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Christian Theology as a Rationalization of Religion

The Case of the Nineteenth-Century Research University

Theology as Rationalization

Rationalization is not a univocal concept. Notwithstanding the powerful and suggestive way in which Max Weber summarized his understanding of Western culture and its development with the help of this term, it is far from obvious that the various features of the modern world that he enlisted as proof for the historical uniformity of its meaning are all species of a genus called rationalization. Care and a healthy dose of skepticism are therefore needed in any approach to this topic if one is to avoid falling victim to the spell of the Weberian narrative.¹

Urging care is not, however, the same as denying any value to Weber's observations. My attempt to think about theology, and more specifically about theology within the modern university, in terms of rationalization inevitably follows the Weberian trajectory to a certain extent. The existence of systematic theology was, after all, one notable feature which, according to the great sociologist, was indicative of the West's unique intellectual tradition.² While I shall remain non-committal, for the purposes of this paper, about any claims to Western exceptionalism, I shall argue that Christian theology *can* be understood as a rationalization of this religion. By this I imply more than the conventional notion of theology as "faith seeking understanding" or as the *ratio fidei*;³ theology "rationalizes" in very practical ways. By making the faiths of individuals compatible, it allows for, or at least facilitates, the creation of a faith community; and through its critical function, it adjudicates between competitive truth claims made by different believers or groups of believers. In a word, its "rational" character "rationalizes" and thus tames, restrains and controls religion. It is therefore unsurprising that Christian theology has been described as a "function of the Church":⁴ Historically and

¹ For a summary of Weber's position see his "Vorbemerkung" in Weber 1988:1–16.

² *Ibid.*:1.

³ For these formulations see Anselm of Canterbury, ed. Davies and Evans 1998:87 (*Proslogion: Premium*).

⁴ Barth 1955:1.

sociologically, this is undoubtedly accurate insofar as theology has facilitated the integration of religious diversity into a single, hierarchical institution.

The Church, however, was not the only institution concerned to control religious activities. In many ways, the modern European state has been predicated from its inception in the seventeenth century on the idea that religion is dangerous and must be contained. Religious policies in Europe, whether conservative or liberal, have long been determined by a fear of religion, originating in the religious wars of the early modern period.⁵ Religious establishment was as much an instrument of controlling religion as a means of supporting it. In this regard, too, theology had its role to play; the state's willingness to fund theological faculties was at least partly an expression of its hope and expectation that theology would endorse and underwrite the "rationalized" form of religion attractive from the point of view of the state. As we shall see, theologians were perfectly aware of this rationale and willing to appeal to it when defending the legitimacy of their discipline within the modern university.

If Christian theology thus "rationalizes" religion, it would be wrong to ignore that it was also an object of rationalization. Church and state, in different ways, have sought (and seek) to "rationalize" theology so that its results will strengthen rather than undermine their attempts to control religion. This, too, has undeniably positive aspects, insofar as funding and institutional support have been provided in the interest of the pursuit of high-quality theological scholarship and training. Yet the Janus-headed nature of rationalization is never far away; theology is empowered but also constrained by all these attempts. Theologians who resist this pressure risk being branded as heretics or academic failures, but that is often only because they are marked out as incompatible with the specific rationality demanded by the ecclesial institution or by the terms of the country's religious arrangement.

One major route this rationalization has taken since the high Middle Ages is the integration of theology into the university, to which both Church and state have contributed throughout the centuries, albeit in different ways and with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The university offers a fascinating illustration of the dual and ambiguous nature of rationalization. Intended as the institution *par excellence* of rationality, knowledge and learning, it is the place that ought to be dominated by reason alone. And yet its rationality also tames, constrains and excludes. Some premises are acceptable, others are not; some questions are admissible, others excluded. A certain type of thinker works well in this institution, while others who are equally or more creative do not. In a word, an insti-

5 Cf. Zachhuber 2010:150–153.

tution founded on the principle of rationality *in and of itself* produces a social discipline.

This is not a particularly new or original insight,⁶ but the fact and the extent to which theology offers itself as a test case for this observation has been less noted.⁷ Theology is always and has always been a marginal member of the university. To be sure, it was given the title of queen of the sciences in the medieval university. However, its status and position within the overall system of human knowledge represented by the *universitas litterarum* was controversial and contested right from the beginning, as borne out by the immense energies invested in discussions of the question of whether it was a “science.”⁸

My subsequent argument rests on the assumption that to consider theology a science is the supreme expression of the specific rationalization of theology within the university. Here, again, this rationalization has two aspects. On the one hand, integration into the framework of the university triggers a new level of rational reflection within theology, going beyond what has been practiced in and recognized by the Christian Church throughout its history: the formation and development of doctrine, the interpretation of Scripture (exegesis), and reflections about the forms of Church organization and governance (canon law), about events in its history (Church history) and about its relationship to rival accounts of reality (apologetics). Viewing theology as a science adds another layer of questions concerning the internal coherence of the various branches of theology (do all these diverse undertakings form a single discipline?), its methodology (how should investigation and debate about them be conducted?) and its epistemological principles (where do their insights originate? what are the sources and the criteria for distinguishing right from wrong, the appropriate from the less appropriate, in this process of reflection?). In this sense, theology in the university can

6 The classical exposition of this view is Weber’s famous essay *Wissenschaft als Beruf*: Weber 1994:1–23.

7 Weber himself, interestingly, offers a brief discussion of theology in *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, *ibid.*:21–22. He states: “all theology is rationalization of the possession of sacred values.”

