

# Theology, History, and the Modern German University

edited by

Kevin M. Vander Schel  
and Michael P. DeJonge

Mohr Siebeck

*Kevin M. Vander Schel*, born 1979; 2012 PhD in Systematic Theology from Boston College; has been a Fulbright Scholar at Humboldt University, a Catherine of Siena Fellow at Villanova University, and a Lecturer in Religious Studies at the University of Houston; currently Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Gonzaga University.

*Michael P. DeJonge*, born 1978; 2009 PhD in Religion from Emory University; has been a Fulbright Scholar, a Fellow of the Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies, a Volkswagen/Mellow Fellow at the Leibniz-Institute for European History in Mainz, Germany, and Visiting Dietrich Bonhoeffer Professor of Theology and Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York; currently Professor and Chair of Religious Studies at the University of South Florida.

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# Theology and History in the Controversy between Albrecht Ritschl and Eduard Zeller

*Johannes Zachhuber*

In this chapter, I discuss the relationship between theology and history in mid-nineteenth-century Germany based on the academic controversy fought between Eduard Zeller (1814–1908) and Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889) concerning the significance of historical criticism for theology and the importance of Ferdinand Christian Baur’s contribution to a properly historical form of theology.<sup>1</sup> As will become evident, this controversy subtly ties in with various problems of the understanding of history, the place of theology in the university, and the role of *Wissenschaft* in the period after 1848 more generally.

## A. Background to the Controversy

On 30 June 1858, historian Heinrich von Sybel wrote from Munich to his friend, the philosopher Eduard Zeller in Marburg.<sup>2</sup> The two had been close for years; between 1849 and 1856 their families had even lived in the same house while both men held chairs at Marburg University.<sup>3</sup> In his letter, Sybel told his friend about his plan to found a new journal, *Historische Zeitschrift*; as it happened, this journal was to become the most prestigious organ of German historiography. Articles in the *Historische Zeitschrift*, Sybel wrote, will be written “in popular form” (*in essayistischer Form*) and addressed “not to specialists (*Fachgelehrten*) but to the general public seeking to preach to them the validity of, and respect for, true method”.<sup>4</sup> Would Zeller be willing to contribute to this

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<sup>1</sup> I have previously discussed this controversy in: Johannes Zachhuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth-Century Germany: From F.C. Baur to Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), pp. 143–62. Cf. also Folkart Wittekind, *Geschichtliche Offenbarung und die Wahrheit des Glaubens. Der Zusammenhang von Offenbarungstheologie, Geschichtsphilosophie und Ethik bei Albrecht Ritschl, Julius Kaftan und Karl Barth (1909–1916)* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), pp. 16–43; and Wilhelm Geiger, *Spekulation und Kritik. Die Geschichtstheologie Ferdinand Christian Baur’s* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1964), pp. 9–14.

<sup>2</sup> Margret Lemberg, ed., *Heinrich von Sybel und Eduard Zeller. Briefwechsel (1849–1895)* (Marburg: Elwert, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Lemberg, ed., *Briefwechsel (1849–1895)*, pp. 32–43.

<sup>4</sup> Lemberg, ed., *Briefwechsel (1849–1895)*, p. 221.

project? If so, an article about the controversy between Baur and his orthodox opponents would be desirable: “imagine you were asked to explain its meaning to a natural scientist or, even better, a government minister”.<sup>5</sup>

Zeller seemed initially hesitant and suggested Sybel might try to win D.F. Strauss as an author,<sup>6</sup> but by March 1859 he had evidently accepted the invitation.<sup>7</sup> After some further urging from his friend, he finally sent the manuscript in August of the same year.<sup>8</sup> Yet the article was not to appear until more than a year later. In October 1859, Sybel informed Zeller confidentially about various personal and political attacks against himself in the Munich popular press.<sup>9</sup> In the situation, he felt it was wise to hold back with the publication of an article that was bound to cause further controversy due to its content. In another letter, he asked Zeller to tone down certain sections of his piece in order to avoid the impression that history and theology were treated together too closely.<sup>10</sup>

In February 1860, finally, Sybel requested that Zeller’s article be published anonymously. In the meantime, he had proposed his friend, one of the most respected historians of philosophy in Germany,<sup>11</sup> to the newly formed Historical Commission of Bavaria as an author for their *History of the Sciences in Germany* (*Geschichte der Wissenschaften in Deutschland*), a project initiated by no less a man than Heinrich Ranke. Zeller was to write on German philosophy since Leibniz.<sup>12</sup> There were, however, objections, as Sybel reported, which illustrate the complicated position of the liberal, Prussian, Protestant historian in the capital of the staunchly Catholic Bavarian Kingdom: Zeller was allegedly a pantheist who could not be tolerated as a contributor to a volume published under the patronage of the Catholic king. Sybel was able to overcome the resistance in the Historical Commission and secure Zeller as a contributor to the *History of Sciences*. At the same time, the king himself, whom Sybel had to consult about his plans for the *Historische Zeitschrift*,<sup>13</sup> endorsed the publication of Zeller’s article on the Tübingen School. Still, Sybel felt omitting Zeller’s name was the prudent course of action at this delicate point in time.

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<sup>5</sup> Lemberg, ed., *Briefwechsel (1849–1895)*, p. 221.

<sup>6</sup> Lemberg, ed., *Briefwechsel (1849–1895)*, p. 225.

<sup>7</sup> Lemberg, ed., *Briefwechsel (1849–1895)*, p. 242.

<sup>8</sup> Lemberg, ed., *Briefwechsel (1849–1895)*, pp. 244, 250–252.

<sup>9</sup> Lemberg, ed., *Briefwechsel (1849–1895)*, p. 269.

<sup>10</sup> Lemberg, ed., *Briefwechsel (1849–1895)*, p. 276.

<sup>11</sup> Georg Hartung, “Eine Schatzkammer des Wissens. Leben und Werk des Gelehrten Eduard Zeller”, in Georg Hartung, ed., *Eduard Zeller. Philosophie- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2009), pp. 1–24; here pp. 4–5.

<sup>12</sup> Lemberg, ed., *Briefwechsel (1849–1895)*, p. 276.

<sup>13</sup> Lemberg, ed., *Briefwechsel (1849–1895)*, pp. 282–283.

