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## Christology and the Historical Jesus

In 1911, Ernst Troeltsch published in brochure form a version of a lecture that he had delivered at Aarau to a conference for Swiss students. Entitled in translation “The Significance of the Historical Existence of Jesus for Faith,” the topic of the discourse was the impact of historical criticism on Christian faith and doctrine.<sup>1</sup> Troeltsch began:

Christian dogma, as construed by the early church, has finally disintegrated; there is no longer a unitary Christian culture; and historical criticism of the Bible is now a reality. One of the main questions for Christian religious thought today is therefore the effect of historical criticism upon faith in Christ. What can a picture of Jesus subject to and shaped by historical criticism mean for a faith that is by its very nature concerned with the eternal, timeless, unconditioned and supra-historical? When it first formed its religious ideas the primitive Christian community had already taken Jesus out of history and made him Logos and God, the eternal Christ appearing to us in historical form, one who is related in essence to the eternal Godhead and so not unnaturally the object of faith. But historical criticism, grown up in a world no longer dominated by the church, has returned him to history where all is finite and conditioned.

Is it still possible to speak of any inner, essential significance of Jesus for faith?<sup>2</sup>

These remarks are noteworthy in part because, through allusions to historical criticism, historical relativism, the history of doctrine, the social dimension of Christian doctrine, and the secularization of Christianity's Western context, Troeltsch indirectly conveys something of his sense of the way systematic Christian thought should proceed. The remarks are also colorful and no doubt would have won the immediate attention of the Swiss students, if they were indeed a part of the original lecture.

There are hints of rhetorically opportunistic exaggeration, such as when Troeltsch speaks of Christian dogma as having "finally disintegrated," or mourns the loss of a "unitary Christian culture," or characterizes the early church as having "taken Jesus out of history." Even with these excesses, however, Troeltsch's comments accurately convey a sense of how severe the problems posed by historical criticism for Christian faith were thought to be at the beginning of the twentieth century. In fact, in some ways, Troeltsch's point in this quotation is as germane now as it was then, creating the impression that little advance has been made on the problematic situation Troeltsch described. Of course, a great deal has changed, including especially the declining status of the problem of faith and history in relation to the entire matrix of Christological issues. But the Christological implications of the tension between faith and history are still important, and the fundamental terms of the debate have remained almost unaltered from before Troeltsch's time until now.

The problem of Christian faith and the historical Jesus has two branches. A basic statement of one branch, the problem of faith's dependence on history, is as follows. The partially self-authenticating and trusting character of Christian faith has *some* relationship with the results and characteristically skeptical, critical approach of historical critical research, so how is this relationship to be conceived? Should the assertions about Jesus Christ made by an intellectually responsible Christian faith be thought of as fully dependent upon historical research into the life and person of Jesus for their establishment, as requiring historical research merely for supplementary support to rule out egregious errors, or as formally independent of historical research? Such Christological assertions surely do at least *presuppose* something about the historical Jesus, even if they are not to be thought of as in need of *warranting* by historical re-

search. But the Christian, even in such implicit presupposing, takes a posture that seems to require engaging the results of historical research *on the terms of critical historiography* to precisely the extent that he or she desires to be intellectually responsible. But how can faith be made answerable to historical critical research?

The other branch, the problem of the historical Jesus, is structured by several issues that became problematic under the hand of biblical criticism. The most obvious of these surrounds whether or not the results of life-of-Jesus research are consonant with assertions of Christian faith about Jesus Christ. This issue is closely connected to two others. On the one hand, it has become dubious whether the sources for life-of-Jesus research—no matter what methods are brought to bear on them—are capable of leading to a reliable picture of Jesus' life and character, or even a secure picture with the basic detail needed to offer minimal support to Christological doctrine. On the other hand, the whole history of life-of-Jesus research has sharply raised the question of whether the classical Christology is irretrievably docetic, placing Jesus outside the realm of the truly human. Treating the first of these three issues requires an extensive excursus into the intricate details of Jesus research; the second calls for a survey of the fluctuating decline of confidence in the historical value of the gospel records through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and the third demands an analysis of the argument that Jesus' humanity is essentially marginalized in the classical Christological tradition, a case prosecuted perhaps most famously by Albert Schweitzer in relation to the so-called "two natures" teaching of the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE).

None of the three issues defining the second branch of the problem of faith and history can be dealt with here without moving too far afield from the primary goal of a thematic analysis of the crisis of plausibility in contemporary Christology. Thus, the discussion that follows is confined to understanding the dependence of faith on history in its Christological dimensions, and especially Troeltsch's view of it. For this purpose, it is sufficient to be aware of the connections between the two branches of the problem of faith and history, to remember that the more theological branch—the problem of dependence—is sharpened and really brought into focus by the more historical branch, and to draw in results from the historical paths of inquiry as the discussion of dependence unfolds.