8 A brief note on terminology: In this paper, I shall use “science” to translate Latin *scientia* and German *Wissenschaft*, both of which are abstract nouns derived from the verb “to know” and thus denoting a system of knowledge in the broadest possible sense. While English “science” used to have a similarly broad meaning, this changed in the mid-nineteenth century. Increasingly, “science” came to refer more specifically and exclusively to the natural sciences. When John Henry Newman, in *The Idea of a University*, discussed the question of whether theology was “a science,” this already sounded archaic (Newman 1996:26). Today, the older meaning of the term has become obsolete. It is therefore not ideal to use it, but since there is no appropriate English equivalent available, it seems to be the least problematic solution to a veritable terminological conundrum.

be seen as theology in a higher order of rationality, extending the range of the questions to the principles and coherence of the discipline.

On the other hand, it is far from obvious that a stringent application of these criteria is even possible in the case of theology. It may well be argued that subjection to the agenda implied in this form of “rationalization” cripples theological reflection in such a way as effectively to rob it of its most productive and creative power.⁹ The argument *against* the acceptance of theology as a science has therefore always been pressed from two seemingly contradictory angles: On the one hand, it has been the battle-cry of those who would prefer to oust theology as “irrational” from the realm of respectable academic learning and study; on the other, it has been the project of those who fear that “scientific theology” risks giving up too much of what is essential for the faith-guided reflection of which the Church and its believers are in need; that it stifles spirituality; that it invites skepticism if not atheism.

The conflict as such is well known; yet I would argue that it, too, can be inscribed into the logic of double rationalization: If theology exercises rationalization with regard to the faith community and is itself the object of rationalization within the university, it finds itself, unsurprisingly, pulled in these two directions: It can always be accused either of being lacking in rationality or of displaying too much of it (a charge frequently expressed by invoking the word “rationalistic”). This dynamic is arguably not new to Western modernity,¹⁰ but it plays out in a particularly illuminating way in nineteenth-century German universities. It helps explain some very characteristic theological transformations and developments that occurred during this time, or so, at least, I shall argue.¹¹

These nineteenth-century debates were inevitably informed and shaped by issues arising from the specifically modern transformation of Christian thought: the rise of biblical criticism, Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy, and history of dogma, to name but a few. Notably, however, the seventeenth and eighteenth-century authors who spearheaded the early forms of modern theology showed little or no interest in the question of whether or in what sense theology was a science. The latter question came to the fore precisely with thinkers whose activity was directly related to the organization of theology within the academy. This is true of Friedrich Schleiermacher, whose reflections on the topic resulted directly from his

⁹ Webster 2005:11–31.

¹⁰ Interesting cases from the pre-modern age would include Origen, John Philoponus and Abaelard.

¹¹ In what follows I take up and develop further material that I presented in my article on “Wissenschaft,” Zachhuber 2013d:479–498.

involvement in the foundation of the University of Berlin in 1810, but also of John Henry Newman, who lectured on *The Idea of a University* as rector of the newly established Catholic University in Dublin in the 1850s, and even of Wolfhart Pannenberg's extended reflections on *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (a rather misleading rendering of *Wissenschaftstheorie und Theologie*), which were written at the height of the institutional controversies about the West German university in the early 1970s.¹²

At the same time, it is instructive to note that the question of whether theology is *scientia* was by no means rhetorical when it was first raised in the thirteenth century; in fact, the caveats and reservations expressed by those who discussed it back then in many ways anticipate later controversies and may thus indicate problems transcending the specific parameters of *Wissenschaft* as conducted within the modern academy. Without going into the details of the medieval debate, it may be useful to summarize some key problems as a heuristic starting point to the more detailed analysis of the modern discussion. It will turn out that all the fundamental problems recur; the modern theories that will be discussed in the remainder of my paper can be understood as seeking to address one or more of them within their own specific historical and intellectual environment.

First, how can a field of study be a science if it relies for its premises or principles on revelation? According to Aristotle, demonstration is only possible from principles that can either be demonstrated or are self-evidently known.¹³ While we can make deductions from information obtained from others, we will never know those principles with certainty. Aquinas argued that such knowledge was possible as long as the principles were known to God and to the saints and accepted as revelation by everyone else,¹⁴ but William of Ockham, for one, strongly disagreed:

It is absurd to claim that *I* have scientific knowledge with respect to this or that conclusion by reason of the fact that *you* know principles which I accept on faith because you tell them to me. And, in the same way, it is silly to claim that *I* have scientific knowledge of the conclusions of theology by reason of the fact that *God* knows principles which I accept on faith because he reveals them.¹⁵

¹² Schleiermacher 1956:219–308; Newman 1996; Pannenberg 1973.

