

The Historical Turn

Johannes Zachhuber

The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Christian Thought

Edited by Joel D.S. Rasmussen, Judith Wolfe, and Johannes Zachhuber

Print Publication Date: Dec 2019 Subject: Religion, Christianity

Online Publication Date: Aug 2017 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198718406.013.38

Abstract and Keywords

This chapter considers historicization as a major paradigm of Christian thought in the nineteenth century. Early historicism saw history and religion as mutually related, and history as having a religious dimension. F. C. Baur created a monumental work of theological historicism. Yet tensions were visible in Baur's oeuvre: between idealist and positivist interpretation of history; between historical criticism and religious faith; between history of process and the historical appreciation of individuals. These tensions increased among his students for whom historicism had become the master discourse whose rules were binding for 'scientific' theology as well. In this situation, a reconfiguration of theological historicism occurred in the work of Albrecht Ritschl and theology continued to work within the historicist paradigm. Only the more fundamental criticism directed by Franz Overbeck and Friedrich Nietzsche against the principles of historicism and its use in theology led the eventual abandonment of historicist theology.

Keywords: historicism, historicization, critical exegesis, Romanticism, Idealism, positivism, F. C. Baur, Albrecht Ritschl, Franz Overbeck, Friedrich Nietzsche

Introduction

A chapter on the 'historical turn' in nineteenth-century Christian thought can easily appear as an attempt to perpetuate a triumphalist narrative according to which European modernity in its specifically liberal Protestant shape marked the final arrival at the pinnacle of human understanding. Yet whilst I shall indeed argue that some fundamental intellectual shifts that occurred at the turn of the nineteenth century have cast a long shadow over subsequent developments far into the twentieth and indeed the twenty-first centuries, it is my main aim to illustrate the complex and heterogeneous nature of these shifts, their controversial assessment even in the nineteenth century, as well as their adaptation for various religious and theological ends.

The Historical Turn

References to and debates about history and historicization in the nineteenth century abound throughout a wide variety of intellectual discourses, from historiography and philology to political thought and constitutional theory (Reill 1975; Rüsen 1993; Fulda 1996). In the present chapter, however, my purpose is more narrowly concerned with the historical turn in nineteenth-century Christian thought. This is still a very broad topic given that the study of religion touches on, and is connected with, so many other intellectual domains, not least with philosophy, history, literature, and language. It is hardly possible to write about the historicization of religious thought without taking into consideration developments in these and other subjects. Yet the claims I am making here are in an important way limited to the significance of history for approaches to religion, so, even though I shall have to take into account developments in various fields, I shall primarily be concerned with their importance for reflection on religion and specifically Christianity.

Whilst it may thus appear overly ambitious to write about the nineteenth-century 'historical turn', it may in another way also appear a questionable generalization or even a somewhat parochial perspective to use that phrase to characterize nineteenth-century Christian thought in its entirety. For the narrative of historicization has not only (p. 54) its particular time frame but also its particular place: it is very much a German story in which Enlightenment historiography is married with Romanticism and German Idealism to produce the environment in which a particular philosophical and theological understanding of history could appear as the ultimate key unlocking the deepest mysteries of humankind. It is undeniable that addressing the historical turn means taking seriously the trajectory emerging from this point of origin. Such a position does not imply the claim that *all* Christian thought in the nineteenth century was historicist, but it is based on the assumption that historicization, despite its particular origin, is one of the formative tendencies of modern thought in general. It is hoped that the narrative offered in this chapter will contribute to making this assumption plausible.

What Is Historicization?

Scholars of nineteenth-century Christianity sometimes summarize the impact of historical thought on religion by speaking of the challenge of historical criticism (Davaney 2006). Whilst there can be no doubt that historicization has had serious implications for the way Christians have interacted with the Bible as well as other historical traditions, it is essential to see that such a perspective is a dangerous reduction of a much broader and more complex phenomenon. The turn to history at the end of the eighteenth century meant in the first instance the discovery that relating to documents from the past revealed a world that was neither entirely familiar nor entirely different from one's own. Those texts rather combined in an often bewildering way sameness and otherness, and for this reason offered themselves as a unique opportunity for understanding contemporary humanity in relation to them. Glenn Most has argued that this ambivalent experience in encountering the past was the only one that could have given rise to modern historicism, as opposed to

The Historical Turn

a sense of full and unbroken continuity within a tradition on the one hand, and a sense of total alienation on the other (Most 1984, 75).

Yet the historical turn was more than simply the discovery of history as a strange and fascinating space inviting exploration. It was equally conditional on the postulation (or invention) of 'history' itself—a temporal continuum extending in principle from the dawn of humanity into the present (Kosellek 1975, 647–91). This continuum permitted placing individual events, people, or institutions somewhere on a timeline and thus within a web of relationships with contemporaneous, prior, and later developments. It was thus a principle imposing order and sequence on the sprawling remains of the past. In this way, the past assumed a whole new dimension as individual points on that timeline were spaced out and assigned to different and distinctive historical places. Yet at the same time and by the same token, history also provided a medium potentially linking them amongst each other, notably by means of theories of evolutionary development which were as popular in the nineteenth century as they were controversial. This of course could only work if documents could be assigned to a definitive time and place within that historical continuum, and it was for that reason that critical historiography (p. 55) assumed such a vast significance. If historical understanding was the basis for all understanding, and if historical understanding could only be achieved on the basis of a secure chronology of events, then dating texts and thereby establishing their original historical context became the most fundamental presupposition not only for historiography itself but also for the entirety of the humanities.

In the specific case of the Christian religion, these two aspects of the historical turn coalesced in a remarkable way. There is little doubt that one factor that fuelled historical approaches to all aspects of the Christian tradition was a sense of distance from a tradition that had previously seemed certain and unquestionable. The major figures from the Bible and subsequent Christian history were no longer quasi-contemporaries who spoke directly to the spiritual and moral needs of the inhabitants of the modern world. Instead their actions, words, and thoughts were in need of translation and interpretation in order to be intelligible to the contemporary believer. It would nevertheless be inaccurate to speak of historicization as an effect of secularization, as the early historical theologians had in their majority not taken leave of Christianity, let alone religion. Rather, they embraced the historical turn out of a desire to reappropriate this particular past—to re-establish a secure link with the earlier parts of their own religious tradition and thus to rekindle the original spark of the faith, albeit in modified form.