Thus, the lengthy piece, *Die Tübinger historische Schule* (“The Tübingen Historical School”),<sup>14</sup> appeared without a by-line in the final issue of 1860. As an additional measure of caution, the editor appended a note to the first page emphasising that the *Historische Zeitschrift* took no sides in theological controversies and published the article because “the importance of the Tübingen School for historical literature was so great, and accepted [as such] by friend and foe”.<sup>15</sup>

In his polemical response to this article, Albrecht Ritschl accused its author of insufficient familiarity with the state of the art in theological studies.<sup>16</sup> He was not entirely off the mark, but Zeller’s professional history is in itself indicative of the difficult environment Tübingen scholarship faced within academic theology during the 1840s and 50s. When he wrote the article, Zeller had held a professorial chair in philosophy for over ten years. His hesitation to accept Sybel’s requests was partly due to his own awareness that during these years his acquaintance with theological debate had been reduced to a minimum. His article, he confessed, had been stitched together from “remains of previous times”.<sup>17</sup>

During these “previous times” Zeller had been one of the most successful and committed students of Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860), who went on to become his father-in-law when Zeller married Emilie Baur in 1847.<sup>18</sup> While his name is not connected with a major theological monograph during this time,<sup>19</sup> Zeller edited the *Theologische Jahrbücher*, the major outlet of Tübingen theology, and contributed a large number of substantive articles to this journal, on biblical studies and church history as much as on more philosophical topics. Most important, arguably, was a long article on *The Essence of Religion* (*Das Wesen der Religion*), clearly an attempt to respond to Feuerbach’s influential work from a less radical perspective.<sup>20</sup>

In 1848, Zeller was offered a chair at the Faculty of Theology at Marburg. Throughout that year a wave of radical revolutions swept across Europe; their

<sup>14</sup> Anon. [= E. Zeller], “Die Tübinger Historische Schule”, *Historische Zeitschrift* (1860): pp. 90–173. Henceforth, this article is cited under Zeller’s name.

<sup>15</sup> Zeller, “Die Tübinger Historische Schule”, p. 90.

<sup>16</sup> Albrecht Ritschl, “Über geschichtliche Methode in der Geschichte des Urchristenthums”, *Jahrbücher für Deutsche Theologie* 6 (1861): pp. 429–459. Reprinted in Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Ausgewählte Werke in Einzelausgabe*, vol. 5: *Für und wider die Tübinger Schule*, ed. K. Scholder (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1975), pp. 467–499. In what follows, page numbers refer to the original edition.

<sup>17</sup> Lemberg, ed., *Briefwechsel (1849–1895)*, p. 306.

<sup>18</sup> Hartung, “Eine Schatzkammer des Wissens. Leben und Werk des Gelehrten Eduard Zeller”, pp. 1–4.

<sup>19</sup> His monographic study of Acts only appeared in 1854: Eduard Zeller, *Die Apostelgeschichte nach ihrem Inhalt und Ursprung kritisch untersucht* (Stuttgart: Mäcken).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Zachhuber, *Theology as Science*, pp. 110–123.

political backlash directly affected Zeller's putative promotion. Responding to the news of his appointment, the local clergy staged a protest organised by the notorious reactionary, August Vilmar (1800–1868), then teaching at a Marburg *Gymnasium*. In August 1849, the Elector of Hesse, Frederick William, refused to appoint Zeller, calling him the “Anti-Christian Professor Zeller”.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, Zeller was moved to the Faculty of Philosophy, and a year later Vilmar, by then working for the government of Hesse, instructed him not to cover theological topics in his lectures.<sup>22</sup>

By the time of writing *Die Tübinger historische Schule*, then, Zeller's familiarity with the problems of theology and historical criticism, and with the complications of the existence of theology in a university partly controlled by ecclesiastical politics was tainted by painful personal experience.

Yet it is not only Zeller's background that matters for an understanding of the controversy. For Ritschl, too, the debate stirred deeply personal as well as professional issues. In 1843, the young Ritschl had insisted, against the wishes of his father, himself a bishop, on going to Tübingen to study under Baur.<sup>23</sup> The environment of the school thus shaped his scholarly formation at its most crucial juncture. The very research, however, that grew out of this engagement ultimately became the cause of his alienation from the Tübingen consensus. Working through the emergence of what he called “early-Catholicism”, i.e. the church of the late second and early third century, Ritschl increasingly came to conclusions that could no longer be reconciled with the impressive but idiosyncratic construction of early Christian history that underwrote the scholarship of Baur and his students.<sup>24</sup>

His newly acquired scholarly position dominated the second edition of his *The Origins of the Early Catholic Church (Die Entstehung der altkatholischen Kirche)* which appeared in 1857. More than this extensive historical account of the Christian church from the time of the New Testament to the end of the second century, however, it was a brief review, published a year earlier, that came to be seen as encapsulating Ritschl's break from his previous theological alliance. In this succinct discussion of Carl Schwartz's *History of the Most Recent Theology (Geschichte der neuesten Theologie)*, Ritschl included the following assessment of Baur and his students: “The Tübingen School has fallen apart, and its stimuli will only merit recognition insofar as they lead to an

<sup>21</sup> Lemberg, ed., *Briefwechsel (1849–1895)*, p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> Ulrich Sieg, *Aufstieg und Niedergang des Marburger Neukantianismus*, vol. 1 (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1994), pp. 50–51. Cf. Lemberg, ed., *Briefwechsel*, p. 28, n. 88, where Minister H.D.L. Hassenpflug is credited with this decision.

<sup>23</sup> Otto Ritschl, *Albrecht Ritschls Leben*, vol. 1 (Freiburg: Mohr, 1892), pp. 76–77.

<sup>24</sup> O. Ritschl, *Albrecht Ritschls Leben*, p. 272.

opposition to the system of the history of primitive Christianity as presented by Baur and Schwegler".<sup>25</sup>

As was customary in this particular journal, the piece was published anonymously, but Baur was soon informed of Ritschl's authorship. He plausibly saw this as a public rebuke of their connection, and a cowardly one at that, although Ritschl insisted he would have written the same words had the publishing guidelines required him to add his name to the review.<sup>26</sup> Is the matter, however, as unequivocal as it appears at first sight?

For Baur and the other members of the school, Ritschl quite simply became an apostate. They interpreted the conflict within their customary binary of doctrinal versus critical. In this perspective, Ritschl's departure from the Tübingen consensus meant a lapse back into the pre-critical approach from which Baur himself had originally broken free.<sup>27</sup>

It is, however, arguable that Ritschl's position was more nuanced than that. Note his precise wording in the above quotation. In what sense could the Tübingen School have been said to have "fallen apart" (*auseinandergefallen*) rather than "be outdated" or "disproved"? Ritschl's choice of phrase, it seems, only makes sense if at the time he still thought of himself as one part of a "divided" Tübingen School. It would then be his own position he has in mind when demanding a development of this scholarship in "opposition to the system of the history of primitive Christianity as presented by Baur and Schwegler". In other words, Ritschl does not so much renounce his own background but, rather, claims for himself the mantle of the Tübingen tradition. The whole statement would thus be a bit of self-advertisement through which Ritschl presents himself and his historical work as the only genuine continuation of Baur's best insights.