## Strategies for Managing Dependence

Troeltsch's attempt to make theological sense of the fact that Christian belief and practice presupposes the historically unverifiable about Jesus of Nazareth has a double context. On the one hand, it is set against the background of his training in the theology of Albrecht Ritschl and his followers. The entire Ritschlian school grappled to various degrees with this problem of dependence, and Troeltsch was imbued with their presuppositions about the problem from his earliest days as a student. On the other hand, Troeltsch's background in sociology, particularly through his friendship with Max Weber, cast the problem of dependence in a light less familiar to Troeltsch's teachers. We begin here, accordingly, with a critical review of the interpretations of this dependence that constituted one part of Troeltsch's framework for approaching the problem. Subsequently, we will consider Troeltsch's positive solution to the problem of dependence conceived both sociologically and theologically.

### *General Optimism about Managing the Problem*

The first and most general point to make is that the nineteenth century presents almost unbroken confidence among theologians that the presupposition in Christian theology and practice of historical facts about Jesus is not an insurmountably difficult state of affairs. This is so in spite of the fact that the late eighteenth-century confidence about the value of the biblical sources for critically assembling a life of Jesus gradually, with notable variations, eroded through the nineteenth century.

The apprehension with which the historical critical method was regarded in many quarters in the eighteenth-century beginnings of the quest for the historical Jesus<sup>3</sup> proved to be justified, both for expected and for unexpected reasons. The obvious fear was that the Bible would rapidly be lost as a supportive resource for faith, either because the results of historical research might not support the assertions of the Christian faith, or because the historical critical method itself might require a partial abandonment of the trusting attitude of faith. But the most intractable problem turned out to be the discovery that the sources are too sparse, vague, and variable, and too burdened with legend, myth, and fiction to allow a precise historical determination of anything beyond the barest outline of Jesus' life and ministry; the situation is far worse with regard to

his character and self-understanding. Landmark figures such as Reimarus (1694–1768), Strauss (1808–1874), Weiss (1863–1914), and Schweitzer (1875–1965) produced powerful evidence to support this contention, sometimes as a side effect of their main arguments. The same conclusion is inescapably confirmed (against all recent protest) by the increasing diversity of the results of twentieth-century life of Jesus research: *traditional Christological statements involving historical assertions about Jesus are underdetermined by the available historical data*. There is simply not enough of the right kind of information to ground much reliable knowledge about Jesus, no matter how sophisticated the historical, literary, social and anthropological tools brought to bear on the gospel records.

What then was the source of confidence that dependence of Christian dogmatics and practice on historical assertions about Jesus of Nazareth could be theologically managed? This confidence had five elements that were combined in various ways to produce a variety of “theological management strategies”: (1) confidence in the sources, against the growing trend of suspicion toward them; (2) reliance on the biblical pictures of Jesus Christ; (3) reliance on the confirmatory experience of the communion of the Christian with God through Jesus Christ; (4) reliance on the authorizing import of the Christian dogmatic tradition; and (5) espousing a Christology that made fewer historically unverifiable assumptions about the biography of Jesus. The first four of these will be described in turn, deferring the last until after Troeltsch’s social psychological analysis of this dependence has been presented.

### *Invoking History: Harnack*

Before the problematic nature of the sources was properly appreciated, historical criticism of the Gospels was enthusiastically greeted by some as an ally for Christian faith. It was received as a means for placing the assertions of faith on a more secure basis, one more compatible with the Enlightenment values of autonomy and suspicion of the supposed arbitrariness of religious authorities. This enthusiastic viewpoint held that careful study of the Gospels would reward hard labor with reliable knowledge about Jesus. A host of “Lives of Jesus” were being produced with the aid of the exciting new historical critical tools. They were premised on confidence that the texts were sufficient for constructing not only the out-

lines of Jesus' life and teaching, but also theological statements about Jesus' significance and sometimes even detailed biographies and what we would now call "personality profiles."

This sanguine attitude appears to have been self-perpetuating, in that the large number of lives of Jesus encouraged even more of them, and almost every bold reading could point to other attempts that were even bolder. The process of extracting reliable historical knowledge about Jesus' life and teaching may have become more circuitous for historians using biblical critical tools in an intellectual culture with an increasingly naturalistic bias. And the relationship between the critical assumptions of the historical method and trusting stance of Christian faith remained problematic. But optimism about actually obtaining historically sound and theologically useful results remained virtually undisturbed in the early decades of historical criticism and continued throughout the nineteenth century in some scholarly circles, in spite of apprehension about the problem that was strengthening at the same time.