For this very purpose, history seemed ideally suited precisely insofar as it offered the concept of continuity in change that could integrate the present with a distant past without denying to the past its own dignity and individuality. The past could be understood and, as it were, respected in its own distinctiveness, and yet be linked with the present through the chain of historical continuity. In this way, individual believers did not have to deny their feelings of distance from earlier figures in the tradition and could yet rest as-

The Historical Turn

sured that they were still included in the same community, if only by virtue of being historical.

There was a further argument (about which I shall write more later): Christianity seemed to be the historical religion par excellence. Unlike many other religions it had a defined historical point of origin which, at the same time, was given a specific interpretation with regard to universal time in the New Testament: Christ had come ‘in the fullness of time’, as St Paul wrote (Gal. 4:4). Subsequent generations of theologians, beginning with Eusebius of Caesarea in the early fourth century, felt therefore motivated to inscribe the story of their religion into the history of the world as a whole. Historical theologians in the nineteenth century saw themselves in some ways as the successors of those ancient and medieval church historians.

No reconciliation of Christianity with modern historicism was possible, however, without the acceptance of the strictly historical character of Christianity and the willingness fully to embrace its consequences. As with historicism in general, religious or theological historicism too depended on the establishment of a precise chronological framework into which individual textual witnesses from the Christian tradition could be fitted. And here the problem began in more than one way.

Firstly, it turned out that the amount and the depth of the problems scholars were facing once they took seriously the need to establish a critical reconstruction of even (p. 56) the main elements of Christian history was staggering. These difficulties were caused not least by instances of pseudepigraphy (some of which had been discussed since the time of the Renaissance humanists), but also by uncertainties about the composition of crucial texts and their original meaning. These insights inevitably took their toll on the credibility of the Christian tradition, even if the scholars who presented those reconstructions meant them to have the contrary effect. Somehow it was difficult to avoid letting the apparent historical unreliability of those texts affect their overall credibility. In this sense, the Christian faith did indeed face the ‘challenge’ of historical criticism: its claims to represent the fullness of truth did not sit easily with the recognition that—*historically*, at least—many of its sources were on shaky ground.

Secondly, even if the principal necessity of historical theology was accepted, the problem remained that all scholarship could ever produce was probable results (Troeltsch 1991, 11–32). It is therefore misleading to speak of a confrontation between traditional religion and the perspective of critical historiography, as if the latter represented a single voice of opposition in response to orthodox Christianity. Instead, historical scholarship of Christianity increasingly became multi-faceted in itself, and produced a plethora of individual and often contradictory perspectives on practically every single relevant question.

Thirdly, historicization caused a shift in authority structures. The more important the investigation of historical sources became for the understanding of the Christian faith in its entirety, the more definitional power was taken away from ecclesiastical authorities and from theologians (if understood as *confessional* theologians) and handed over instead to historians and philologists. This tendency is described with admirable clarity in a letter

The Historical Turn

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) wrote to Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88) on the occasion of the publication of Herder's *Oldest Document of the Human Race* (1774):

If a religion once reaches the point where critical knowledge of old languages, philological and antiquarian erudition, constitute the foundation on which that religion must be constructed through every age and among all nations, then he who is most at home in Greek, Hebrew, Syrian, Arabian etc., and in the archives of antiquity, will drag the orthodox (they may look as sour as they please) like children wherever he wants; they mustn't grumble; for they cannot compare themselves to him in what according to their own confessions carries the power of proof, and they look shyly at a Michaelis as he recasts their ancient treasure in an entirely different coinage.

(Kant 1999, 148–9)

Theologians and ecclesiastics, then, faced an unenviable choice of either competing with philologists and historians in their own field and facing an uphill battle against opponents who were by default more competent than they could ever hope to be, or avoiding that competition and risking the loss of their public prestige.

Fourthly, the need to establish definitive dates and contexts for historical sources changed the attitude with which scholars would approach historical texts, and it is once again arguable that this had specific ramifications in the case of religious documents.

(p. 57) The modern, historical-critical researcher cannot by definition accept any sources as unquestionable authorities but instead subjects them to the judgement of another authority, namely that of historical criticism. With a metaphor borrowed from Kant one might say that modern historians are no longer students seeking to learn from history as their teacher, but have become instead judges treating sources as their witnesses who have to answer as they are asked. The latter observation is not limited to theological historicism; it is arguable that quite generally the immense fascination for history in the nineteenth century went hand in hand with a reversal of its status vis-à-vis modernity. Yet however this may be, it seems evident that religion with its deeply engrained sense of pious reverence for tradition and its authority was particularly affected by this side-effect of the historical turn, and it is therefore understandable that the 'rise of biblical studies' has in a recent publication been equated with the 'death of Scripture' (Legaspi 2011).

Christianity and the Historical Turn: F. D. E. Schleiermacher and F. W. J. Schelling

The origins of the historicization of Christian thought can be traced back to Göttingen in the late eighteenth century. But it is one generation later, at the turn of the nineteenth century, that we encounter two major thinkers whose reflections on the subject were to become supremely influential on subsequent intellectual developments: Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Joseph Schelling (1775–1854).

The Historical Turn

Schleiermacher's *Speeches on Religion* (1799) are not often cited as a classical text of German historicism. Their overall purpose, after all, was to offer a novel and groundbreaking theory of religion. Yet this very theory, as we shall see, ties religion intimately together with history, establishing both as equally fundamental aspects of our humanity. The linchpin of Schleiermacher's argument is his concept of an unmediated intuition (*Anschauung*) of the world that constitutes the unitary foundation of the dualistic forms in which human knowledge and agency operate. This intuition, he suggested, was the purest manifestation of religion.