His personal actions confirm this assessment. Ritschl was clearly keen to remain on good terms with Baur. In 1854, following a period of personal estrangement, he went to Tübingen and spent more than a week in Baur's house relishing the renewal of personal bonds.<sup>28</sup> When their break ultimately happened, it was Baur who severed ties, which Ritschl simply acknowledged.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> O. Ritschl, *Albrecht Ritschls Leben*, p. 274. On Albert Schwegler, cf. Josef Matzerath, *Albert Schwegler (1819–1857)* (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1993). Schwegler's major work was his *Das nachapostolische Zeitalter in den Hauptmomenten seiner Entwicklung*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: Fues, 1846).

<sup>26</sup> Matzerath, *Albert Schwegler (1819–1857)*.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Die Tübinger Schule und ihre Stellung zur Gegenwart* (Tübingen: Fues, 1859), pp. 64–83; Adolf Hilgenfeld, "Das Urchristentum und seine neuesten Bearbeitungen von Lechler und Ritschl", *Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche Theologie* 1 (1858): pp. 54–140; here p. 58.

<sup>28</sup> O. Ritschl, *Albrecht Ritschls Leben*, pp. 258–62.

<sup>29</sup> O. Ritschl, *Albrecht Ritschls Leben*, pp. 274–75.

As we shall see, it is this perspective combining respect for Baur and his intellectual accomplishments with a thoroughgoing critique of the details of his historical and philosophical vision that explains Ritschl's approach to the debate with Zeller which took place only a few years later.

## B. Zeller's Presentation of the Tübingen School

Zeller's piece for Sybel's journal was, if anything, verbose. On seventy-three pages, he offered a sprawling account that was, ostensibly, a presentation of three recent books by Ferdinand Christian Baur,<sup>30</sup> but at the same time attempted to contextualise these publications within the broader movement of biblical criticism. The article begins with an introduction specifically designed for the text's immediate purpose; it was, consequently, omitted from the article's later reproduction in Zeller's collected papers.<sup>31</sup> In these lines, Zeller – writing anonymously! – introduces himself as a theologian and a member of Baur's circle. Does this make him too partial for a presentation of a current theological debate to a non-theological readership? Arguably not, as only someone trained in theology, with full knowledge of its internal discussions and full understanding of basic principles, can hope to offer such an account. Such a person, however, will inevitably be partial in some sense; to hope for neutrality in this case would therefore be pointless.<sup>32</sup>

Zeller continues with a narrative of the historical emergence of biblical criticism.<sup>33</sup> The older theological tradition was simply dogmatic, without any critical awareness. This only changed with the emergence of theological rationalism, but while this school rejected the supernaturalism of traditional and more recent orthodoxies, it retained the principal notion of the Bible's historicity. The duality of these two approaches, rationalism and supernaturalism, still dominated the thought of Schleiermacher and Hegel: the former practised a rationalistic form of biblical criticism, while the latter had started there but later moved more to the anti-rationalism of traditional orthodoxy, a position that was initially held by his school as well. This narrative is clearly designed to lead to the publication of David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus (Das Leben Jesu, 1835)* as a major turning point. This is no coincidence as Zeller evidently took as his template the historical account of biblical criticism Strauss himself had

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<sup>30</sup> Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", p. 92.

<sup>31</sup> Eduard Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", in *Vorträge und Abhandlungen geschichtlichen Inhalts* (Leipzig: Fues, 1865), pp. 267–353.

<sup>32</sup> Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", pp. 91–92.

<sup>33</sup> Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", pp. 92–112.

offered at the outset of his notorious work; in some places he even comes close to the very wording of Strauss' text.<sup>34</sup>

Yet Strauss's mythical interpretation was not the final resolution of the problems besetting the discipline.<sup>35</sup> Firstly, his scholarship was more negative than positive. In other words, while the *Life of Jesus* excelled in its demolition of erroneous assumptions about the historicity of the gospels, it hardly addressed the task of a historical reconstruction of primitive Christianity based on extant historical sources. Secondly, while Strauss was right to detect mythical material in the New Testament, this kind of material was not nearly as dominant in the biblical books as the *Life of Jesus* made readers believe. To have addressed these two shortcomings of Strauss's work, Zeller argued, was the main merit of Baur's scholarship, which originated prior to the publication of the *Life of Jesus*, but only came to its "full and uncompromising" realisation due to Strauss's "critical activity".<sup>36</sup> The disruptive earthquake that was the *Life of Jesus*, we might say, prepared the ground for Baur's own reconstruction of early Christian history, whose result Zeller sets out to present in his article.

The fundamental methodological principle of Baur's approach was as simple as it was revolutionary: sacred history had to be studied in the same way as history in general. Theological presuppositions of ecclesiastical historiography were thus ruled out. "As Christianity is a historical reality", Zeller writes quoting Baur, "it has to accept being considered and investigated in a historical manner".<sup>37</sup> As a result, miracles and other supernatural events can have no place in historical theology. Historical research must rely on the postulate of universal causality, and the stipulation of miraculous events violates this principle: "[The acceptance of] miracles and the historical study of reality are mutually exclusive. What the former wants, the latter cannot concede. In this conviction, Baur and Strauss are in complete agreement".<sup>38</sup>

Following this initial exposition, Zeller offers a rather long-winded apology for biblical criticism explaining at length why doubting the historical accuracy of the biblical accounts and considering biblical books as pseudonymous does not imply irreligious sentiments.<sup>39</sup> The former must be considered nearly inevitable given the circumstances in which biblical authors produced their accounts.<sup>40</sup> The latter was widely accepted in antiquity even among the most respectable and educated classes – Zeller illustrates this at length with examples from ancient philosophy. It must therefore be concluded that the moral

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", pp. 93–95; and David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* (Tübingen: Osiander, 1835, vol. 1), pp. iv–v.

<sup>35</sup> Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", pp. 103–106.

<sup>36</sup> Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", p. 106.

<sup>37</sup> Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", p. 108; cf. Baur, *Die Tübinger Schule*, p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", p. 109.

<sup>39</sup> Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", pp. 112–143.

<sup>40</sup> Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", pp. 116–117.

categories connected for us with terms such as intellectual property, plagiarism, even forgery were alien to the intellectual environment from which early Christianity emerged.<sup>41</sup> Any reconstruction based on such assumptions, then, Zeller concludes, is not due to some residual, theological bias displayed by the Tübingen School but the result of their commitment to a strictly historical approach.<sup>42</sup>

In the last part of his essay, Zeller finally gives the overview of Baur's publications on early Christianity he promised at its outset.<sup>43</sup> He describes Baur's reconstruction of the history of the church from the apostolic age to the sixth century,<sup>44</sup> accepting his most controversial historical hypotheses: an early date for the Book of Revelation, second-century dates for the gospels, Matthean priority, and major roles for Gnosticism and Montanism in the evolution of the early church and its theology. Overall, Zeller concludes, these volumes exemplify the principle of Tübingen scholarship "to exercise historical fairness towards both [the good and the bad] in Christianity and the Christian Church, to provide of its origin and development as faithful a picture as possible, according to true reality and in agreement with what was historically possible and probable".<sup>45</sup> Whatever criticism may be legitimate against its specific findings, no one will be able to deny to the school the recognition that "its leading principles are the same as those accepted by the whole of German historiography outside theology since Niebuhr and Ranke".<sup>46</sup>

On the face of it, Zeller's presentation may appear straightforward. As requested by Sybel, the article explained to non-theologians the Tübingen School's critical application of nineteenth-century historiography to Christianity's religious texts. In Zeller's presentation Baur and his students appear as method-driven, non-ideological stalwarts of historical *Wissenschaft* within the discipline of theology.

