simplification. There is no room here to enter into an exhaustive discussion of Baur's intellectual development, but it seems evident that many of the central tenets of his thought are present in publications from the 1820s already, without any evidence of Hegelian influence to explain them there. There is some earlier influence of Schelling and Schleiermacher, but, once again, this cannot pursued here.³³

The full title of the book at once betrays how Baur intends to approach his object of study: *Christian Gnosis* or *The Christian Philosophy of Religion in its Historical Development*. The three chief intentions of the book are apparent from its title.

First, Baur offers a study in the historical phenomenon of Gnosticism in late antiquity. Much space is taken up by painstaking attempts at reconstructing the thought systems of the major Gnostic schools and their relationships. Nevertheless this aspect of his study will be left to one side here. It would be the task of a separate paper to investigate Baur's historical-critical work taking into account the sources available at that time and establishing on that basis the strengths and weaknesses of his approach.³⁴

In any case it seems evident—and this is the second clue we can take from the title—that Baur's interest in Gnosticism was not confined to the historical reconstruction of an ancient philosophical and religious movement. More precisely, one might say that 'historical reconstruction' for him ideally

²⁹ Cf. A. Ritschl, 'Geschichtliche Methode', 433.

³⁰ The first edition has been reprinted in 1967 by Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

³¹ Horton Harris, *The Tübingen School*, Oxford (OUP) 1975, 25–27.

³² Baur, *Gnosis* (as in n. 10), viii.

³³ Eduard Zeller argued in his extensive obituary that the most fundamental influence on Baur throughout his life had been Schleiermacher's ('Ferdinand Christian Baur' [1861], in: id., *Vorträge und Abhandlungen geschichtlichen Inhalts*, Leipzig (Fues [L.W. Reiland]) 1865, 354–434, here: 361), but this judgment has been harshly criticised (Harris, *Tübingen School*, 155–158). For a discussion of Schelling's influence cf. Carl Hester, 'Gedanken zu Ferdinand Christian Baur's Entwicklung als Historiker anhand zweier unbekannter Briefe', in: *ZKG* 84 (1973), 249–269.

³⁴ Many important scholarly contributions are documented in the collection edited by Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis und Gnostizismus*, Wege der Forschung CCLXII, Darmstadt (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft) 1975.

included going beyond the mere facts, stretching out towards an understanding of the phenomenon by setting it within a larger, more complex whole thereby elucidating its relevance and its meaning. Baur attempts to capture the essence of Gnosticism by understanding it as ‘the Christian philosophy of religion’. This to us sounds odd, but we have to be aware that Gnosticism appeared to most 18th and early 19th century scholars as a strange hybrid combining Christian, Jewish and Pagan elements, and hovering somewhere between theology, philosophy and myth. So it was characterised by Baur’s immediate predecessors, Neander and Matter, as ‘syncretistic theosophy’.³⁵ Against this background, we may be able to appreciate Baur’s suggestion that this ‘syncretism’ was much rather a Christian attempt to understand what religion was by bringing the existing religions into a comparative system:

Religion is the very object of its (i. e. Gnosticism’s) study, but not so much religion in its abstract idea, but in its concrete forms in which it existed historically at the time when Christianity first came into existence.³⁶

In Baur’s reconstruction, the Gnostics studied the actual, ‘positive’ religions of antiquity, Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity, in order to gain knowledge (*gnosis*) of their own position within the world of religions. This knowledge the Gnostics sought to obtain is directly related to their faith; it is the product of ‘faith seeking understanding’. The Christian faith, Baur thinks, carries with it the notion of its own superiority over other religions, while being aware at the same time that it shares common features with them. The resulting tension requires a reflection, which must be philosophical and historical in nature insofar as it has to engage with the other, competing religions in a way that explains their respective places in history as significant for their theological and philosophical evaluation.

Late ancient Gnosticism, then, ultimately provides the paradigm for a much more general assumption Baur makes: this is that Christian theology must be historical in the sense that its task, the proper exposition of Christianity as the absolute religion, requires the proof that this historical religion brings together spirit and matter, eternity and history, in idea and reality of the Incarnation, which offers an absolute point of reference within history thus making truth essentially historical and history, in its turn, the revelation of the eternal.