Whilst Schleiermacher did not entirely reject examples taken from the realm of nature to illustrate this religious intuition of the universe, he strongly insisted that the real key to our 'religious' openness to the world lay in our encounter with fellow human beings (Schleiermacher 1996, 38). Whilst the starry sky above us might seem to provide our most ostensible connection with the world as a whole and thus with God, Schleiermacher argued that in reality it is primarily other people who make this experience possible for us.

Yet if the 'genius of humanity' was 'the most accomplished and universal artist' (Schleiermacher 1996, 38), its work of art was history. In and through history we gain a (p. 58) sense of the universal unity of humanity, and—returning to our own selves—discover there 'what was otherwise gathered from most distant regions' (Schleiermacher 1996, 41). In this way, Schleiermacher's attempt to reconstruct religion as our immediate intuition of the universe takes a most profoundly historical turn, and 'history in the most proper sense' is therefore 'the highest object of religion' (Schleiermacher 1996, 42).

Schleiermacher's turn to experiential religion, then, is in and of itself historical. His defence of the so-called 'positive' religions of history, consequently, is as emphatic as his critique of natural religion is scathing. The latter, a favourite concept of the eighteenth century, is 'usually so refined and has such philosophical and moral manners that it allows little of the unique character of religion to shine through' (Schleiermacher 1996, 98). Every 'positive' religion, by contrast, 'has exceedingly strong features and a very marked physiognomy, so that it unfailingly reminds one of what it really is with every movement it makes and with every glance one casts upon it' (Schleiermacher 1996, 98).

Schleiermacher thus closely aligns a historical perspective with the perception and appreciation of individuals. The universal, abstract, and hence empty notions created by 'natural' approaches to religion are juxtaposed with the particular, concrete, and therefore interesting (albeit controversial) features of the religions as history created them. This will be a staple of historicist rhetoric throughout the century, to which we shall have to return.

Religion can only be found in religions (Schleiermacher 1996, 96). But *how* can it be found in them? Schleiermacher proposes two ideas, both of which were to cast a long shadow over historicist religious thought. Firstly, in order to conceive historical religions as quasi-individuals, we need to identify a single idea that is at their heart. This is the famous 'essence' of religion (Schleiermacher 1996, 111–12). Secondly, religions must be brought into some sort of historical sequence. Religions themselves, in other words, have

The Historical Turn

their own history, which quite possibly has a teleology comparable to that of universal history (Schleiermacher 1996, 123). Here Schleiermacher gestures at what will later be called the historicist argument for an 'absolute' religion, a pinnacle of religious truth that can be established simply on the basis of comparative religious history.

The *Speeches* are ultimately a manifesto of theological historicism that jars with the conventional narrative of historicization as a threat to religion. Schleiermacher's argument combines suspicion towards the abstract universality and regularity of nature with the expectation to find in history a unique and total perception of humanity as a concrete whole of individuals. History therefore provides the most appropriate key for the understanding of religion. Yet the relationship between the study of religion and the historical turn is not a one-way road: if it is the case that historicism has changed religion for good, this was only possible because the turn to history itself had religious or even theological roots. A full appreciation of history, in other words, must in its turn be religious because both—religion and history—aim at the same goal, the elucidation of humanity (*die Menschheit*) in its relation to the world as a whole.

One may be forgiven for suspecting that Schleiermacher in this instance was not an entirely disinterested party. He wrote, after all, as an apologist of religion to its 'cultured despisers'. Given the intellectual prestige history enjoyed at the time, it had to appear an attractive move to tie the object of his apology so closely together with historicization. Yet (p. 59) it would be a mistake to see the close connection between the two as merely an apologetic ploy of a theological author. On the contrary, the link between religion and in particular Christianity on the one hand and a turn to history on the other was keenly perceived by many of the time's discussants and elaborated in various ways in their writings.

Later, in the mid-twentieth century, Karl Löwith wrote a critical genealogy of the German philosophy of history that made the same point by tracing the thought of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), Karl Marx (1818–83), and others back to the theologies of history in Eusebius and Augustine (Löwith 1949). From Löwith's more secular perspective, this descent disowned major claims of the philosophers whose seemingly rational arguments for historical development and teleology turned out to have their unacknowledged roots in an older, theological conception of the history of salvation. In the context of the early nineteenth century, however, the same observation was seen as confirming the widespread belief in the foundational role of history for an understanding of humanity. The normative sway exercised by Christianity was still strong enough to make the coincidence between one's own intellectual intuition and a major element of that tradition appear an indication of the former's validity.

Joseph Schelling illustrates this point in an exemplary fashion. He was, without a doubt, the most widely watched and admired German philosopher in the first decade of the century—next to Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), perhaps, but expected soon to eclipse the reputation of his slightly older contemporary. Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*, published in 1800, contained a speculative theory of history that it described as a 'progressive, gradually self-disclosing revelation of the Absolute' (Schelling 1978, 211).

The Historical Turn

History, in other words, does not merely have meaning; it has absolute meaning. It is, one might say, God's own story whose eventual decipherment will thereby furnish humanity with perfect knowledge of itself.

To justify this extraordinary claim, Schelling claimed that history is the 'union of freedom and necessity' (Schelling 1978, 203). The conflict between the two initially arises at the level of the individual. Human beings understand themselves as citizens of two realms, the manifestation of natural and spiritual (*geistig*) conditions at the same time. In good Kantian manner Schelling postulates that, whilst the former results in determinism, the latter requires freedom. Reflection about this tension subsequently leads beyond the individual, as the purpose of their actions 'can [ultimately] be realized, not by the individual alone, but only by the entire species' (Schelling 1978, 205). The problem of freedom and necessity thus recurs at the universal level of humanity, and can therefore only be solved through an interpretation of history.