One does not, however, have to be overly sceptical or suspicious to perceive this narrative as tendentious. It is, admittedly, the case that Baur can be cited with statements that sound extremely similar to Zeller's claims about the "purely historical" ethos of Tübingen scholarship. For example, in the introduction to his *Christianity and the Christian Church in the First Three Centuries* (*Das Christentum und die christliche Kirche in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*), he writes as follows: "My standpoint is, in a word, a purely historical

<sup>41</sup> Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", pp. 130–134.

<sup>42</sup> Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", p. 143.

<sup>43</sup> Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", pp. 143–172. The article concludes with a brief summary on pp. 172–173.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", p. 145.

<sup>45</sup> Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", p. 173.

<sup>46</sup> Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", p. 173.

one, whose sole purpose is to capture the historical material (*das historisch Gegebene*) in its pure objectivity as far as this is possible."<sup>47</sup>

This was Baur's view not only towards the end of his career, but similar comments were contained in some of his earliest work as well. In extant notes for his first ever lecture course in church history, written probably in 1827, we find Baur proclaiming that "in general" church history has to work by the same method "that is valid for history as such, since church history is merely one part of general world history".<sup>48</sup> Thus far, Zeller's insistence on the "purely historical" approach practised in the Tübingen School undoubtedly captured something important in Baur's self-understanding as a church historian.

And yet, it is equally evident that this can at best be one particular aspect of what Baur and his school stood for. Zeller's own narrative makes this perfectly clear. If Baur and his school had only accomplished the methodological alignment of biblical criticism with historiography, and their main achievement, thus, was the rejection of miracles as part of the biblical history, how did their work mark an advancement beyond what had been achieved by the so-called rationalist critics of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century? Following Strauss, Zeller had credited these scholars with the insight that the "supernatural" character of the biblical story had to be relinquished; the refusal to accept miracles in biblical scholarship was evidently just one application of this principle.

For Strauss, rationalism had only been a first step because he believed the gospels had to be recognised in their mythical character,<sup>49</sup> but while Zeller conceded that the Bible in both parts contained myths, he was far from following *tout court* the mythical reading proposed by his friend. Thus, the position Zeller ascribed to the Tübingen School was not, in fact, far from that of the biblical critics of two generations before. Certainly, Baur and his students would no longer explain the stilling of the storm with the changing weather conditions on the Sea of Galilee or the resurrection of the dead with the assumption that Jesus had only been seemingly dead, but in its fundamental approach to biblical history, the Tübingen project, as sketched by Zeller, was neo-rationalist.<sup>50</sup>

Baur himself, by contrast, rarely claimed originality for his "purely historical" viewpoint but described his own contribution to scholarship in rather different terms. In the preface to his *History of the Christian Church from the*

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<sup>47</sup> Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Das Christenthum und die christliche Kirche in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Fues, 1860), p. v.

<sup>48</sup> Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Kirchengeschichte*, MS Tübingen University Library (Mh II 166h), p. 19: "Im Allgemeinen bringt es die Natur der Sache mit sich, dass für die christl[iche] Kirchengesch[ichte] dieselbe Methode gelten muss, die für die Geschichte überhaupt gilt, da ja die K[irchen]G[eschichte] nur ein Theil der allgemeinen Weltgesch[ichte] ist."

<sup>49</sup> Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, pp. iv–v.

<sup>50</sup> For the problem of "neo-rationalism" in the Tübingen School, cf. Zachhuber, *Theology as Science*, p. 124.

*Beginning of the Fourth to the End of the Sixth Century* – incidentally, one of the works underlying Zeller’s article in *Historische Zeitschrift* – he conceded, for example, that painstaking research by others had provided the scholarly community with a wealth of historical detail to which he had little to add. What was lacking, by comparison, was

... the intellectual processing and penetration of the whole material; the summation of the infinitely divided and manifold under the idea of its unity; the reduction of external appearances to their internal principle, which moves them and determines their interconnection; the construction of the development in which the various historical epochs and periods have taken their temporal course as moments of definitive conceptual unity. This task of research in church history drew my preference from the outset partly to the history of religion, ... partly to the history of dogma.<sup>51</sup>

Not the “purely historical research” then, was his innovation, but the attempt to integrate or synthesise individual insights into a bigger picture based on an understanding of history as a unity, an organically connected whole. The structure and shape of this whole, Baur further contended, became apparent to him by focusing his attention on the history of religion and the history of dogma, in other words, on intellectual phenomena underlying church history in its “external manifestation”.

The description Baur gives of the impetus behind his own works in these lines corresponds to other utterances from across his oeuvre. It explains one of the most distinctive features of his work, his penchant for the use of philosophy in historical studies. Famously, he laid down his conviction in his first, major monograph, *Symbolism and Mythology* (*Symbolik und Mythologie*), published more than thirty years prior to his *History of the Church* from which the previous quotation was taken. *Wissenschaft*, he argued there, could only ever choose one of two ways:

... 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 recognised 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.<sup>52</sup>

No reader of Zeller’s article would have guessed that Baur himself saw the specific character of his work in this integration of philosophical and historical perspectives. No reader, consequently, would have guessed that the key question that has been asked of Baur’s scholarship was and would remain this: to

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<sup>51</sup> Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Geschichte der christlichen Kirche*, vol. 2: *Die christliche Kirche vom Anfang des vierten bis zum Ende des sechsten Jahrhunderts*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Fues, 1863), p. vi.

<sup>52</sup> Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Symbolik und Mythologie oder die Naturreligion des Alterthums*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1824/1825), here vol. 1, p. xi.

what extent did this use of philosophy advance his historical agenda, and to what extent did it stand in its way? More particularly, how far does the value of Baur's historical scholarship depend on the recognition of the philosophical ideas he utilised? Given that Baur's philosophy has, rightly or wrongly, often been identified with Hegelianism, this legitimate question has in practice meant that his research was frequently presented as little more than the application of Hegelian principles to the histories of doctrine and the Church. As we shall see, this was the polemical angle from which Ritschl, too, approached his critique of Zeller's presentation.