¹³ Aristotle, *Analytica Posteriora* I 2 (71^b 19–25).

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, art. 2, resp.

¹⁵ William of Ockham, ed. St. Bonaventure, NY, 1967:199; English text: Freddoso 2000:334.

This problem lingers in the modern debate primarily in a historicist transformation, famously formulated by Lessing, who held that “accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.”¹⁶

Second, how do the various parts of theology form a unit? This problem is illustrated by the ambiguous use of theology, which is sometimes employed more narrowly to denote speculative reflection about Christian doctrine, but in the academic context usually denotes the ensemble of exegetical, historical, doctrinal and practical disciplines. What unites them, and how are they, in this form, distinct from and yet analogous to subjects like philosophy, history, physics or linguistics? In the German tradition, this problem is usually referred to as that of the “theological encyclopedia,” and its treatment is closely related to the discussion of theology as *Wissenschaft*.¹⁷

Third, what methodologies ought to be used in the pursuit of theology, and what criteria are acceptable in adjudicating conflicting judgments? From the mid-nineteenth century, conceptions of science increasingly emphasized its procedural aspect, thus bringing this particular problem to prominence. Frequently, the question of theology’s character as *Wissenschaft* is all but identified with its willingness to succumb to rational enquiry and its readiness to accept whichever conclusion is best supported by argument and evidence.

Fourth, how precisely is theology as a rational enterprise related to Christian faith and practice? Is faith merely a motivating factor for intellectual interest in theological enquiry, or does it, in its own specific structure, influence the actual operation and practice of theology? If the former, theology can easily appear indifferent or even implicitly hostile to faith; in fact, the academic and public prestige of certain theologians has – not only in modernity – often evoked sustained criticism from within the faith community. Yet if theology is in any more specific way beholden to its basis in Christian faith, this might appear to be in tension with, or even in contradiction to, the detached and impartial attitude required of the “scientist” with regard to their object of study.

These four questions offer a helpful structure and framework for the specific rationalization of theology as science that happened as part of its institutionalization in the university. They all triggered *both* intellectual reflection and disciplinary restriction. In the remainder of my paper, I shall investigate in more detail three paradigmatic responses to this challenge in the nineteenth century. As we shall see, these theories differed rather obviously in their conception of theology, but also in their conception of rationality. In fact, it may be most helpful to dif-

¹⁶ Lessing 1897:5; idem, ed. Chadwick 1956:53.

¹⁷ On the history of significance of “encyclopedia” see now: Purvis 2014.

ferentiate them as seeking to integrate theology into a framework of a practical rationality (Friedrich Schleiermacher), a scientific rationality (David Strauss) or a historical rationality (Ferdinand Christian Baur; Albrecht Ritschl).

Friedrich Schleiermacher's Concept of Theology as "Positive Science"

The problem of theology's place in a system of knowledge was not new to modernity. Developments from the late eighteenth century, however, created conditions that elicited new answers to most aspects of this problem. The first response I shall discuss goes back to Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Characteristically, it was developed in the immediate context of the debates about university reform that took place in Prussia at the very beginning of the nineteenth century and ultimately led to the foundation of the University of Berlin. I cannot here discuss in any detail this fascinating public controversy, in which many leading German intellectuals of the time participated.¹⁸ Suffice it to say that in spite of all the differences between individual discussants, they shared certain premises, the first of which was that *Wissenschaft* in the true sense was philosophy. This, of course, had been Aristotle's position, and indeed we may roughly sketch the consensus among these early nineteenth-century German thinkers by saying that their notion of science combined the Aristotelian tradition of philosophy as the systematic organization of knowledge with more romantic ideas of an organic unity-in-multiplicity. This is significant: These debates are often hailed as the intellectual origin of the modern research university, but in many ways they espoused remarkably conservative positions; the truly revolutionary views, as we shall see, were to emerge much less spectacularly.

Schleiermacher agreed with these assumptions; for him, too, *Wissenschaft* in the proper sense was philosophy,¹⁹ but the latter, for him, always had to operate embedded in its cultural context. This stance permitted him to defend the traditional structure of the university: Theology, law and medicine all depend on regular exchange with and insights from philosophy, but philosophy itself would be incomplete without those extensions, because rational reflection cannot ever be conducted in abstraction from the concrete realities of nature and cul-

¹⁸ For a full account of those debates see Howard 2006.

¹⁹ Schleiermacher 1956:258–260.

ture.²⁰ Schleiermacher was deeply skeptical about the ability of the human mind to construct a system of thought capable of explaining reality in its fullness – hence his opposition to Fichte and Hegel and his advocacy of a dialogical epistemology as first philosophy.²¹ Rationality and hence knowledge and *Wissenschaft* are fundamentally dependent on communication and exchange; they are always perfectible and never complete.