For Schelling too, then (as for Schleiermacher), history is invoked to solve humanity's deepest problem, which was (in his view) the tension between its natural origin and its spiritual destiny. The answers history can provide take three basic forms: fatalism, atheism, and religion. The first puts all the emphasis on determination and necessity, the second affirms only freedom, whilst the third and most appropriate one suggests a synthesis of both. This religious view—according to which history bridges the tension of nature and spirit (*Geist*)—produces a developmental account of history in three periods or stages which are dominated by the ideas of fate, nature, and providence, respectively.

(p. 60) Schelling's argument in the *System of Transcendental Idealism* is abstract and speculative. In his *Lectures on Academic Study*, published in 1803, he applied his theory to individual academic disciplines. Remarkable in this connection is the section entitled 'On the historical construction of Christianity'. There Schelling—with an explicit nod to his theory of history in the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (Schelling 1803, 290)—argued for the eminently historical character of Christianity:

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.

(Schelling 1803, 291)

Theology is thus necessarily and paradigmatically historical theology because Christianity is a historical religion. This may be unsurprising in the age of historicism. Yet Schelling says something else echoing the Schleiermacher of the *Speeches*: Christianity is also the nurturing ground for a new, higher understanding of history. This 'higher' view of history is clearly identical with the principle underlying the historical turn. If, then, the interpretation of religion is irrevocably altered on account of the emergence of modern historical

The Historical Turn

thought, the latter would have been impossible without the cultural and intellectual background provided by the Christian tradition.

Schelling is of interest here as he supports the insight gained by our reading of Schleiermacher's *Speeches*. Religious thinkers were called to embrace the principles of historical thought, but the rationale of this demand was in itself theological. History was the medium in which religion had to be understood, but, in order to be properly grasped, history also needed a religious or even a theological interpretation. The latter claim, which in the case of Schleiermacher might have seemed the result of an apologetic intention, is equally apparent in Schelling and, in fact, a recurrent feature of early historicist writing.

There is, however, another reason why Schelling's contribution is significant. His early writings, such as the *System of Transcendental Idealism* and the *Lectures*, were of immense influence for a whole generation of German historical thinkers to whom he seemed to maintain a careful balance between the 'pragmatic' historiography of the Enlightenment (whose intention was unduly restricted to its practical uses) and the purely speculative view characteristic of Hegel's system (Momigliano 1946).

Theological Historicism from F. C. Baur to Ernst Troeltsch

Perhaps the most clearly articulated vision of Christian theology under the conditions of radical historical thought is to be found in the work of Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860). Influenced by both Schleiermacher and Schelling—as well as, more famously, G. W. F. Hegel—Baur was also (and primarily) a historical theologian who across his (p. 61) life published a series of astoundingly learned books trying to reconstruct the historical origins of Christianity from the earliest sources and, in the light thereof, to rethink the history of Christian dogma (Zachhuber 2013, 25–50).

It is important to see these two interests—historical and theological—as jointly contributing to Baur's intellectual character. Baur is a historicist theologian in the very specific sense that for him theology *is* its own history but, by the same token, the 'history' of Christianity is not fully understood until it has been interpreted as giving expression to the truth of this faith.

Baur expressed this principle *in nuce* in his earliest published monograph, *Symbolik und Mythologie oder die Naturreligion des Alterthums* (Baur 1824). This work presents the ambitious attempt to add to the burgeoning field of research in mythology—most notably represented at the time by the 1810 publication of *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen* by Georg Friedrich Creuzer (1771–1858)—by embedding mythology in an overall theory of the history of religion. Its first volume (of three) appeared in 1824. Right at its outset, Baur writes that, in principle, there are only two roads that the study of the history of religion can follow:

The Historical Turn

either that of separation and isolation, which, consistently pursued, necessarily leads to atomism, fatalism, and atheism, or that on which dawns a purer and higher consciousness of the divine to the degree to which the spiritual life of the peoples is recognized in its great interconnectedness as a great whole, thus leading to 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.

(Baur 1824, 1.xi)

Due to more rigid disciplinary boundaries in contemporary scholarship, this larger picture is often missed today. New Testament scholars may deal with Baur and his Tübingen School insofar as they contributed to the rise of historical criticism (Kümmel 1970). Those specializing in nineteenth-century systematic theology, on the other hand, will consider Baur's relation to Hegelian philosophy, or to the thought of Schleiermacher (Hodgson 1966, 43-70), but tend to ignore the more historical aspect of his work. The truth is that for Baur the two were inseparable and that the specific character of his thought can only be appreciated from a vantage point that takes this syzygy seriously.

G. E. Lessing (1729-81) had famously stated that 'the arbitrary truths of history could never prove the necessary truths of reason' (Lessing 1956, 53). For Baur, this dilemma, the tension between theology's rational claims and the historical character of its sources, epitomized the task of the theologian. As his programmatic statement from *Symbolik und Mythologie* shows, his own solution was based on the idea that a philosophical interpretation of religious history would overcome the arbitrariness that seemed such an inevitable aspect of historical events. Further, whilst the real history of religion would be the one informed by philosophical reflection, the true philosophy of religion would in turn be identical with its own history. To write the history of the philosophy of religion would thus be tantamount to its systematic exposition; history and philosophy are thus thoroughly and inextricably intertwined.

(p. 62) This project, which could equally be described as a history of the philosophy of religion and as a philosophy of the history of religion, was ultimately meant to lay a solid foundation for Christian theology. Baur expected such reflection to demonstrate that Christianity was what he called 'the absolute religion': in and with Christianity the very concept of religion was brought to its fulfilment. Yet this fulfilment happened in history and could, in principle, be established on historical and philosophical grounds.

Central for Baur's argument was the Incarnation, which he understood as both the *idea* of the coming-together of God and world, spirit, and matter, and also the concrete *realization* of this unity in the historical person of Jesus Christ. Whereas the former was a philosophical problem, the latter, Baur believed, could only be ascertained by historical study. Only in their conjunction, however, could the two underwrite the claim that, in and through Christianity, the divine had truly informed and transformed history and thus revealed its ultimate truth. The concrete, historical existence of the God-man as part of human history was, therefore, as necessary for the elevation of history from the realm of hu-

The Historical Turn

man confusion to that of divine ordination as it was the hermeneutical key of a philosophy of history. Consequently, the theologian had to be both a historian and a philosopher.