### C. Ritschl's Response: Historical Method in the Study of Primitive Christianity

The publication of Zeller's article all but coincided with Baur's death on 3 December 1860. Thus, when Ritschl drafted a critical response, which he first presented to a group of colleagues in Bonn<sup>53</sup> and subsequently published in the *Jahrbücher für deutsche Theologie*, the organ of mediating theology, he had to reckon with the fact that readers would take his piece as his own obituary of his former teacher. In characteristic fashion, Ritschl did not feel such sentimentalities should influence academic debate, but it is probably fair to say that the timing of his publication did not increase his article's overall popularity among readers. All too often, therefore, the text has been dismissed as Ritschl's polemical rebuttal of his former school's views, hardly worthy of serious attention and analysis.<sup>54</sup>

Much was thereby missed. If Ritschl's article is to an extent polemical, this is largely due to the extreme one-sidedness of Zeller's presentation of the Tübingen project. Ritschl's engagement with Baur and his work, on the other hand, is not only respectful and nuanced but also, arguably, more substantive and profound than the rather superficial appreciation expressed by the author of *Die Tübinger historische Schule*. In fact, it would not be far-fetched to describe Ritschl's article as the beginning of serious Baur scholarship based in the first instance on an overview of Baur's major publications<sup>55</sup> which are then divided into three major periods of scholarly activity. Characteristically, the fullest biography to have been written of Baur to date essentially follows Ritschl in this periodisation.<sup>56</sup> This approach enabled Ritschl to appreciate Baur's thought in its internal development, which made it relatively easy to

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<sup>53</sup> O. Ritschl, *Albrecht Ritschls Leben*, p. 394.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Geiger, *Spekulation und Kritik*, pp. 9–14.

<sup>55</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", pp. 431–432.

<sup>56</sup> Gustav Fraedrich, *Ferdinand Christian Baur. Der Begründer der Tübinger Schule als Theologe, Schriftsteller und Charakter* (Gotha: Perthes, 1909), p. xiv.

rebut Zeller's narrative according to which Baur's serious engagement with primitive Christianity was only initiated by Strauss's spectacular book.<sup>57</sup>

From this dense overview of Baur's scholarly production, Ritschl moves on to a closer consideration of his teacher's argument in *Christian Gnosis (Die christliche Gnosis)*, published in 1835, as there, he claimed, Baur was found at his intellectual best.<sup>58</sup> The focus on Baur's book on Gnosticism has been decried as opportunistic or even disingenuous by some critics on the grounds that Ritschl wanted polemically to play up the Hegelian Baur against the post-Hegelian author of the 1850s whom Zeller sought to present. But as we have seen, Zeller's presentation hardly did justice to the later Baur, and much can, in fact, be said in favour of *Die christliche Gnosis* as a major key to Baur's thought.<sup>59</sup>

On the basis of this work, Ritschl makes a number of observations. First of all, he demonstrates that Baur independently of Strauss reached the same conclusions "about the difference between speculative Christology and the doctrine of the Church"<sup>60</sup> which Ritschl describes as the separation "of the historical and the ideal Christ".<sup>61</sup> This separation is indeed central to Baur's argument throughout *Die christliche Gnosis*, and Ritschl rightly observes that the author diagnoses the problem at the root of all "Gnostic" systems in past and present. Ritschl, further, is within his rights to raise the question of why Baur "in the presentation of Hegel's philosophy of religion acts as its apologist despite his proof of its Gnostic, theogonic character".<sup>62</sup> One may wonder whether this question should be answered by detecting a reserve towards Hegel's philosophy even at this stage of Baur's career,<sup>63</sup> but Ritschl cannot be faulted for finding here a deep-seated tension or even contradiction at the heart of Baur's entire project. It *could* therefore give rise to the ultimately irreligious tendency to be found in Strauss, but a very different interpretation remained a possibility as well.<sup>64</sup>

The whole section Ritschl devotes to the relation between Baur's and Strauss's thought is evidently written in response to Zeller's contentions about this same topic.<sup>65</sup> While Ritschl tries to be nuanced, pointedly agreeing with his opponent's principal claim that there is both agreement and disagreement

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<sup>57</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", p. 431.

<sup>58</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", 433; Cf. Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Die christliche Gnosis oder die christliche Religionsphilosophie in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Tübingen: Fues, 1835).

<sup>59</sup> Zachhuber, *Theology as Science*, p. 26.

<sup>60</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", p. 434.

<sup>61</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", p. 434.

<sup>62</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", p. 434.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Zachhuber, *Theology as Science*, pp. 42–47.

<sup>64</sup> Zachhuber, *Theology as Science*, pp. 47–50.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", p. 106.

between the two,<sup>66</sup> his own determination of this relationship diverges rather sharply from Zeller's. The primary reason for this divergence is that Ritschl, one might say, refuses to play by Zeller's rules in reducing Baur's work entirely to its "purely historical" dimension but rather aims, right from the outset, at its philosophical foundations. Baur's historical insights, Ritschl insists, must be understood on the basis of their philosophical foundations. Considering Baur's own pronouncements on this matter, this seems a fair demand.

It must be noted, however, that for the moment Ritschl has not provided any arguments indicating that a shadow falls from Baur's philosophical commitments upon his historical results. So far, he has simply changed the topic by reminding readers that neither Baur's nor Strauss's scholarship can be detached from their theological concerns which were, in many ways, focused on Christology. If Ritschl now turns to an important difference between them, this too is primarily located in the theological realm.<sup>67</sup> Ritschl, it appears, takes for granted that a "Gnostic" Christology of the Hegelian type elevates the philosopher above the believer (and ultimately, as Baur himself pointed out, even above the redeemer himself).<sup>68</sup> Thus far, Strauss's development towards a "complete opposition between the philosophical Gnostic (*dem Wissenden*) and the believer", as found in his *The Christian Doctrine of Faith (Die christliche Glaubenslehre)*, published in 1840/1841, was inevitable. Baur however, Ritschl claims, addressed the same problem already in *Die christliche Gnosis* but indicated a different outcome:

Baur asks "whether the opposition between faith and knowledge is absolute or relative?" His answer is this: "Is the opposition absolute, all truth will only fall on the side of faith since it first has truth as its content. There would, then, be no knowledge as different from faith, hence no philosophy of religion as the latter [only] has the content of faith in a different form than faith. Is this opposition however relative, then the distinction between form and content is thereby acknowledged, and the right of the philosophy of religion cannot be denied to acuminate this difference and opposition to its utmost extreme".<sup>69</sup>

This is a subtle argument which Ritschl evidently takes to mean that the philosophy of religion must never forget that it is a derivative phenomenon which only exists because religion exists, more specifically, because a kind of religion exists that requires its faith to be reflected philosophically:

In order to remain a philosopher of religion instead of exclusively conceding the honour of possessing the truth to the unscientific faith, to which it would otherwise fall, Baur must not

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<sup>66</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", p. 431.

<sup>67</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", pp. 436–438.

<sup>68</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", p. 435.