It is this open system of science that facilitated theology's inclusion in the university. Schleiermacher did not claim that theology was an indispensable part of a system of knowledge, nor did he accept for theology any narrow definition of science as normative. In fact, his argument for the retention of the traditional "higher faculties" is remarkably conservative: This particular structure had emerged "naturally"²² and for this reason had continued for so long. The Faculty of Theology, in particular, was founded by the Church

in order to preserve the wisdom of the Fathers; not to lose for the future what in the past had been achieved in discerning truth from error; to give a historical basis, a sure and certain direction and a common spirit to the further development of doctrine and Church.²³

In other words, theology exists because the Church was in need of rational reflection about its doctrines and practices, and this was best achieved by permitting these issues to be openly debated in permanent exchange with all other areas of human knowledge. Theology is to be taught in the university because the public has an interest that this be done well: The public, too, we might say, benefits from a rationally reflected form of religion. In this sense, theology is what Schleiermacher called "positive science" (*positive Wissenschaft*), a discipline that is constituted not by systematic deduction from the idea of knowledge, but by a practical need.²⁴ Yet it is not merely a trade, as theology, for its proper exercise, requires a solid and permanent exchange with *Wissenschaft* proper, that is, philosophy.²⁵

Along the same lines, Schleiermacher argued in his *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology* that theology derives its internal unity not from its place within a system of *Wissenschaft*, but, again, from the practical need of the Church to have

²⁰ At the heart of Schleiermacher's philosophy stands ethics understood as a system of goods. For a brilliant and brief summary of these ideas see his academy lectures *On the Highest Good*: Schleiermacher 2011:535–553, 657–677; English text: idem, ed. Froese 1992.

²¹ Schleiermacher 2002:378.

²² Schleiermacher 1956:257.

²³ *Ibid.*:258.

²⁴ Schleiermacher 1993:1.

²⁵ Schleiermacher 1956:258–259.

appropriately trained leaders.²⁶ It is this purpose that serves as the organizing center of theology as *Wissenschaft* for Schleiermacher, and the philosophical and historical parts of the discipline are instrumental to this ultimate goal. Schleiermacher's argument can easily appear pragmatic, almost opportunistic. It is therefore important to see how it is embedded in his broader conception of rationality. A rational reflection on religion, we might paraphrase, cannot and must not abstract itself from its practical and cultural setting (and thus from religious communities), as rationality itself only comes to fulfillment through recognition of those realities.

What exactly does this mean for theology as a rationalization of religion? Let me return at this point to the four questions I formulated at the end of the first section.

First, like Thomas Aquinas, Schleiermacher accepts that theology is based on principles that are not themselves part of science. For Aquinas, these principles had been revealed and passed down to us through the authority of the teaching magisterium of the Church; the theologian thus relies on somebody else's knowledge for his work. Schleiermacher does not appeal to supernatural facts, but in his theory, too, the theologian is dependent for his work on something external to scientific rationality: the existence of the church as a historical and social reality. One might say that in practice the difference between the two is small; after all, revelation *in practice* is always (or almost always) accessible only as historical information, whether contained in biblical texts or in authoritative writings of the ecclesiastical tradition. Yet it seems clear that, nevertheless, something fundamental is at stake here, which may be called the historicization of religion. In *The Christian Faith* Schleiermacher argued that the utter novelty of a historical movement, which cannot be deduced from previous events, is the only reasonable meaning that the word "revelation" could possibly have.²⁷ It is precisely this inscrutable reality of Christianity as a historical and social formation (which Schleiermacher calls the church) that provides an extra-philosophical focal point of reference for theology in Schleiermacher's theory.

It is thus evident, second, that this same historical and social reality of Christianity is also the principle that unites the various philosophical, historical and practical fields pertaining to it.

As for methodology, thirdly, this is where Schleiermacher's concept is perhaps most evidently *wissenschaftlich*. Not only must all theological work be conducted in ways that can stand up to the highest standards of academic enquiry, but the-

²⁶ Schleiermacher 1993:2–3.

²⁷ Schleiermacher 1999:71–74.

ologians must also constantly be aware of possible cross-references and interferences between their theological and related non-theological work.

Finally, what about the relationship between theology and faith? Schleiermacher draws a clear distinction between religion and theology. The former is a fundamental dimension of human nature, the latter a second-order discourse about it. Thus, theology would seem primarily to be a historical and philosophical interpretation of the faith that exists within the Christian community at a given time and of its historical emergence. Yet, for Schleiermacher, theology is not merely descriptive. Its reflection can and indeed has to be critical, and in this sense it offers a “rationalization” of religion. Still, it is needed by the few who have responsibility for shepherding the flock, not by the individual believer. While Schleiermacher chose Anselm’s motto *credo ut intelligam* to adorn the title page of *The Christian Faith*, his view clearly was that individual faith, or religion, does not need theological reflection, but only its own social and historical manifestation in an increasingly extended group.²⁸

The last point, in particular, helps us understand how, according to Schleiermacher, theology “rationalizes” religion. He is utterly explicit about the relationship between theological reflection and the need to govern and administer a large group of religious individuals. Theology is not, for him, a project for individual enlightenment; it is an elite project, a tool for those to whom religious leadership has been entrusted. This is not to say that Schleiermacher does not see theology as the rationality of faith in the more traditional sense. He clearly does; in fact, it is obvious that he considers religion to have its own specific form of rationality, which it is the task of theology to establish. As far as the individual is concerned, however, faith is enough! Religion can exist without theology, but for its organization and government, rationality is needed.