This idea is central to, and foundational for, Baur’s thought. In his earliest published monograph *Symbolik und Mythologie oder die Naturreligion*

³⁵ Cf. Jacques Matter, *Histoire critique du Gnosticisme et de son influence sur les sectes religieuses et philosophiques des six premiers siècles de l’ère chrétienne*, 2 vols., Paris (F.G. Levrault) 1828, vol. 2, 191.

³⁶ Baur, *Gnosis* (as in n. 10), 18 f.: “Die Religion ist das eigentliche Object, mit welchem sie [sc. Gnosis] es zu thun hat, aber zunächst nicht die Religion ihrer abstracten Idee nach, sondern in ihren concreten Gestalten und den positiven Formen, in welchen sie sich zur Zeit der Erscheinung des Christenthums historisch objectivirt hatte”.

des Alterthums,³⁷ an attempt to describe and explain mythology within the framework of the history of religions, which appeared in 1824 and many years before Baur made the acquaintance of Hegel's philosophy, he states that, in principle, there are only two roads which the study of the history of religions can follow:

... either that of a completely analytical splitting up of phenomena which, ultimately, leads to atomism, fatalism and atheism, or that in which we perceive the intellectual life of the nations in its coherence as one great whole, thus obtaining an ever more sublime idea of the divine. ... I am not scared of the well-worn charge of mixing philosophy and history. Without philosophy, history for me remains forever dead and dumb.³⁸

Empirical, analytic study of historical data must be combined with synthetic, philosophical reflection in order to understand history as 'the revelation of the Godhead' as Baur calls it in the same place.³⁹

Let us return to his treatment of the Gnostics though! The three principles to be found in many Gnostic writings, material creation, the demiurge and the saviour for Baur indicate three stages in the history of religions: Pagan nature religion, in which the divine is (ultimately) identical with the material world, Jewish theism, in which God is seen chiefly as creator and, as such, transcendent and wholly detached from the world, and the religion of salvation or, better, reconciliation, which is aimed at bringing the two realms of transcendence and immanence, spirit and world together in the Incarnation. It is not difficult to see why Baur thinks that such a construction would show the superiority, in fact, the ultimate validity of the last of those types as it would succeed in portraying the other two as necessarily one-sided forerunners inevitably to be superseded by the advent of a religion that bridges the gap between them by showing how each of them is, and is not, true.

This success depends, however, on the Gnostics' ability to show that the conjunction of God and world in the Incarnation had actually occurred. Characteristically, Baur denies that they achieved any such thing. As a matter of fact, the Gnostics were notorious for their docetic Christology; for them there is not, nor could there be, a real union between the spiritual and the

³⁷ Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Symbolik und Mythologie oder die Naturreligion des Alterthums*, 2 vols., Stuttgart (J.B. Metzler) 1824/25.

³⁸ Baur, *Symbolik und Mythologie*, vol. 1, xi: "Ich sehe hier nur zwei Wege, entweder den der Trennung und Vereinzelung, welcher, consequent fortgesetzt, nothwendig zuletzt auf Atomistik, Fatalismus, Atheismus führen muss, oder denjenigen, auf welchem auf diesem Gebiete in dem Grade ein reineres und höheres Bewusstseyn des Göttlichen aufgeht, in welchem das geistige Leben der Völker in seinem großartigen Zusammenhang als Ein großes Ganze [sic!] erkannt wird. [...] Den bekannten Vorwurf der Vermengung der Philosophie mit der Geschichte fürchte ich dabei nicht: ohne Philosophie bleibt mir die Geschichte ewig todt und stumm." (Unless otherwise indicated translations are my own).

³⁹ Baur, *Symbolik und Mythologie*, vol. 1, v. For the same idea cf. also: Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, transl. Peter Heath, Charlottesville (University Press of Virginia) 1978, 211.

material.⁴⁰ They thus fail, from Baur's point of view, in the very task they had to solve. Their saviour figure remains very much an element of the spiritual world leading those, who are themselves part of that world, back to their origin.