<sup>69</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", pp. 436–37; cf. Baur, *Die christliche Gnosis*, p. 720.

admit that an absolute opposition, in other words a contradiction, obtains between faith and knowledge.<sup>70</sup>

Ritschl's interest in this occasional remark becomes clearer when he suggests that Baur in these words not only intimated a "necessary albeit not specifically designated sympathy of religion"<sup>71</sup> but also a concept of religion different from its exclusively intellectual understanding as accepted in the Hegel School. Ritschl does not say what this "other" concept is, but he may have sought his own concern for religion as practice, however implausibly, in his teacher. If one accepts this possibility, it is highly significant that Ritschl in the same breath connects Baur's "intuition" of religion as practice with the observation that unlike Strauss "he [Baur] could continue to study primitive Christianity historically".<sup>72</sup> To Ritschl, it appears, the critique of a purely intellectual account of religion, the appreciation of Christianity as a truly historical phenomenon, and the affirmation of the Christian faith are intimately connected.

At this point, finally, Ritschl addresses Zeller's main contention regarding Baur's contribution to the study of Christian history. But the careful reader will recognise how many preliminaries had to be tackled, in Ritschl's view, to arrive at this point. As much as Baur's own historical scholarship was tied in with his philosophical views on religion and history, any attempt to critique the former could only succeed if it confronted those same issues. What is more, Ritschl already indicated, albeit in broad strokes, where he found Baur's approach wanting. If the Hegelian trajectory inevitably led to a division between the historical and the ideal, it surely was as much a historical as it was a theological imperative to move beyond this kind of philosophical foundation.

Before moving on to further reflections, therefore, Ritschl felt entitled to insert, at this very point, the precise counterclaim to Zeller's major thesis: "We believe to have demonstrated from Baur's general theological principles that he was by no means in a position to apply the universally valid, historical method to the study of primitive Christianity, as claimed by the author in *Historische Zeitschrift*".<sup>73</sup>

Baur's principles were Hegelian; he himself knew that these principles led to a stark dichotomy between the historical and the ideal: consequently, his own historiography cannot have been unaffected by these distortions. There is, unquestionably, a polemical edge to Ritschl's line of argument. He must have been aware that, if there was one sentiment commonly shared by the general public of the time and especially by those pursuing historical scholarship, it was a deep-seated mistrust of Hegel's philosophical idealism. Only few years earlier, in 1857, Rudolf Haym had given expression to this *Zeitgeist* in his

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<sup>70</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", p. 437.

<sup>71</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", p. 437.

<sup>72</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", p. 437.

<sup>73</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", p. 438.

influential *Hegel und seine Zeit*.<sup>74</sup> It was surely no coincidence that Zeller did not so much as mention the name of the Berlin philosopher in his extended account of Baur and his school.<sup>75</sup> Ritschl evidently was unwilling to let his opponent get away with such an overly convenient lapse of memory.

This polemical element, which is unmistakably present, should not, however, obscure the substantive point Ritschl raised. Against Zeller's contention that Baur and his school stood for purely and strictly historical research, his opponent reminded him of the constitutive importance philosophical principles had had for the entire project advanced by his sometime teacher. This insistence on the philosophical backdrop to historical work, whether acknowledged or not, remains central as Ritschl's argument moves on to consider the problem of miracles, which Zeller had so much emphasised in his account.

Once again, Ritschl offers a nuanced assessment emphatically agreeing with Baur's judgement that miracles were without importance for the historian notwithstanding the "dogmatic question whether miracles as such are possible" since for the historian only their "knowability" (*Erkennbarkeit*) matters.<sup>76</sup> Ritschl himself demands that miracles be considered in the context of "religious epistemology"; they merely express the believer's absolute trust in divine providence.<sup>77</sup> Zeller's stipulation, however, that a dogmatic judgement about the metaphysical impossibility of miracles must underlie all historical scholarship according to Ritschl is tantamount to the rejection of religion as "an illusion".<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, it confirms his acceptance of a philosophy prioritising theoretical knowledge above all other kinds of experience.

Ritschl's main argument, then, is not that miracles ought to be accepted but that their interpretation is a matter of religious philosophy or theology, not of historiography. He thus retains his line of attack targeting Zeller's presentation of the Tübingen School as theological *historians* working without presuppositions by insisting that the principles underlying their scholarship were not self-evident but philosophical in themselves.

In support of his claim that Baur rejected miracles, Zeller adduced a quotation criticising the belief in a "miraculous origin" of Christianity. This, Ritschl rightly observes, points to a set of problems rather different from that posed by the miracles ascribed to Jesus in the gospels. By dismissing "the miracle of an

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<sup>74</sup> Rudolf Haym, *Hegel und seine Zeit. Vorlesungen über Entstehung und Entwicklung, Wesen und Werth der Hegel'schen Philosophie* (Berlin: Gaertner, 1857).

<sup>75</sup> In his correspondence with Sybel, he authorised the latter to inform his colleagues how completely Zeller had abjured any allegiance with Hegel's philosophy "for many years, almost since my arrival [at Marburg, i.e. in 1849]"; see Lemberg, ed., *Briefwechsel (1849–1895)*, p. 284.

<sup>76</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", p. 439.

<sup>77</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", p. 441.

<sup>78</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", p. 441.

absolute beginning”<sup>79</sup> as incompatible with critical scholarship, Baur demanded an explanation of the origin of Christianity purely as the result of previously existing historical causes, such as the Roman Empire, the spread of Greek culture, the spiritualisation of Judaism albeit in a particularistic guise, and so forth: “Christianity appears, when seen within its world-historical context, as the natural unity of all these elements... It contains nothing that was not conditioned by a prior series of causes and effects; nothing that had not long ago been prepared in various ways”.<sup>80</sup>

The problem here is not the possibility or impossibility of supernatural healing, the multiplication of bread loaves, or the transformation of water into wine, but the existence of continuity and discontinuity in history. The “miracle” Baur has in mind is the theological contention that Christianity ushered in an entirely novel phase in human history radically detached from all earlier developments. Against this, he demands that its emergence be explained as the result of “a prior series of causes and effects”.

Ritschl takes issue with this principle. First of all, he observes that it is not derived from Hegel’s philosophy; in fact, it is utterly alien to it.<sup>81</sup> It is, therefore, arguably closer to the neo-rationalist perspective of Zeller than to that of Baur in *Die christliche Gnosis*. Secondly, Ritschl denies that such a statement can at all be justified on historical grounds. It is profoundly philosophical; but is it, as such, as obviously true as Baur and his apologists pretend? Ritschl begs to differ. One cannot, he urges, understand any historical phenomenon, including Christianity, simply on the basis of antecedent causes and influences. The complete steadiness of historical development, which the late Baur and Zeller propose, negates the very possibility of discrete, individual events in history, as Ritschl elaborates with the example of human 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.”<sup>82</sup>

This is no *ad hominem* argument as the comparison of contemporaneous, anti-idealistic philosophies of history proves. In fact, Ritschl’s position has close parallels in thinkers such as Hermann Lotze, who developed conceptions of teleological or organic – as opposed to atomic – oneness to explain the existence of discrete individuals within an historically continuous development.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Baur, *Das Christentum und die christliche Kirche*, p. 1.