This theological rationality, then, is evidently at least partly instrumental. But Schleiermacher does not only affirm for theology the task of “rationalizing” religion; he also affirms the need for theology to be rationalized by virtue of its inclusion in the modern university. The methods it uses must be the same as those employed in other disciplines. In fact, Schleiermacher argues that a professor of theology who does not make an effort to contribute actively to philosophy – in the wide sense, including not only metaphysics and ethics but also philology and history – deserves to be ridiculed or even excluded from the university.²⁹ At one level, this is a demand for what we would now call interdisciplinary competence: Students of theology may expect of their teachers the ability and the willingness

²⁸ Schleiermacher 1993:2.

²⁹ Schleiermacher 1956:261.

to traverse the distance between their theological area of expertise and related philosophical fields. The moral theologian must be conversant in ethics, the New Testament scholar in classics, the systematic theologian in logic and metaphysics and so forth.

At the same time, however, the methodological homogeneity that Schleiermacher prescribes for every participant in the academy constrains and disciplines individual fields, and in particular theology. In fact, Schleiermacher's advocacy of a universal standard of research methodology without any acknowledgement of the potential complications arising from this principle for theology appears almost naïve. Did he not realize that the application of those methods was most likely to yield results different from, if not in outright contradiction to, traditional Christian views? It appears that he thought (much like his idealist contemporaries) that historicism could be contained by proper philosophical reflection, and while he himself, more than Hegel, engaged in exegetical and historical work, the results of that work soon became the butt of ridicule because of their lack of critical edge.³⁰ Be this however as it may, there is no doubt that theology is "rationalized" by virtue of Schleiermacher's principle of its methodological convertibility with philosophy; once again, this combines the advancement of intellectual insight with the imposition of order and discipline.

Schleiermacher's view of theology, then, advocates rationalization in a specific and nuanced sense. On the one hand, theology rationalizes religion by establishing its inherent rationality. Since Schleiermacher recognizes religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon in human culture, its rational reflection has to take this character into account and therefore draws on a broad and inclusive conception of rationality. At the same time, theology also rationalizes by imposing order and discipline on religious communities. This is acknowledged insofar as theology is defined as a tool for church leadership. Schleiermacher's support for theology's inclusion in the university is equally ambiguous, insofar as his advocacy of an open concept of rationality must be balanced against his demand for total convertibility of research methodologies across subjects, opening up the potential for a considerable amount of "rationalization" of which he himself, interestingly, seems to have been unaware.

30 See the account in Schweitzer's authoritative *Quest of the Historical Jesus*: Schweitzer 1910:62.

Theology as the Science of Religion

While Schleiermacher insisted on the need for rational reflection upon religion (and thus for “rationalization” of religion), for him this included the need for rationality to respect, we might say, the independence and autonomy of religion as a field of human life. We encounter a very different view only a few decades later among the younger members of the so-called Tübingen School, a group of mostly historical theologians initiated by the Tübingen scholar Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860). Here, the ideal of scientific theology is employed with a polemical edge against more traditional (and thus less “rational”) forms of theology. In an editorial in the newly established *Theologische Jahrbücher*, Baur’s son-in-law, Eduard Zeller (1814–1908), declared in 1841 that this journal “starts from the idea of free *Wissenschaft*.” The primary imperative of the yearbook, he continued, was “to accept freedom and consistency of thought as necessary and justified even within theology.”³¹

The change in tone cannot be explained merely by the more animated temper of public debate in the lead-up to the storms of 1848. Zeller and his colleagues argued on the basis of a new understanding of *Wissenschaft* that was about to take over as the dominant model, heavily informing all public perceptions and expectations of academic work. This development happened largely outside theology; it also seems to have taken hold, at least initially, without great fanfare, simply by being accepted by an increasing number of researchers.³² Due to the intellectual clamor surrounding the foundation of the University of Berlin, that date is often associated with the shift to modern notions of science, but, as I noted above, the conceptions proffered by the protagonists of that debate were not revolutionary. The revolution happened more silently: By 1840, it was clear that *Wissenschaft* was in practice now defined with reference not to a universality of knowledge, but to the formal rules of a particular procedure.³³ It thus became dynamic and open, geared towards the progressive discovery of new knowledge, which, however, could never be more than provisional. Any firm adherence to philosophical or religious principles was therefore ruled out; in fact, any predisposition of the indi-

³¹ Zeller 1842.

³² Cf. the famous opening line of A. Trendelenburg’s *Logische Untersuchungen*: “The sciences happily try their own peculiar paths, but often without reflection about their method, as they are interested in their object, not in their procedure.” Trendelenburg 1840:iv–v. On Trendelenburg see now Beiser 2013.

³³ Schnädelbach 1984:91.

vidual academic came to be considered at best indifferent and, more often than not, problematic with regard to the scientific goal.