This inability to achieve a real notion of incarnation has consequences for the historicity of salvation. If there is no real amalgamation of God and world in Christ, Baur contends, salvation does not really occur within history either. The saviour enters the world from above; his salvific activity has, as Baur puts it, an 'absolute beginning', expressed most characteristically in Marcion's famous opening of 'his' Gospel of Luke, where Jesus is said to have 'come down from heaven' in the 15th year of the Emperor Tiberius.⁴¹

If, however, the life of the saviour has such an 'absolute beginning', its salvific effect will never really become part of history either. And so, what is true for Christ is, in a sense, true for all later Christians. They enter into the realm of grace or, we might better say, grace enters into them from above with no relation to their previous histories. There is thus no history of salvation, only as it were a quasi-history of salvation. Salvation thus becomes as unhistorical a thing as the Incarnation.⁴²

How then are Christians related to the 'historical' saviour? Is there any link connecting us with the man Jesus who flourished in the first century of the Common Era? The Gnostics, Baur suggests, tried to alleviate this problem by introducing their famous myth of Adam as the original man, who in a way encompasses all those who came later.⁴³ In order to be properly related to all other human beings, the saviour must be this original or paradigmatic man. As such, however, he cannot any longer be thought to be identical with any individual man. There is an infinite chasm separating the ideal, universal Adam of Gnostic speculation from any particular, historical individual. The philosophical reconstruction of the history of salvation thus ends with the unresolved duality of a historical Jesus and an ideal Christ.

At this point, finally, the failure of the Gnostic philosophy of religion becomes fully apparent. While it set out to do the right thing, trying to vindicate Christianity as a historical philosophy of religion, it fails to succeed in this attempt because it is unable to demonstrate how God became human in one individual. In the end, the separation of God and world remains as stark as it has always been; not even remotely is the coming together of the two explained by the Gnostics' efforts.

⁴⁰ Baur, *Gnosis* (as in n. 10), 261.

⁴¹ Baur, *Gnosis*, 263 f. Cf. Tertullian, *adv. Marcionem* I 19: 'Anno XV. Tiberii Christus Iesus de caelo manare dignatus est, spiritus salutaris Marcionis' (= Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion. Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott*, Leipzig [J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung] 1924, 184*).

⁴² Baur, *Gnosis*, 264.

⁴³ Baur, *Gnosis*, 265.

This failure has a further corollary. If this philosophy of religion is unable to overcome the duality of the transcendent and the immanent, then it cannot claim either to have shown that history is ultimately meaningful. Rather, history remains very much the realm of relativity and is therefore unable to provide any evidence for or against philosophical or theological statements. In Baur's perspective—and due to his specific conception of historical theology, there is a subtle yet powerful interrelation between the material and the formal level, between contents and method. The historical approach to the philosophy of religion needs for its own confirmation the success of the incarnational argument, as only the latter would resolve Lessing's 'ugly ditch'. The failure of Gnosticism as a philosophy of religion, then, is complete.

Is this specifically the fault of those 2nd century philosophical theologians? Have they perhaps merely misconstrued the task they were facing? Baur's book not only wishes to argue that Gnosticism is best understood as philosophy of religion, but that the path followed by those 2nd century figures is, in principle, the path to be followed by any Christian theologian with an equally keen interest in the philosophy of religion.⁴⁴ This, then, is the third major concern his study has, and once again it is to some extent apparent from the book's title. *The Christian Gnosis* or *The Christian Philosophy of Religion in its Historical Development*—this clearly hints at a normative interest. Historical study ideally teaches us what philosophy and theology are. Here at the very latest, it becomes apparent how similar Baur's own position is to that of the Gnostics. His own historical work, which as we saw he perceived as being at the same time philosophical, depends on the success of his attempt to overcome Lessing's dichotomy of absolute truth and relativistic history. Historical research can be philosophically or theologically relevant only if philosophy can demonstrate that history is more than the realm of contingent events and actions, but if such a proof is successful, history may well turn out to be the paradigmatic object for philosophical and theological study.⁴⁵ As in Gnosticism, then, philosophy of religion has to be historical because only as such it can actually reflect religions, which are historical phenomena. The philosophical imperative of developing a normative concept of religion must therefore be pursued on the basis of a critical engagement with the empirical material from the history of religions.

The last third or so of Baur's monograph, consequently, is dedicated to a detailed study of the modern varieties of the old tradition of a historical phi-

⁴⁴ Baur, *Gnosis*, 11.