Thus far Baur represents, one might say, the ideas encountered in Schleiermacher and Schelling turned into a massive scholarly project. If historicism is true, his intention could be paraphrased, then the ultimate truth of historical research and that of philosophical and theological reflection must be one and the same. His willingness to work this concept out in extraordinary detail over the course of several decades is nothing short of extraordinary and the stimulating albeit controversial nature of his results would seem to testify to the creative impulse emanating from early nineteenth-century historicism. Yet Baur's example offers more than an illustration of historical scholarship inspired by certain philosophical principles. Considered more carefully, his work also exposes some fault lines characteristic of theological historicism in general.

Idealism vs. Positivism

The first fault line is apparent from his own writing (Zachhuber 2013, 47–50). Whilst, as I have described, Baur was committed overall to a grand vision of merging historical research and philosophical reflection into a true unity, in many places he nevertheless gave in to the opposite tendency of juxtaposing the two. Discussing the work of philosophers of religion, from second-century Gnostics to his contemporaries Schleiermacher and Hegel, Baur regularly emphasized how their speculative claims are unmatched by historical insight (Baur 1835). The Gnostics *may have intended* to prove the superiority of Christianity over other religions on the basis of the Incarnation, but instead of demonstrating how a historical event is also the meeting point of matter and spirit, they became docetists whose Christ was not, after all, a man of flesh and blood. Schleiermacher similarly postulated the identity between the historical Jesus and the transcendental origin of the believers' faith but failed ever to substantiate this claim (Baur 1835, 638). Baur was vocal in his insistence that Schleiermacher ought to have engaged more historical and (p. 63) philosophical reflection to prove that the two are really the same—that the Jesus of the first century was really and truly the unique individual as which he is revered by the Christian faithful. Hegel, finally, is repeatedly quoted as saying that 'what the Spirit is and does is no history' (Baur 1835, 696).

At one level these analyses simply indicate Baur's dissatisfaction with thinkers whose philosophical reflections eventually failed to bridge the gap with the empirical reality of history. Yet there are indications that Baur himself had substantial doubts that such a project could ever succeed. History, he writes, can never underwrite absolute value judgements: 'Between the relatively best and the absolutely perfect there is a chasm which history can never cross' (Baur 1835, 638). At the time of Baur's writing, a new generation of historians was already on the ascendancy in both history proper and theology, and their work was very much dominated by that precise scepticism. The support offered by philosophers such as Schelling or Hegel to historical work increasingly appeared like a poisoned chalice with ultimately detrimental or even fatal consequences for the intellectual integrity of historical researchers. Baur himself was not part of that generation, but

The Historical Turn

his work anticipated their concern in a most interesting way. Right at the heart of a historical theology inspired by idealist philosophy, a voice made itself heard suggesting that history was, after all, the realm of approximation and relativity (for which reason eighteenth-century philosophers had excluded it from rational reflection). Students of that realm, then, seemed well advised not to trust the siren song of those superimposing grand narratives of evolutionary progress towards an ultimate goal on the empirical material. The historian's ideal—namely, the methodologically controlled interpretation of a given (positive) set of data—was ultimately opposed to the ideal of the philosophers, certainly to that of the more speculative ones amongst them.

Baur never became a positivist in the strict sense, although it is evident that from the mid-1840s he made increasingly less use of the philosophical armour of German Idealism. More important though is the more principal question this observation raises for an understanding of the historical turn in nineteenth-century Christian thought. The appeal to history, it now turns out, was Janus faced insofar as its two main facets, as analysed earlier (in the section 'What Is Historicization?'), stood in tension with each other. The need to give to past people and events their own 'historical' dignity focused on the individuals in their unalienable uniqueness, whereas the interest to establish 'history' as a link uniting universal humanity had the opposite tendency. If the decades around the middle of the century seemed to witness a radical shift from speculative to historical thought, the truth is that a shift occurred within historicism, from an emphasis on the unity of history to one on the individuality of its constituent parts.

Historical Criticism vs. Religious Faith

This tension was of particular significance in historical theology, where it partly coincided with the question of whether the historical turn was advantageous or detrimental for religion. Schleiermacher, Schelling, Hegel, and other theorists at the time insisted (p. 64) that a historical framework was conducive to the spirit of Christianity. Admittedly, not everyone agreed, but it was really the application of its critical tools that exposed the risks of the historicist movement for the faith. Once again, Baur is an instructive example. The results of his historical scholarship were nothing if not radical. Large parts of the New Testament, he declared, were either not at all genuine or certainly originated from a much later period than traditional orthodoxy had assigned to them. These claims were understandably shocking to many contemporaries, and those in particular who failed to share Baur's enthusiasm for the contemporaneous philosophies of history found them very nearly blasphemous. Yet it is crucial to see that for Baur himself his 'negative' criticism was only part of a larger, constructive project—a rearrangement, as it were, of the remains from Christianity's past in the service of its more genuine, historical—and thus *also* theological—understanding. Once the link between historical research and philosophical reflection was cut, however, all that remained was the application of a disinterested, quasi-scientific enquiry to the biblical text. One could read some of Baur's texts along those lines, but the problem became much more prominent amongst his students who formed the so-called Tübingen School.

The Historical Turn

Beginning with the notorious *Life of Jesus* (1835) by David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74), these younger scholars held up the ideal of historical theology as a discourse ‘without presuppositions’ (*voraussetzungslose Wissenschaft*). Whilst they did not give up on the ideal of a philosophical or theological integration of their historical and exegetical results, this became an entirely separate, secondary exercise that was not allowed to dilute the pureness of the historical approach to the biblical text. Eduard Zeller (1814–1908), Baur’s son-in-law and a major scholar in his own right, described that ideal in an article published soon after Baur’s death in the *Historische Zeitschrift*:

As the Tübingen School in its external development has spread from theologians to non-theologians, its internal character similarly shows a fundamental transcendence beyond the theological tradition. *In the first instance*, admittedly, its founder and his students were theologians who had been led to their studies by their own specialist science (*Fachwissenschaft*). But they wanted to treat their subject matter, for which until then entirely unique operations—deviating from otherwise accepted scientific procedure—had as a rule been required, not according to theological but historical criteria.