It is easy to see that Zeller's emphatic affirmation of theology as *Wissenschaft*, committed to research that is free and unconstrained by political and religious pre-conceptions, corresponds to this new idea. Yet he was not the first to espouse this as an ideal. If the broader transformation of the notion of *Wissenschaft* during this time happened silently and gradually, the situation in theology was very different indeed: The normative claim of the new ideal was enunciated with the loudest and shrillest possible fanfare in the one book that captured and divided public attention as few others had done before or after, David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus*.³⁴ Strauss (1808–1874), with his notorious gift for polarization, presented himself in this book as the representative of a modern, scientific mindset, in conscious contrast to the old-fashioned, albeit erudite, theologians around him. For this novel approach, he coined a new phrase which soon became the watchword for guardians of *Wissenschaftlichkeit* across disciplines: *Voraussetzungslosigkeit*, absence of presuppositions. Strauss's intention to provoke controversy by indicating irreconcilable differences between the old and the new became even more marked in his subsequent *Glaubenslehre*, published in 1841/42, whose subtitle promised to describe the Christian doctrine of faith "in its historical development and in its struggle with modern science."³⁵

Strauss soon came to the conclusion that the rational standards of "modern" science left no room for theology. Yet this does not mean that his ideas are insignificant to the problem of religion's "rationalization." Strauss's own very specific concept of how religion ought to be rationalized can be gleaned from his argument, advanced in an earlier publication, that the task of the exegete was critically to unravel the seeming historicity of the biblical narrative.³⁶ This was necessary, he held, in order to prepare the ground for the philosophical restoration of the Christian truth by the more speculative disciplines. Precisely the same logic underlies his advocacy of the "mythical interpretation" of the gospel in the *Life of Jesus*; as the long final chapter of that work makes clear, Strauss hoped to show that the truth of the Christological dogma would become apparent after all erroneous attempts to tie it to the historical Jesus had been rejected.³⁷

Strauss thus did have his own answers to our initial questions, and they were very different from Schleiermacher's.

³⁴ Strauss 1835.

³⁵ Strauss 1841/42.

³⁶ Strauss 1839.

³⁷ Strauss 1835:736.

First, insofar as it aims at a virtual transformation of faith into knowledge, the principles of theology are ultimately derived from speculative philosophy.

Second, as this knowledge can only be attained once the illusion that historical knowledge could have religious significance has been dispelled, critical exegesis and historical theology in general have a necessary role to play within the discipline. However, this role is wholly negative; it does not yield historical knowledge but rather destroys the deceptive certainty created by the narrative spell of the biblical stories, thus paving the way for the constructive task of philosophical theology.

Third, it might seem that the question of methodology is easily answered from Strauss's point of view, but I would like to sound a note of caution here. Notwithstanding his rhetorical appeal to modern science, Strauss's conception of theology was deeply indebted to German Idealism and especially to Hegel's philosophy. Strauss himself admits this freely³⁸ but is rather unclear about the particular relationship between these two sources of his model.

Fourth and finally, it is significant that theology, for Strauss, is in principle relevant to every believer, as its purpose is the elevation of historical faith to speculative knowledge.³⁹ Theology is "faith seeking understanding," or more precisely, faith being transformed into understanding or knowledge.

Theology, for Strauss, rationalizes religion in a somewhat violent, even revolutionary (in the Marxist sense) manner. That is because the rationality of faith, for him, is originally hidden in a pre-rational, mythical narrative. Theology is a midwife assisting in the delivery of rational truth from its earlier container, and this cannot be accomplished without pain. Theology thus imposes on religion not so much the order and structure of a university discipline but the insights of modern scientific rationality. Whereas for Schleiermacher theology was a tool of Church government and therefore needed the space of the state-funded university, Strauss's theology offers a program for general, popular education, because the transformation of faith into knowledge must be appropriated by each person individually.

It can therefore be argued that this form of rationalization, while it originated in the university, was not ideally suited to it, or in fact to any institutional environment. Strauss intends to "rationalize" religion not in the interest of the Church or the state, but for the needs of the emerging class of the reading public; and the latter certainly embraced his teachings with enthusiasm.⁴⁰ One may even specu-

³⁸ *Ibid.*:vi.

³⁹ *Ibid.*:742–743.

⁴⁰ Graf 1982:16–18.

late that Strauss's personal departure from the university, though it owed much to a deeply problematic political constellation, was not without an inner logic: The type of rationalization his theology proposed was ultimately incompatible with that required by the institution.

Theology as History of Religion

For all these reasons, Strauss's influence on university theology was limited. Much more influential was a view that may appear closely related, because it also relied heavily on the results of the critical study of the Bible and Christian tradition. According to this theory, biblical and historical theology contributed positively to theology's rational enterprise by reconstructing the history behind the available textual sources. This conception of scientific theology can be called historicist in the strict sense of the term. In different ways, it underlies the work of the two foremost German Protestant theological schools of the nineteenth century, the Tübingen School and the Ritschl School, and it was therefore crucial to this period's flourishing of historical theology. While in some ways it may be legitimate to see in Strauss an extreme proponent of this approach—and it is certainly the case that he continued to haunt the theologians associated with these schools—I shall argue that the rationalization of religion that they sought was very different from his vision.