⁴⁵ Baur, incidentally, knew quite well that he is here effectively turning against a powerful tradition in the philosophy of religion. In a footnote he remarks candidly that there was no greater distance conceivable than that between Gnosis and [Christian Wolff's] rationalistic philosophy of religion. While the latter, Baur writes, intends to be philosophy of religion, its concept of God is nothing but the abstract notion of the *ens perfectissimum*: Baur, *Gnosis*, 555, n. 5.

losophy of religion in Schelling, Schleiermacher, and Hegel.⁴⁶ There is no need to follow this discussion in detail here. The crucial question, after what we have found about Baur's view on the Gnostics of the 2nd century, evidently is this: does this most recent development provide the key to the aporiae that were left unresolved 1600 years earlier? Does Baur find evidence in Schleiermacher or in Hegel for the eagerly sought solution to the dilemma, which was only exposed but not answered, by their theological-philosophical forebears?

The answer is as simple as it may be surprising: he does not. Not for a second do we find Baur tempted to give in to the fascination of Hegel's absolute idealism; if anything, its perfection is seen in the fact that the unresolved problems which, in Baur's own interpretation, were characteristic of 2nd century Gnosticism come out more clearly in his own time. In Hegel, Baur insists,

Christ is the God-man only through the mediation of faith. What is behind faith, the objective reality of history that must form the presupposition for the transformation into faith of the merely external, historical consideration, remains veiled in a mystery into which we ought not to enter. It does not matter whether Christ as such, according to his objective, historical appearance, was the God-man. What matters is that through and for faith he became the God-man.⁴⁷

Ultimately, Hegel's absolute mind or reason or spirit, according to Baur, is itself trans-historical: 'Whatever the spirit is and does, is not history', he famously commented.⁴⁸ Baur thus finds, in the most recent representatives of 'Gnosis' precisely the same ambiguity he had discovered in its earlier variants. Neither Schleiermacher nor Hegel, according to Baur, succeed closing the gap between God and world, mind and body, reason and history.

We must remember that this is not a marginal error. Only success in this attempt would have justified the entire procedure of treating the philosophy of religion historically. Without it, the foundation, on which Baur himself is erecting his edifice of a historical study of the philosophy of religion with normative implications for philosophy and theology, is bound to collapse. At the end of all those lengthy analyses from 2nd century Gnosticism down

⁴⁶ Baur, *Gnosis*, 557–735.

⁴⁷ Baur, *Gnosis*, 712: "Christus ist mit einem Worte Gottmensch nur durch die Vermittlung des Glaubens. Was aber hinter dem Glauben liegt, als die historisch gegebene, objective Realität, unter deren Voraussetzung die bloß äußere, geschichtliche Betrachtung zum Glauben werden konnte, bleibt in ein Geheimniß gehüllt, in welches wir nicht eindringen sollen, denn die Frage ist nicht, ob Christus an sich, seiner historischen Erscheinung nach, der Gottmensch war, sondern nur darauf kommt es an, dass er dem Glauben der Gottmensch wurde."

⁴⁸ Baur, *Gnosis*, 715. Cf. with this Hegel's own remark according to Marheineke's edition of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*: "Was der Geist tut, ist keine Historie; es ist ihm nur um das zu tun, was an und für sich ist, nicht Vergangenes, sondern schlechthin Präsentes." (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Werke. Vollständige Ausgabe durch einen Verein von Freunden des Verewigten*, eds. Philipp Marheineke et al., Berlin [Duncker und Humblot] 1832–1845, vol. 17, 318).

to 19th century philosophers and theologians we seem to arrive very much at the place from which we had started. Baur has come nowhere near a position that permits him leaving behind Lessing's dictum about the impossibility of reconciling historical and philosophical statements. We are, more perhaps than before, faced with the utter duality of unhistorical reason ('whatever the spirit is and does, is not history') and relativistic, meaningless history. The great project, undertaken commonly by historical research, philosophy of history and, not least, Christian theology, designed to finding within history its own ultimate point of reference, has utterly failed, so it seems.

It is in the face of, and in response to, this failure, that Baur takes refuge in the theory that Jesus' humanity is all humankind:

If the god-man as such is the union of the divine and the human, humanity being unified with God, then the historical Christ is humanity becoming unified with God in all its members who are the one body of Christ. [In this process, humanity] fulfils the concept of religion and rises from earth to heaven.⁴⁹

This is, in all essentials, the same theory that was touted with much fanfare by Baur's student, David Strauß, in the same year. It is this same theory also, which Baur – rightly or wrongly – identified and commended as 'mystical theory of salvation' in the Greek Fathers.