<sup>80</sup> Ritschl, “Über geschichtliche Methode”, p. 443; Baur, *Das Christentum und die christliche Kirche*, p.1

<sup>81</sup> Ritschl, “Über geschichtliche Methode”, p. 445.

<sup>82</sup> Ritschl, “Über geschichtliche Methode”, p. 445.

<sup>83</sup> E.g., Rudolf Hermann Lotze, *Mikrokosmos. Ideen zur Naturgeschichte und Geschichte der Menschheit. Versuch einer Anthropologie*, vol. 3 (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1864), pp. 59–64.

Ritschl's immediate source, however, seems to have been Friedrich Schleiermacher who applied such an organic view of individuality to religious history and claimed this was the only way the theological concept of revelation could be understood: "Accordingly, we might say that the idea of revelation signifies the *originality* of the fact which lies at the foundation of a religious communion, in the sense that this fact ... cannot itself in turn be explained by the historical chain which precedes it."<sup>84</sup>

Had Ritschl, in the former part of his essay, objected to Zeller's claims about the "purely historical" character of Baur's project on the grounds of its indebtedness to Hegelian idealism, he now seems to have changed tack altogether blaming it for an unbridled naturalism that is less suited to an understanding of religious history than even Hegel's philosophy in its "pro-orthodox element".<sup>85</sup> Yet once again, it may be rash to accuse Ritschl of polemical opportunism as he makes the connection between the two, as he perceives it, explicit:

This transition to [naturalism] has been practiced in historiography by quite a number of former Hegelians who from the fall of absolute idealism only saved their faith in the uninterrupted necessity of historical development, an idea which, when detached from Hegel's dynamic conception of the divine, is minimally suited to measure the mutual relationship between religions.<sup>86</sup>

The remainder of Ritschl's article is taken up with a discussion of the specific shape of Baur's theory of early Christianity. In this section, Ritschl in effect offers a summary of the views he had developed in great detail in the 1857 edition of *The Origins of the Early Catholic Church (Die Entstehung der alt-katholischen Kirche)*.<sup>87</sup> He repeatedly emphasises that Baur's differences from other historical theologians are by no means as categorical as Zeller claimed. Those who disagree with Baur's construction are not, therefore, unscientific or beholden to an older, dogmatic viewpoint but simply drawing different conclusions from the historical material for which, as Ritschl explains at some length, there is much reason.

As for his own position, Ritschl evidently thinks it explains the evidence from primary sources *better* than Baur's construction. He therefore refuses to be counted among those who simply lack critical edge and methodological rigour. Baur's approach to historical theology, Ritschl seeks to demonstrate, is built on philosophical foundations, a practice he never attempted to deny and which, apparently, finds Ritschl's principal approval. Its strengths and

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<sup>84</sup> Friedrich D.E. Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt*, 2nd edition, §10; in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe I.13.1*, ed. R. Schäfer (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2003), p. 90. ET: *The Christian Faith*, trans. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), p. 50.

<sup>85</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", p. 448.

<sup>86</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", pp. 448–449.

<sup>87</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", pp. 449–459.

weaknesses are bound up with this practice, and Ritschl is entitled and indeed obliged to critique all these different levels rather than be grouped with those prevented by their theological prejudice from recognising the truth of the Tübingen orthodoxy.

If Zeller's piece was apologetic, Ritschl's article undoubtedly is polemical. Yet as much as the former, despite his apologetic intention, presented a coherent vision of historical theology, such a vision was equally to be found in Ritschl's response, notwithstanding its polemical cast. Characteristic of Ritschl's argument is the nuance of his response to Zeller's presentation. He was clearly unwilling to accept the latter's claim to speak on behalf of Baur and the Tübingen School. While Ritschl was conscious that Zeller was in conformity with Baur regarding his historical construction of early Christianity, which Ritschl had come to reject, he nonetheless felt that his own theory, despite its break with nearly all the constituent parts of the Tübingen consensus, was a more faithful continuation of Baur's initial intellectual impulse than its later, post-idealist reduction to a "purely historical" account of this period as proposed by his opponent.

What were the philosophical principles of Ritschl's historical theology as conceived at this point? I would propose that two of them can be gleaned from the present text. First of all, Ritschl is clearly sceptical of the primarily intellectual or theoretical understanding of religion that he found in Baur, Strauss, and Zeller.<sup>88</sup> This, he felt, inevitably led to a radical opposition of faith and knowledge and ultimately to the rejection of traditional religion. In addition, a theoretical concept of religion produced the dichotomy of historical and ideal that Baur had diagnosed in all Gnostics, ancient and modern; it thus vitiated against a truly historical understanding of religion, as Baur himself had concluded twenty years earlier in *Die christliche Gnosis*. The latter problem, Ritschl felt, only became more pronounced after the formerly Hegelian historians, whether theological or secular, abandoned their erstwhile idealist framework and transformed it into the liberal model of perpetual, evolutionary progress.

Ritschl's alternative is an understanding of religion as practice (or *praxis*). Little is said in the present article about its conceptual basis, but he evidently believed that such a view of religion solves the "Gnostic" opposition of faith and knowledge by accepting that religious knowledge is impossible without active participation. More importantly for the present purpose, Ritschl also saw a correlation here with the opposition between a concept of history as process, as championed by Hegel and his school, and history as focused on individuals which loomed so large in post-Hegelian, mid-century historicism and found perhaps its classical expression in Leopold von Ranke's celebrated 1854

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<sup>88</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", p. 435.

lectures *On the Epochs of Recent History (Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte)*.<sup>89</sup>

We can thus see how Ritschl's argument skilfully and subtly weaves together philosophical, historical, and theological claims: philosophically, he rejects a concept of religion as theory or knowledge in favour of religion as (primarily) practice. Historically, he maintains that such an understanding of religion facilitated the integration of ideas and historical reality. Theologically, he believes this approach allowed the integration of philosophy and historical scholarship with a clear commitment to lived religion as their basis.

Ritschl's second major principle is an emphasis on historical individuality. Once again, his argument ties together a philosophical, a historical, and a theological concern. What philosophically is presented as simply the best account of individuality (namely, as an organic and, as such, discrete entity) permits proper historicity that does not submerge individuals, human or collective, in the steady stream of historical continuity. Theologically, finally, the affirmation of historical individuality can explain revelation (as previously in Schleiermacher).

Ritschl ended his essay with an appeal to stem the "increasing isolation of the different disciplines (*Wissenschaften*)". Here he addressed the author of the anonymous article as a "non-theologian",<sup>90</sup> a fact that subsequently earned him Zeller's ridicule.<sup>91</sup> More importantly, Ritschl's comment could make his nod towards "interdisciplinarity" appear insincere indicating that his true concern was the defence of his own academic turf against a suspected outsider. Yet for Ritschl these two claims were not in contradiction. He was concerned about a presentation of historical theology that could only be *wissenschaftlich* by ceasing to be theological. His own discipline, he felt, had its role to play in religious historiography, together with philosophy, by providing the principles on which the history of Christianity could be understood and written. Whatever other people may have thought, Ritschl himself considered his intervention as the legitimate defence of a theological perspective that did not exclude the historical method but was not reducible to it either.