(Zeller 1865, 295; italics mine)

It surely was no coincidence that these lines were published in the flagship journal of professional historiography. And it was no less a coincidence that Zeller in his presentation of the Tübingen project made no mention whatsoever of Baur’s erstwhile association with speculative philosophy. Instead, his heritage is described purely in terms of accepting the ground rules of secular historiography for the treatment of religion as well. The resulting vision of historical theology is very different from that of the early nineteenth century with its justification of the historical turn in philosophical and even theological categories. Instead, history is now perceived as factual, empirical reality whose ontological status or indeed relevance is no longer in question. Its truth as the (p. 65) outcome of a procedurally controlled investigation of sources is itself foundational for the truth claims advanced by other disciplines. It has become a self-reliant, paradigmatic master discourse, but as such also detached from other fields of human enquiry. For Schleiermacher religion was inconceivable without reference to history; the vision underlying Zeller’s argument invited the objection that religious faith might eventually be better off without the historicist baggage.

History as Process vs. History of Individuals

In immediate response to Zeller, however, a position was articulated that, whilst consciously different from that of the Tübingen School, did remain within the overall horizon of historicism. The respondent was Albrecht Ritschl (1822–89), arguably the major authority in German theological historicism in the latter half of the century, and founder of a school that included many of the leading lights of historical and systematic theology way into the twentieth century, including luminaries Adolf Harnack (1851–1930) and Wilhelm Herrmann (1846–1922). Ritschl’s criticism strikes right at the heart of Zeller’s construc-

The Historical Turn

tion of historicist theology by reminding his readers in the first instance of Baur's earlier affiliation with Hegel and his philosophy. This could at first sight appear like a cheap shot, given that the academic public at the time (1861) was violently hostile to idealistic speculation. In reality it raises the important question of the nature of history. Baur had in many ways taken over the idealist view that history is ultimately a process whose unity and cohesion had to be understood in order to avoid fragmentation. This underlying identification of history with development, Ritschl insinuated, was preserved by Zeller and others long after they departed from an overtly Hegelian framework, with the result that history came to be seen as a quasi-natural process fundamentally defined by its steadiness. As such it excluded the possibility of real beginnings—since everything can always be explained on the basis of what happened before—and with this the existence of individuality:

Even the individual human being can only be considered the subject of a historical process because one must understand him not as the *result* of the natural development of the species, but—under the *conditions* of the latter—as God's miraculous creation.

(Ritschl 1861, 445; italics mine)

What is true for individuals is equally true for collective quasi-individuals such as nations or, indeed, religions. Their distinctness is drowned out, as it were, in the perennial flux of historical becoming, and no individual shapes become discernible. Yet history ought to be concerned with individuals! Its humane purpose is to preserve those who have lived before from being merely subsumed in our own, present self-understanding. Ritschl was clearly hearkening back to the origins of the historicist movement with its integration of history into a larger concern for humanity, including its religious dimension. He rightly felt that the moment historical scholarship (p. 66) approaches religion with a set of presuppositions to which their object has to conform in order to merit investigation, a tool is converted into an end in itself. To demand, for example, that miracles are historically impossible is tantamount to saying that 'positive religion [is] an illusion' (Ritschl 1861, 441). Ultimately, both history and religion are rooted in human practice, and therefore—as he boldly concluded—participation in religious practice is the real presupposition of the historical study of religion.

In his protest against the idealist obsession with history as process, Ritschl could feel broadly in line with the mainstream of contemporaneous philosophers and historians (Schnädelbach 1984, 33–65). Closer comparison, however, also shows important differences, which produced yet more tensions for a historicist theology. Consider Ranke's famous lectures *Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte* (*On the Epochs of Recent History*), delivered in the presence of the Bavarian king, Maximilian II, in 1854 (Ranke 1971). Ranke devoted a whole section to the question 'How is the term "progress" to be understood in history?' (Ranke 1971, 54–63). Ranke answers without a moment's hesitation: philosophically speaking, the idea of progress leads to a complete abrogation of freedom, and reduces humans to 'will-less tools' (Ranke 1971, 54). Historically, it is questionable

The Historical Turn

and contradicts too many individual findings (Ranke 1971, 55–6). Theologically, it leads to the ‘injustice against God’ that many generations have the sole purpose of existing towards the perfect epoch; they are thus, as Ranke says, ‘as it were mediatized’ (Ranke 1971, 59). Against such misconceptions of history, Ranke sets his own view:

I however state that every epoch is immediate unto God. Its value does not consist in its result but in its own existence, in its own self. In this way, the consideration of history that is, *the individual life in history*, obtains its proper attraction, as every single epoch must now be considered as something in itself valid and eminently worthy of consideration.

(Ranke 1971, 59–60; italics mine)

Ranke thus fully agreed with Ritschl’s emphasis on the significance of the individual for any historical study, but he linked it with an equally categorical rejection of teleology. Doing justice to individual historical epochs means accepting them as being ‘immediate unto God’ rather than seeing them ordered towards a particular historical goal. This, however, was one step too far for the historical theologians of the nineteenth century for whom the ultimate value of adopting the historicist perspective consisted in its potential for constructing an argument exhibiting Christianity as the historical end-point of the history of religions and thus the ‘absolute religion’. Ritschl himself was somewhat indecisive on this point, but ultimately came down in support of a historical teleology towards the Kingdom of God (Ritschl 1902, 304).