Yet it ought to be clear by now that Baur's support for this view really is an act of desperation that ultimately cannot conceal his inability to develop a sound answer to his own, most fundamental question of how theology can conceptualise Christianity as something that is both divine and human, both eternal and historical, both universal and particular.

3. Ritschl's critique of Baur's historical theology

Baur's theology, then, ends in ambiguity. On the one hand we have what I would call an idealistic programme, which rests on the assumption that Lessing's dilemma can be overcome by a philosophical reflection on the history of religions or a historical study of the philosophy of religion. Yet this programme is undermined and ultimately cancelled out by Baur's own positivistic historicism, that is his belief in the empirical, continuous, and contingent nature of history. Albrecht Ritschl was bound all the more acutely to perceive this ambiguity within Baur's thought as the development, in Baur himself as well as in the Tübingen school from 1835 to 1855 increasingly veered towards the historicist line of thought and effectively took leave altogether

⁴⁹ Baur, *Gnosis*, 721: "Ist der Gottmensch an sich die Einheit des Göttlichen und Menschlichen, die mit Gott einige Menschheit, so ist der historische Christus die in allen ihren Gliedern, die zusammen der lebendige Leib Christi sind, den Begriff der Religion realisierende, von der Erde zum Himmel aufstrebende, mit Gott sich einigende Menschheit".

from the idealist programme of a synthesis of history and speculation.⁵⁰ All that remained of this programme was the notion of a philosophical or speculative ‘interest’ developed and articulated independently of historical scholarship while the latter was perceived, and proudly advertised, as ‘presuppositionless’ and strictly historical.⁵¹ Thus the settlement of 18th century rationalism combining empiricist positivism with natural theology was practically restored.

Ritschl’s own position was developed very much in response to this development, which occurred while he was aligned with the Tübingen School for a decade from the mid-1840s. As I argued earlier, he clearly and fully underwrote Baur’s original interest in historical theology, expressed perhaps most coherently in *Die christliche Gnosis*, a book Ritschl singled out as the climax of Baur’s academic achievement.⁵² It is, further, Ritschl’s view that in order to follow Baur there, he had to oppose him in quite a number of his other tenets which caused Baur’s own programme to fail making him lapse back into the very duality of faith and history, which he had set out to overcome.

Why had this happened? Ritschl’s first and decisive answer is that Baur’s failure is due to a mistaken understanding of history.⁵³ For Ritschl, the ethical or teleological view of history, which Christian theology must achieve, emphasises the importance of individuals. This in itself is relevant given the crucial importance of Jesus’ human individuality for historical theology and Baur’s failure to conceptualise it; it is also directly related to the specific issue, raised at the outset, of ‘physical’ doctrines of salvation. Yet Ritschl goes further by arguing that within history individuality must be recognised not only at the level of persons, but also on a transpersonal plane. In this view, people, cultures, epochs, and—not least—religions can be considered as quasi-individuals. In many ways, such a view was at the very core of early German historicism; it is embodied in Leopold von Ranke’s famous word that each epoch is equally ‘immediate unto God’.⁵⁴ Its earliest and most influential application to religion is to be found in Schleiermacher’s fifth *Speech on Religion*—which Ritschl later on will praise for precisely

⁵⁰ This is the overall tendency in David Strauß; cf. for this the perceptive study by Jörg F. Sandberger: *David Friedrich Strauß als theologischer Hegelianer*, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 1972. For similar positions articulated by other Tübingen theologians cf. Eduard Zeller, ‘Vorwort’, in: ThJ 1, iv–viii. Adolf Hilgenfeld, ‘Die wissenschaftliche Theologie und ihre gegenwärtige Aufgabe. Vorwort des Herausgebers’, in: ZwTh 1, 1–21.

⁵¹ The ideal of theological science (Wissenschaft) as ‘presuppositionless’ (voraussetzungslos) is set up for the first time in the preface to the first edition of Strauß’ *Life of Jesus* (as in n. 3), 4 = *Leben Jesu* (as in n. 3), 5.

⁵² Ritschl, ‘Geschichtliche Methode’ (as in n. 8), 433.

⁵³ The basis for what follows is Ritschl’s argument in ‘Geschichtliche Methode’, 444 f.