The origins of the historicist conception can be traced back to Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling's lectures *On University Studies*, written in 1803 and thus belonging to the debate that preceded the foundation of the University of Berlin, which had also produced Schleiermacher's programmatic treatise on university education. Schelling suggests an outlook for theology that is strongly informed by history and justified by Christianity's influence on historicization:

This is the great historical thrust of Christianity; this is the reason for which a Christian science of religion must be inseparable from, indeed wholly one with history. But this synthesis with history, without which theology itself could not be thought, in turn requires as its condition a higher Christian view of history.⁴¹

Religion's rationality is here closely aligned with its historicity; this is because the philosophical understanding of history has such an important place in Schell-

⁴¹ Schelling 1956:69.

ing's own thought.⁴² In this sense, the “higher Christian view of history” is here explicitly enlisted to justify an idealist philosophy of history. At the same time, his formulation contains a methodical demand for the thorough historicization of theology. In the context of Christianity, a “science of religion” must be not only “inseparable” from but “wholly one” with history. Christian theology, in other words, does not merely have a historical component; it is, strictly speaking, its own history. Such an ideal form of historical theology is, however, only possible on the soil of Christianity—just like Schelling's philosophy, which reaches this insight.

Schelling's intuition is developed into a veritable theory by Ferdinand Christian Baur, founder of the Tübingen School and teacher of both Strauss and Zeller.⁴³ For him, theology is *Wissenschaft* insofar as it offers a full integration of philosophy and history, centered on the notion of the Incarnation. The idea, as well as the reality, of God's becoming, in Christ, part of human history transforms the latter from an arbitrary sequence of isolated events into an orderly whole which in its entirety conforms to and reveals the divine plan. Yet if history is thus endowed with meaning and significance, it also and by the same token becomes the primary source of religious insight and truth. Only Christianity enables such historicism, which is far from relativist, but the product of this new perception of humankind's development in its turn takes on a normative role for Christian theology as well. Theology in its entirety, then, becomes something like a philosophy of the history of religion that develops its truth claims through historical analysis and, concurrently, allows the result of its historical work to be interpreted in light of philosophical insights.

In practical terms, this meant that the argument for the absoluteness of Christianity became the linchpin for this understanding of theology. Absoluteness here does not signify the broader assumption that Christianity is set apart from other religions as the full and ultimate revelation of truth; it refers to the more specific idea that historical work is able to establish absolute value judgments. The study of the history of religions, properly considered, thus proves not merely that Christianity is the highest or the most advanced of them; it reveals the religion of the Incarnation as the “religion of religions,” as religion in itself and thus qualitatively different from all others.

Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1932) recognized the centrality of this argument in making the case, in his landmark 1902 book *The Absoluteness of Christianity and*

⁴² See Schelling 1857:593–603. On Schelling's philosophy of history in this work see Danz 2001:69–82.

⁴³ Cf. Zachhuber 2013b:25–72. For Baur's debt to Schelling see Zachhuber 2013a:151–170.

the History of Religion, that the impossibility of establishing such absoluteness within a historicist framework pulled the rug out from under all those attempts.⁴⁴ Yet in pointing out the failure of this project, Troeltsch was not triumphalist. He himself strongly sympathized with an approach to theology that started from the historicist turn, which he saw as irrevocable.

How does this model reply to the questions standing in the background of the whole debate? In response to the first question about the principles that determine theological work, the possibility that these could be inaccessible to general knowledge is emphatically excluded. The alternative to accepting this premise, it is argued, would be to reduce theology to *private* opinion and thus take away precisely what this form of the rationalization of religion is meant to achieve, namely, public justification of the tenets of the Christian faith.⁴⁵

Secondly, the unity of theology as one science within this model is tantamount to the unity of historical and systematic theology. As such, it is much more rigorously conceived than in Schleiermacher's theory, which had been willing to allow for a variety of disciplines within theology, bound together by their common purpose with regard to Church governance. Ultimately, the unity of the discipline is guaranteed by its common object or field of research, that is, religion. Historical and systematic interpretations go hand in hand in religion's elucidation, aimed at justifying the claims of Christianity to be the true religion that enables full knowledge of God.

It is evident, thirdly, that issues of procedure or method are central to this model. Theology is *Wissenschaft* insofar as it is willing to adopt the same standards of rational, intellectual investigation that are accepted in other disciplines, certainly in philosophy or history, but possibly also in the sciences. Here, the procedural emphasis of the "new" conception of science from the 1830s makes itself felt, even though its affirmation in the German context often had as a tacit premise an idealist philosophy of history. Indeed, the adoption of this idealist philosophical framework assuaged the worry that the acceptance of empirical and open-ended methods of research in theology could ultimately lead to results incompatible with the fundamental tenets of Christianity. In practice, of course, this presupposition was frequently shaken, and that is why this model regularly gave way to the variety encountered in Strauss, who viewed critical results obtained from historical and exegetical studies as a cathartic corrective to a naïve, literalist faith, as (seemingly) suggested by Paul's statement that "the letter kills but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6).