His students Julius Kaftan (1848–1926) and Wilhelm Herrmann, however, tended to draw the opposite conclusion and moved beyond historicism in their theological arguments, thus paving the way for the more radical rejection of historical thought in the dialectical theology of Karl Barth (1886–1968). Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), on the other hand, who more than others recognized the precarious position of theology in the face of historicist relativism, ceaselessly argued for a theological reflection on history in the (p. 67) interest of Christian apologetics. Only by engaging with historicism can theology stand up to the challenges of modernity. For this task, Troeltsch explicitly invoked the tradition flowing from German Idealism, and in particular Schleiermacher:

Schleiermacher exhibits the attempt of German Idealism to overcome this historical relativity by a way other than that of historical rationalism, namely, by ontological speculation concerning history—speculation that, through the reflection on the very multiplicity of history, leads to knowledge of the unitary ground of all life.

(Troeltsch 1971, 40)

Troeltsch’s example shows how predominant Romantic and idealist patterns of thought remained for theological historicism until the turn of the twentieth century. Outside the immediate context of nineteenth-century German intellectual culture it is easy to lose sight of this fact, in particular given the disavowal of those roots and the preference for ‘scientific’ language amongst the later historicists. It is arguable that things were not en-

The Historical Turn

tirely different for historicism more broadly, but this is not the topic of this chapter. As for religion and theology, there can be no doubt that the fascination emanating from the historical turn gained its strength and perseverance from its coincidence with the Romantic-idealist paradigm, which perceived a close relationship between historical and religious, in particular Christian, thought. The resulting vision of history as an organic unity directed towards an ultimate goal invited thinkers throughout the century to re-envision religion as essentially historical and history as ultimately religious. These theories came in many forms and were held by people of different religious and political persuasions. Liberals *and* conservatives, Protestants as well as Catholics, were able to participate in this remarkably open discourse. The one principle they all had to agree on was that history unlocked the deepest truths about humanity and that, since the same was supposed to be the case for Christianity, the two—history and Christianity—stood in a particularly close relationship towards each other.

The Critique of Historicism: Friedrich Nietzsche and Franz Overbeck

It was therefore only when this fundamental principle was queried that historicism in its secular and its religious form came into a crisis. This happened towards the end of the nineteenth century in the work of the two friends Franz Overbeck (1837–1905) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Their influence, admittedly, was not strongly felt until later, when political developments brought home to the citizens of Europe the end of the ‘long’ nineteenth century, but when it ultimately arrived, its impact on twentieth-century intellectual life was all the more considerable.

Overbeck’s critique is as simple as it is fundamental: true Christianity, he insisted, is not the religion of history, and, if this is what it has become over time, this only speaks to (p. 68) a remarkably cruel historical irony. In fact, Overbeck suggested, Christianity was if anything the religion of anti-history insofar as its original and thus far truer form was built on apocalyptic principles. Primitive Christianity lived in the expectation of the imminent end of the world that would coincide with the second coming of Christ. It was only after this did not happen that Christianity with its institutions and its theology came into being. Accordingly, the mere fact that Christianity by now has a history of two millennia is an argument against its truth and validity: ‘Christianity’s advanced age is for serious historical reflection a fatal argument against its eternal nature’ (Overbeck 1919, 8; Law 2012, 226–9).

Whilst Overbeck thus attacked one pillar of the link between Christianity and history, Nietzsche’s polemic was directed at the other one. In his early essay *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (*On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*)—one of his four ‘untimely meditations’—he queried the unquestioned assumption that historical consciousness was desirable in an unqualified way. Nietzsche did not go so far as to suggest that historical knowledge was, as such, bad. Instead he argued that it was good as long as it was kept in check. ‘The unhistorical and the historical are necessary in

The Historical Turn

equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture' (Nietzsche 1997, 63). In spite of such measured language, it is fairly evident that Nietzsche's aim in this essay is not impartially to argue for a balance between remembrance and forgetting, but to diagnose in his own time the deeply problematical effects of a habituated tendency to preserve every single remnant of the past.

The full nature of Nietzsche's attack on contemporaneous historicism is, however, missed by focusing mainly on his polemical rejection of the excesses of a memorial culture. It was his demand that the rights and limits of history are judged by its usefulness for life that undermined the very foundations of historicism. The latter's strength, certainly after the demise of the idealist philosophies, had been the implicit acceptance that 'history' could be appealed to as a final arbiter, that it constituted a foundational form of reality which had to be taken into account whenever a position was to be justified or rejected. We have seen earlier how Ritschl had already protested against this form of historical positivism as a kind of quasi-religion. It is, then, Nietzsche's pointed rejection of history as this kind of master discourse that makes his essay so momentous. History may or may not be consulted; it may or may not have helpful advice to give, but to assume that it is the highest authority, whose knowledge and appreciation therefore must never be bounded, is wrong and ultimately harmful for individuals as much as for communities. This is the message of his text, and, where it is taken to heart, historicism has finally run its course.

Conclusion

Historicization was one of the most profound intellectual transformations the West has ever seen; it fundamentally altered the way individuals and communities related to (p. 69) and interacted with the past, thus changing the very fabric of Western humanity's self-understanding. It is no exaggeration to say that it left no aspect of human culture unaffected, but its impact on the Christian religion was particularly strong. For this there were several reasons.

First of all, historicism was clearly a response to a crisis of tradition. In view of revolutionary changes affecting all aspects of individual and communal lives, Western Europeans turned to history in the hope that it would provide guidance for their lives. But, instead of the certainty they craved, they discovered ever more ambiguity. It is obvious that this general truth applied to the Christian tradition at least as much as to political theory or ethnic identity. Religion was and remained a paradigmatic case of a tradition that had lost its unquestioned validity, and all the intellectual forces of historical theologians were eventually unable to put Humpty Dumpty together again.

Secondly, historicism drew its ultimate plausibility from the Romantic assumption that history had the potential to reveal the true nature of humanity. In its pursuit, therefore, religious questions were never far away. Theology became historical, whilst history was read theologically. Both were united, but also in competition, in their concern with the deepest truths of human existence.

The Historical Turn

Thirdly and more specifically, Christianity as a historical religion was at once an obvious object for historicization, and at the same time a deeply problematical one. Theological justifications for the application of historical criticism could be cited, and they were. But problems generated along the way—in the quest for the historical Jesus, for example—were considerable for individual believers and religious communities alike.