⁵⁴ Leopold von Ranke, *Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte*, hg. Theodor Schieder/Walther Peter Fuchs, München (Oldenbourg) 1971, 59 f. Cf. Henning Ottmann, *Individuum und Gemeinschaft bei Hegel*, Berlin/New York (de Gruyter) 1977, 59 f.

this insight.⁵⁵ Such a historical quasi-individual is marked off from other historical phenomena by an immanent criterion, by an idea or an organising principle. This criterion would, in a sense, be itself historical, yet it would also be teleological by offering limit and structure to historical development and process. The analogy with a human individual may be helpful: insofar as each of us is part of a natural process that is strictly speaking continuous, the difference between an earlier and a later phase in a person's life on the one hand, and that between a person's and their own grandparents' lives on the other, could appear to be gradual. In some way this may, actually, be a legitimate perspective. Insofar as we consider human persons *individuals*, however, and insofar as we consider them responsible agents, this difference is quite decisive.⁵⁶

Ritschl, not without justification, perceived Baur's failure to bridge the ontological (and epistemic) gap between religion and history as fundamentally rooted in his inability to employ properly in his theology this concept of individuality. Already in the programmatic lines in *Symbolik und Mythologie*, which were quoted above,⁵⁷ Baur started from a mere antagonism of whole and part, universal and particular, and in this conflict he unequivocally comes down on the side of the whole. In other words, he conceptualises universal history at the cost of individuals which are, as it were, submerged in its continuous stream in an almost Heraclitean sense.⁵⁸ In contrast, Ritschl thinks that a *philosophical* (and theological) reflection of history reveals that it is legitimate to isolate particular epochs as quasi-individuals on the basis of *historical* criteria. This is applied, in the first place, to Christianity overall and then, more specifically, to Primitive Christianity.⁵⁹

With regard to the former, this principle permitted Ritschl to contain the problem of the history of religions. I quoted earlier his strong words about the need to root Christian theology in the study of the history of religions; this statement, however, contrasts rather starkly with the practical neglect of any such study by Ritschl himself and by his school. Ritschl thought that the relative isolation of Christianity as an 'individual' of religion, together with a valid argument for its specific role as the apex of the history of re-

⁵⁵ Albrecht Ritschl, *Schleiermachers Reden über die Religion und ihre Nachwirkungen auf die evangelische Kirche Deutschlands*, Bonn (Marcus) 1874, 4.

⁵⁶ Cf. Ritschl, 'Geschichtliche Methode' (as in n. 8), 485: "Schon der einzelne Mensch kann nur deshalb als Subject eines geschichtlichen Verlaufs betrachtet werden, weil man ihn nicht als Resultat eines natürlichen Gattungsprozesses, sondern, unter der Bedingung eines solchen, als wunderbare Schöpfung Gottes verstehen muss".

⁵⁷ See p. above.

⁵⁸ Not *aufgehoben* in Hegel's terminology; characteristically, in Baur's appropriation of Hegelianism this concept seems to play no role.

⁵⁹ In line with Schleiermacher (*The Christian Faith* § 10 [postscript], transl. and ed. H.R. Mackintosh/J.S. Stewart, Edinburgh [T & T Clark] 1999, 50 = *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt*, 2. Auflage, KGA I/13, vol. 1, 90,5–14) Ritschl thinks that this is what 'revelation' means: the beginning, in history, of something new ('Geschichtliche Methode' [as in n. 8], 485).

ligions would dispense the theologian of any further work on non-Christian religions. Once Christianity had been assigned to its special place within the history of religions, its study would be tantamount to the study of religion insofar as it represents the full realisation of the concept of religion.⁶⁰

4. Ritschl's historical theology – the case of Primitive Christianity

Much more central to Ritschl's work was his application of his philosophical view of history to the study of Primitive Christianity. It is significant, though rarely acknowledged, that the conflict between Ritschl and the Tübingen School developed primarily over the interpretation of the history of Primitive Christianity. While the present paper does not permit a comprehensive account of the historical and exegetical problems involved in this debate, even such summary reference as can be given serves to highlight the paradigmatic importance this scholarly debate had for the complex relationship between Ritschl and the Tübingen School.