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<sup>89</sup> Leopold von Ranke, *Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte*, ed. Th. Schieder and H. Berding (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1971), pp. 59–60.

<sup>90</sup> Ritschl, "Über geschichtliche Methode", p. 459.

<sup>91</sup> Anon. [= E. Zeller], "Die historische Kritik und das Wunder. Ein Sendschreiben an den Herausgeber. Von dem Verfasser der Abhandlung. 'Die Tübinger historische Schule'", in *Historische Zeitschrift* 6 (1861): pp. 356–73; here p. 357. Ritschl defended this epithet in "Erläuterungen zu dem Sendschreiben. 'Die historische Kritik und das Wunder'", *Historische Zeitschrift* 8 (1862): pp. 85–99; here pp. 85–87.

## D. Conclusion

The literary exchange between Zeller and Ritschl raises a number of intriguing questions about theology and history in mid-nineteenth-century Germany, their place in the university, but also, arguably, about their mutual relationship beyond the particular period in which this controversy occurred.

First, the two opponents represent different notions of what *history* is and, consequently, how it should be studied. Zeller presents history as, ultimately, its own arbiter, a discipline that deals with empirical material on the basis of a rigid methodology in the interest of the most probable reconstruction of past events and developments. While not denying the possibility that history in this sense could have philosophical or religious meaning, it is clear that neither of them could have constitutive significance for the historian.

Ritschl, by contrast, has reservations regarding such a positivistic notion of history. While he criticises Baur's earlier, "Hegelian" approach, it is evident that he himself is closer to that position than even Zeller. While Ritschl may have believed that Baur was profoundly mistaken about the kind of philosophy that could underwrite history, he clearly shared his conviction that philosophy had a role to play in the process of historiography. Thus far, his view was more traditional harkening back to the approach taken for granted by Schleiermacher and the early Baur.

Secondly, both also disagree on the role *theology* has to play in biblical and church history. For Zeller, the simple answer is, none at all. If pressed, he might have argued that good theology would serve to justify the exercise of unbridled historical criticism.<sup>92</sup> In other words, the quality of theology is measured by its willingness to leave historical research alone. Ritschl, as we have seen, strongly disputes this point. His protestation is taken by Zeller and the other Tübingen scholars as an indication that he is, overtly or clandestinely, an advocate of theological censure of free *Wissenschaft*, but this charge is hardly fair. Little evidence exists that Ritschl sought to restrain historical research in the name of doctrinal orthodoxy (in fact, the subsequent history of the Ritschl School must count as a potent argument to the contrary), but he nonetheless felt that historical theology ought to be both, historical and theological.

Thirdly, it is arguable that their differing perspectives reflect their different *professional places*. Ritschl has often been criticised for his characterisation of the author of *Historische Zeitschrift* as a "non-theologian", but in some ways at least this was an apt observation. Zeller, for all his theological erudition and his track record of publications way into the 1850s, was no longer part of university theology, and the question of what the future shape of this discipline

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<sup>92</sup> He evokes the "genuinely Protestant spirit", affirming truth in all areas without restraint to justify the application of critical historiography to the Bible. See Zeller, "Die Tübinger Historische Schule", p. 93.

might look like was, evidently and legitimately, no longer his concern. If Ritschl appealed, at the end of his article, to the imperative of cross-faculty exchange, he might have equally spoken of the need to retain a unity of purpose within the theological faculty itself whose historical part was destined to drift away from its doctrinal and practical parts under the impact of modern, “scientific” historicism, as Ernst Troeltsch observed half a century later.<sup>93</sup> As for Zeller, the idiosyncrasies of his piece, with its evident deviation from the actual Tübingen project, justify the conclusion that he, too, was following an institutional logic. It was the desirability of strengthening the liberal, positivistic historicism which was as attractive for him as it was for his friend, Sybel. By presenting the Tübingen School as champions of this same line of research within theology, both could bolster the claim that this was, increasingly, a universally accepted, scientific paradigm.

Despite all these differences which divided the two former colleagues, it may be appropriate to close by noting a fundamental similarity between them. It is arguable that their two very different conceptions of history and theology both respond to the political atmosphere that followed the failed revolution of 1848, albeit in different ways. During those years, the intellectual and clerical reaction tirelessly sought to taint critical scholarship and speculative philosophy with the brush of liberal and revolutionary politics. As is evident from his correspondence with Sybel, Zeller’s presentation of the Tübingen School as conducting “purely historical” scholarship responded to such efforts. Accordingly, he sought to redeem their work from its irreligious stigma while trying to insulate it against its sometime association with speculative philosophy. Zeller was clearly of the opinion, then, that there could only be a future to liberal scholarship if it was “purely” scientific and thus untainted by the dangerous philosophical ideas of the previous generation. The contrast between his version of the Tübingen School and the writings of Baur and Strauss – as well as his own! – during the 1830s and 1840s amply illustrates the sanitised character of the later presentation.

Yet the younger Ritschl was, in his own way, affected by the same developments as well, albeit less dramatically. Trying to build up his academic career in the early 1850s, he experienced first-hand the hostile environment of these years. His later success was by no means anticipated in an easy walk towards a tenured professorship.<sup>94</sup> While his father’s influential position probably protected him in some ways, it also made him more exposed in others. Ritschl’s “apostasy” from Baur and his frequently expressed hostility to the Hegelian

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<sup>93</sup> E. Troeltsch, “Ein halbes Jahrhundert theologischer Wissenschaft”, *Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche Theologie* NF 16 [51] (1908/09): pp. 97–135; also, Troeltsch, *Gesammelte Schriften 2: Zur religiösen Lage, Religionsphilosophie und Ethik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1913), pp. 193–226, here: p. 199.

<sup>94</sup> O. Ritschl, *Albrecht Ritschls Leben*, pp. 168–175, pp. 209–215.

heritage in the name of a more “scientific” theology may well reflect, therefore, his own adaptation to the pragmatic necessities of the age. As in Zeller, the magic word is *Wissenschaft*, and this can hardly be coincidence as it seemed to secure the university’s place in society when so many ideas hatched there had come to be perceived with so much suspicion. The particular way in which Ritschl sought to address this issue was inevitably different from Zeller’s as it involved complex negotiations between university, state, and church. Nevertheless, his decision to double down on Baur’s emphasis on scientific theology despite his many misgivings about the whole Tübingen project, almost certainly reflects the pragmatic needs of an academic career pursued in adverse circumstances. This experience connected the two professors whatever else may have divided them.

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