⁴⁴ Troeltsch 1902.

⁴⁵ Pannenberg 1973:333–334.

What, finally, is the consequence of the adoption of this model for the relationship between faith and its rational reflection in theology? It might appear to be largely negative or at least critical; after all, proponents of this model have been the most willing to employ the word *wissenschaftlich* with a normative emphasis in the direction of those seemingly less willing to adopt a critical stance towards traditional faith. Yet things are not quite so simple and straightforward. In fact, some individual proponents of this model were rather conservative theologically. What unites them is the view that faith in itself is cognitive and therefore can and ought to be rationally elucidated. This is in stark contrast to Schleiermacher, for whom individual faith does not need theological reflection. Baur and his successors all agree that this quasi-Kantian attempt to “annul reason to make room for faith”⁴⁶ was essentially a disingenuous, pseudo-intellectual trick.

Theology, then, is unequivocally affirmed by this group of academics as a rationalization of religion. The primary basis of this affirmation is their firm conviction that the Christian faith in and of itself is strictly rational and therefore capable and indeed in need of rationalization. Its rationality, they claim, is essentially historical in character and as such convergent with the kind of historical reason that underpinned much of German scholarship across the disciplines throughout the nineteenth century. Of the three models, this one was arguably the most attuned to the institutional environment of the modern research university, and that may well explain why its proponents achieved unrivalled prestige and accolades within the academy. In this model, theology is constructed as a single discipline with a clearly defined object of research, religion, using a generally recognized methodology (mostly historical and philological) in its open-ended exploration. The internal structure of theology is derived from this systematic and constructive approach; exegetical and systematic disciplines jointly contribute to the task of theology.

It may appear that this model rationalizes less in the way of imposing order and discipline than the two previous types did. In contrast to Schleiermacher, its proponents largely refrained from direct applications of their work to the governance of the church. Unlike Strauss, they did not seek to revolutionize the way people practice their faith. And yet one must not underestimate the extent to which this type of theology “rationalized” religion. Given its historicist cast, the list of starkly normative as well as controversial statements issued by these theologians is astoundingly long, from Baur’s gnostic interpretation of Christianity to Ritschl’s rejection of anything smacking of “mysticism” to Harnack’s critique of the Apostle’s Creed. While the adherents of this model varied in their precise

⁴⁶ Kant 1996:31.

visions, they shared the assumption that their theological system enabled them to make definitive pronouncements on matters of faith and practice. Their theologies were systematically conceived accounts of what could and could not be admitted as genuine expressions of the Christian faith.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the concept of theology as science or *Wissenschaft* is a specific form of making religion rational, which, I suggest, owes its existence to the institutionalization of theology within the university. In the nineteenth century, it essentially took three forms. In many ways, these were inspired by different understandings of rationality as well as of religion: Schleiermacher thought human rationality had to take cognizance of external reality, including religion in both its individual and its communal dimensions; Strauss found the truth of religion in speculative philosophy and therefore used historical criticism to dismantle its traditional historical narrative; Baur and his heirs believed that it was history that brought out the rationality of religion.

All three also, in different ways, exhibited the more instrumental side of rationalization: Schleiermacher explicitly connected theology with the need to organize and govern the church; Strauss assigned an almost revolutionary task to theology in the program of transforming faith into knowledge; while Baur, Ritschl and their students systematized historical and systematic insights in a way that would make certain elements of the Christian tradition acceptable while rejecting others.

All three, finally, show distinct traces of the rationalization imposed on theologians by the nineteenth-century research university. Theology is redefined along the lines of what is acceptable within this framework. Schleiermacher can be said to have pushed hardest against this trend in advocating a broad and inclusive notion of rationality for the future university. Yet in practice he, too, accepted the existence of a single standard of respectable academic methodology as the yardstick by which everyone, including the theologian, would be measured.

More could be said about the critical reception of these theories in both the academy and wider society, but I would like to conclude this paper on a different note. If it is true that theology's rationalization of religion has a Janus head, what about the object of this rationalization? Does the Christian faith thrive when it is rationalized in this sense? Or is it stifled? Any answer to this, I would suggest, walks a tightrope. Theological rationalization is good and indeed necessary for the religion insofar as it cultivates and improves its humane potential. It can provide a space for critical reflection, deepening doctrinal and ethical views and

calling into question long-cherished ideas and practices incompatible with the principles of the faith.⁴⁷ Yet it is not a good in itself. Arguably, therefore, the resistance that any such attempt encounters is not just reactionary or fundamentalist, but a reminder that the measure of rationalization is its ability to work on and with the living reality of religious faith; otherwise it will indeed be, as Max Weber famously put it, an “iron cage” from which the spirit has escaped.⁴⁸

The same could also be said of the university: Its rationalization of all the fields of human knowledge is good insofar as it contributes to their improvement and flourishing, but it is not a good in itself. And perhaps it can be said that the existence of theology in the university, with its constant resistance to any attempt at full rationalization, is a useful reminder of this very fact.

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⁴⁷ Cf. Zachhuber 2013c:216.

⁴⁸ Weber 1988:203–204.

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