Baur's famous theory starts from the assumption that Paul's and Luke's accounts of the Apostle's council in Galatians 2,1–10 and Acts 15 cannot be reconciled.⁶¹ From this observation he deduced the tension between Jewish and Hellenistic Christians as the driving force for the development of Christianity during much of the 2nd century until they were brought into an alliance of sorts in Early Catholicism.⁶² One consequence of this view is that the bulk of the New Testament would have been written late with the Gospel of John, as the seal of this development, produced some time towards the end

⁶⁰ Cf. Ritschl, *Schleiermachers Reden* (as in n. 55), 7 where a method is demanded according to which "diejenige einzelne positive Religion, welche die höchste Stufe einnimmt, zugleich als die 'ganze Religion' erkannt werde". In the later editions of *Justification and Reconciliation* Ritschl tried to steer away from this stark claim. He admits it will be useless to demonstrate 'scientifically to a Mohammedan or a Buddhist that the Christian religion, and not theirs, occupies the highest rank. [...] The arrangement of religions in stages, consequently, amounts to no more than a scientific attempt to promote mutual understanding among Christians' (*The Positive Development* [as in n. 12], 197 = *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 3, 188); compare with this, e.g., *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 3, 1874, 170).

⁶¹ Cf. Baur's own summary in id., *Kirchengeschichte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, ed. Eduard Zeller, Tübingen (Fues) 1862, 395.

⁶² Fundamental for Baur's assumption about the perseverance of those conflicts is his (problematic) interpretation of the so-called *Ps.-Clementine Homilies*, which he first proposed in his 1831 Easter programme *De Ebionitarum origine et doctrine ab Essenis repetenda* and then, in its most influential form in his classical paper 'Die Christuspartei in der korinthischen Gemeinde, der Gegensatz des petrinischen und paulinischen Christentums in der ältesten Kirche, der Apostel Petrus in Rom', in: TZTh 1831, Issue 4, 61–206, here: 116–133. The historical problems are extremely intricate; cf. Hans-Joachim Schoeps, *Theologie und Geschichte des Judentums* (1949), in: id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, I/2, Hildesheim (Olms), 1998.

of the 2nd century.⁶³ This view, whatever else its merits and weaknesses may be, has the effect of blurring the distinctions between an early phase of ‘primitive Christianity’ and 2nd century Christianity; the fundamental antagonism, which remains relevant until the end of the 2nd century, is the product of the period immediately following upon the foundation of the Church.

Ritschl, in the 2nd edition of his *Entstehung der altkatholischen Kirche*,⁶⁴ disagrees with this account almost *tout court*. For a start, he thinks that almost all the New Testament writings could be genuine.⁶⁵ Primitive Christianity, furthermore, while it contained within itself doctrinal and practical differences, was overall faithful to the essential message of Jesus himself, who had taught (in a nutshell) that the law was *adiaphoron* except where it concerned the ultimate goal of human existence.⁶⁶ Within this framework, the conflict between Paul, Peter, and James could be settled (cf. Acts 15). In the 2nd century, Jewish Christianity lost its relevance largely due to external factors, such as the Bar Kokhba revolt.⁶⁷ Thus it was Hellenistic Christianity alone that developed into Early Catholicism.⁶⁸ Yet 2nd century Hellenistic Christianity is as little ‘Pauline’ as Jewish Christianity during this period is ‘Petrine’ or ‘Jacobean’.⁶⁹ The former, Ritschl thinks, in the post-apostolic age lost a proper understanding of the Old Testament background of Jesus’ preaching of the Kingdom of God;⁷⁰ the latter forsook its apostolic credentials when it made full observance of the law the criterion for salvation.⁷¹

Once again, the historical and exegetical value of Ritschl’s position must be left to one side here; it is crucial, however, to see that Ritschl’s account of early Christian history, in combination with his ‘teleological’ theory of history, produces a relatively self-contained phase of Primitive Christianity, characterised by a full appreciation of Jesus’ teaching including its Old Testament background.⁷² It can therefore be considered an absolutely normative point of reference for Christianity and for Christian theology. The books of the New Testament, in their turn, are foundational insofar as, and to the extent that, they are the literary product of this very historical

⁶³ Ferdinand Christian Baur, ‘Die Einleitung in das Neue Testament als theologische Wissenschaft. Ihr Begriff und ihre Aufgabe, ihr Entwicklungsgang und ihr innerer Organismus’, in: ThJ 9 (1850), 463–566; 10 (1851), 70–94, 222–252, 291–328, here: 318–328.