By the end of the long nineteenth century, internal tensions and contradictions, as well as more fundamental attacks against its conceptual basis, led to the eventual abandonment of the project of a fully and consciously historicist theology. It can therefore easily appear that historicism is a thing of the past. Yet whilst from today's perspective nineteenth-century historical theologians can seem naïve in their expectations, excessive in their scepticism, and extravagant in their hypotheses, this should not allow us to overlook the fundamental continuity between their project and today's intellectual outlook. Whilst it has been fashionable from time to time to subject its theoretical foundations to searing criticism, historical understanding still holds a privileged place in today's culture—from public rhetoric to academic scholarship—and continues deeply to inform debates about individual and communal religious identities.

Works Cited

Baur, Ferdinand Christian. 1824. *Symbolik und Mythologie oder die Naturreligion des Alterthums*, 2 vols. (vol. 2 in two parts). Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler.

Baur, Ferdinand Christian. 1835. *Die christliche Gnosis oder die christliche Religions-Philosophie in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung*. Tübingen: C. F. Osiander.

(p. 70) Creuzer, Friedrich. 1810. *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*, 3 vols. Leipzig and Darmstadt: C. W. Leske.

Davaney, Sheila Greeve. 2006. *Historicism: The Once and Future Challenge for Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress.

Fulda, Daniel. 1996. *Wissenschaft aus Kunst: Die Entstehung der modernen deutschen Geschichtsschreibung*. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Hodgson, Peter C. 1966. *The Formation of Historical Theology: A Study of Ferdinand Christian Baur*. New York: Harper & Row.

Kant, Immanuel. 1999. *Correspondence*. Translated and edited by A. Zweig. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kosellek, Reinhart. 1975. 'Geschichte'. In *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 2. Edited by Reinhart Kosellek, Otto Brunner, and Werner Conze, pp. 593–717. Stuttgart: Ernst Klett.

Kümmel, Werner Georg. 1970. *Das Neue Testament: Geschichte der Erforschung seiner Probleme*, 2nd edition Freiburg and Munich: Karl Alber.

The Historical Turn

- Law, David R. 2012. 'Franz Overbeck: Kierkegaard and the Decay of Christianity'. In *Kierkegaard's Influence on Theology, Tome I: German Protestant Theology*. Edited by Jon Stewart, pp. 223-40. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Legaspi, M. C. 2011. *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. 1956. *Lessing's Theological Writings*. Selected and translated by H. Chadwick. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Löwith, Karl. 1949. *Meaning in History*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Momigliano, Arnaldo. 1946. 'Friedrich Creuzer and Greek Historiography'. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 9: 152-63.
- Most, Glenn. 1984. 'Rhetorik und Hermeneutik: Zur Konstituierung der Neuzeitlichkeit'. *Antike und Abendland*, 30: 62-79.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1997. *Untimely Meditations*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Overbeck, Franz. 1919. *Christentum und Kultur: Gedanken und Anmerkungen zur modernen Kultur*. Edited by C. A. Bernnoulli. Basle: Schwabe.
- Ranke, Leopold von. 1971. *Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte*. Edited by T. Schieder and H. Berding. Munich: Oldenbourg.
- Reill, Peter Hanns. 1975. *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Ritschl, Albrecht. 1861. 'Über geschichtliche Methode in der Geschichte des Urchristentums'. *Jahrbücher für Deutsche Theologie*, 6: 429-59.
- Ritschl, Albrecht. 1902. *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation: The Positive Development of the Doctrine*, 2nd edition Translated and edited by H. R. Mackintosh and A. B. Macaulay. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Rüsen, Jörn. 1993. *Konfigurationen des Historismus: Studien zur deutschen Wissenschaftskultur*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph. 1803. *Vorlesungen über die Methode des akademischen Studiums*. In Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, vol. I/5 (1858). Edited by K. F. A. Schelling. Augsburg: J. G. Cotta.
- Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph. 1978. *System of Transcendental Idealism*. Translated by Peter Heath. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia.
- (p. 71)** Schleiermacher, Friedrich Daniel Ernst. 1996. *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. Translated by R. Crouter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Historical Turn

Schnädelbach, Herbert. 1984. *Philosophy in Germany, 1831–1933*. Translated by E. Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Strauss, David Friedrich. 1835. *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*, 2 vols. Tübingen: C. F. Osiander. English translation: *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1860). Translated by M. Evans. New York: Calvin Blanchard. [The text translates the 4th edition.]

Troeltsch, Ernst. 1971. *The Absoluteness of Religion and the History of Religions*. Translated by D. Reid. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Troeltsch, Ernst. 1991. *Religion in History: Ernst Troeltsch*. Translated by J. L. Adams and W. F. Bense. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

Zachhuber, Johannes. 2013. *Theology as Science in Nineteenth Century Germany: From F. C. Baur to Ernst Troeltsch*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zeller, Eduard. 1865. *Vorträge und Abhandlungen geschichtlichen Inhalts*. Leipzig: Fues.

Suggested Reading

Davaney, Sheila Greeve. 2006. *Historicism: The Once and Future Challenge for Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress.

Dorrien, Gary. 2015. *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit: The Idealistic Logic of Modern Theology*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Hodgson, Peter C. 1966. *The Formation of Historical Theology: A Study of Ferdinand Christian Baur*. New York: Harper & Row.

Howard, Thomas Albert. 2000. *Religion and the Rise of Historicism: W. M. L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt, and the Theological Origins of Nineteenth-Century Historical Consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reill, Peter Hanns. 1975. *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Zachhuber, Johannes. 2013. *Theology as Science in Nineteenth Century Germany: From F. C. Baur to Ernst Troeltsch*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Johannes Zachhuber

Johannes Zachhuber is Reader of Theology in the University of Oxford. He works on Christian theology in late antiquity and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Publications include *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa* (2000) and *A Science of Theology? The German Debate from FC Baur to Ernst Troeltsch* (2012).