⁶⁴ Albrecht Ritschl, *Die Entstehung der altkatholischen Kirche. Eine kirchen- und dogmengeschichtliche Monographie*, Bonn (Marcus) ²1857.

⁶⁵ Cf. Ritschl, *Entstehung*, 48 f. on the genuineness of the Gospel of John and Adolf Hilgenfeldt (‘Das Urchristentum und seine neuesten Bearbeitungen von Lechler und Ritschl’, in: ZwTh 1 [1858], 54–140; here: 59 f.) for a summary of Ritschl’s revisionist datings.

⁶⁶ Ritschl, *Entstehung*, 33.

⁶⁷ Ritschl, *Entstehung*, 257 f.

⁶⁸ Ritschl, *Entstehung*, 330.

⁶⁹ Ritschl, *Entstehung*, 22.

⁷⁰ Ritschl, *Entstehung*, 331.581.

⁷¹ Ritschl, *Entstehung*, 259–261.

⁷² Ritschl, *Entstehung*, 47.

epoch; thus a biblical theology is once again feasible and indeed inevitable,⁷³ but this biblical theology can also claim to be truly ‘scientific’ (*wissenschaftliche*) theology insofar as it is based on a combination of historical research and philosophical reflection.

We can thus see how Ritschl saw his own theology as an answer to Lessing’s dilemma that avoided the pitfalls of Baur’s theory. From a Christian point of view history will appear as structured teleologically, its continuity consisting of self contained ‘individuals’ developing towards a common goal, the Kingdom of God. This insight had far reaching consequences. Within the bounds of the Ritschlian paradigm, there was a possibility for historical theology that was both truly historical and truly theological, and it was the force of this paradigm which enabled the Ritschl School to dominate all branches of German Protestant academic theology for the final third of the 19th century.

5. Conclusion

What united Baur and Ritschl was their awareness of the particular role of history within and for Christian theology. This relevance, they rightly discerned, is a direct implication of the Christian tenet that Christ was born into human history when the fullness of time had come (Gal 4,4). Taken together, these two ideas, of Jesus as a historical figure and of his life span as a transforming qualifier of world history both necessitate the most rigorous historical study of Christianity, especially its beginning, *and* an unashamed theological interpretation of history because only in the light of the Incarnation history may be understood most properly.

Their efforts coincided with a wider intellectual movement in Germany, historicism, in which a combination of historical research and a broadly idealistic frame of mind determined academic work for many decades in the 19th century. It is therefore no coincidence that Baur, Ritschl and their schools dominated academic theology in Germany for much of this time. This they did not so much as ideologies that had to be shared by their followers, but as paradigms (in Thomas Kuhn’s sense) enabling the most original and creative research for quite some while.

At the danger of being a trifle too stringent one might say that historicism always has two main dangers: one is to get too much bogged down by the details of individuals and their ultimately idiosyncratic objectives and in-

⁷³ Cf. Ritschl in *The Positive Development*, 1: ‘Once this authentic exposition [i.e. in the NT] of the ideas named [i.e. the relation between the Christian and God] has been given, however, the interests of theology are satisfied. For succeeding thinkers were guided, in part intentionally, in part unconsciously, by the models of the New Testament, or should not be followed when they in point of fact diverge from them.’ (= *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 3, 1).

terests and thus lose sight of the greater developments; the other is, quite to the contrary, ignoring the individual in an attempt to conceptualise the larger trends and trajectories. Baur's work was driven by an awareness of the former error, but strayed into the latter, whereas Ritschl was—through Baur's and Strauß' examples—alerted to the importance of individuals, but failed to realise the force of historical universals, a failure which, in his school, resulted in the kind of systematic blindness which Troeltsch later exposed and fatally defeated.

Abstract

The article starts by observing a parallel between the identification of Christ's humanity and universal human nature, for which Harnack repudiates some church fathers, and David Strauss' claim, in his *Life of Jesus*, that the subject of the Incarnation must be all humanity. It is argued that this oppositional stance is indicative of fundamental philosophical and theological differences between the Tübingen School and the Ritschl School. Those differences, however, are then explained as emerging from what is ultimately a common project of a radical form of historical theology. This project, it is argued, Ritschl took over from Baur while correcting it in crucial ways. Taken together, the two central theological schools of the 19th century thus illustrate the potential and the limits of christian theology within the historicist paradigm.