Bucking the trend of declining confidence in the historical sources were a number of optimistic and diligent historians, represented *par excellence* by Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930). Harnack's approach managed the theological problem of faith's dependence on history by means of an optimistic estimate of what historical research can discover about Jesus, thereby furnishing for Christology a wealth of relevant information. In fact, Harnack required from, and found in, the gospel accounts more in the way of details about Jesus' life and teaching than many historians thought could be found there, but he made his case powerfully nonetheless. This optimism is especially evident in *What Is Christianity?* a book as massively influential as it was controversial. In the first half, Harnack identified "the leading features of Jesus' message" and considered this message in relation to certain problems ranging from "the question of asceticism" to "the Christological question" and "the question of creed." He then critically examined interpretations of the gospel from several eras of the history of Christianity in light of his own findings.

All of this was carried off with such simple grace and earnest gravity that it is no wonder the book was greeted with acclaim by so many believers in the churches and translated so frequently. If nothing else, it was a fresh presentation of Jesus' message that captured people's imagination with its natural relevance to the contemporary world and revived the spirits of those flagging followers who were saturated with lukewarm presen-

tations of Jesus' person and teaching in the rusty bath, as it seemed, of ecclesial dogma. It was an effective and timely exercise in getting back to basics, with its ringing affirmation of the infinite value of the human soul to God and the vitality of the coming kingdom in which love of God and neighbor hold sway.<sup>4</sup> As Harnack remarked in his preface to the English translation, "The theologians of every country only half discharge their duties if they think it enough to treat of the gospel in the recondite language of learning and bury it in scholarly folios."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Harnack was very far from presenting a watered down ethic of the higher righteousness of love, tied to a sentimental affirmation of divine personal concern. For instance, Jesus' purported aggressive critique of worldly goods and attachments is presented quite powerfully, as is his affirmation of this-worldly pleasures, albeit slightly marred by an inexplicable ranting against asceticism.<sup>6</sup> Very far from being uncritically accommodating, it is partly the *confronting* of his culture and context with the proclamation of Jesus that made and makes Harnack's book so captivating.

What we see here is an excellent example of the strategy of maximizing dependence of Christological assertions about Jesus Christ on historical knowledge of the actual Jesus, in conjunction with the assumption that historical research can unearth enough reliable material about Jesus to make such a high degree of dependence theologically feasible. The happy aptness of Harnack's book for many in the churches with weaker than average sympathies for traditional doctrine was an indication of the power of such a strategy.<sup>7</sup> The question is, of course, whether Harnack's assumptions about the sources for Jesus' life can be adequately justified.

Critics were quick to note the fact that Harnack passed over mostly silently the emphatic eschatological elements of the New Testament and the controversies in which the early church became embroiled because of the delay of the parousia. Harnack acknowledged that Jesus shared in the apocalyptic mind-set of his day in a general way. But he argued that Jesus neither allowed it to determine any part of the heart of his ethical, spiritual message, nor drew on apocalyptic, eschatological categories in forming his self-understanding. As a result, Harnack's critics rightly charged him with reducing the other-worldly character of Jesus' proclamation to the supernatural affinity of humanity for God and of God for each human soul, quietly passing over its stranger aspects. Harnack could not have tolerated these omissions had he paid more attention to or felt more sympathy for the perspective of the history of religions.<sup>8</sup> He also oversimplified

the issue of identifying the meaning and actual origin of sayings ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels, which he did through the liberal peppering of his text with phrases such as “His discourses and actions leave no doubt upon this point,” and “It is certain, therefore, . . .” and “No one who reads the gospels with an unprejudiced mind, and does not pick his words, can fail to acknowledge that. . . .” These devices were used with rhetorical artfulness and are delightfully elusive to critique because they are pervasive, though this is doubtless due in part to the popular nature of the lectures in which such phrases appear.

In all of these ways, Harnack’s confident—perhaps over-confident—mode of interpretation is evident. Other historians, before and especially after Harnack, have been unable to justify such categorical readings.<sup>9</sup> But these criticisms, from one point of view, do not touch the integrity of Harnack’s overall interpretation of Jesus Christ and of the Christian religion. Any fair-minded critic would have to grant that Harnack made good on his assumption of the adequacy of the New Testament as a source for information about the historical Jesus to some extent. He offers a historical reconstruction of Jesus’ life and teaching that is at least partly viable, in spite of its lack of engagement with the history of religions; much of late twentieth-century North American life-of-Jesus research is far more consonant with Harnack’s interpretation, for example, than with the apocalyptic eschatological readings of Weiss and Schweitzer that were to follow Harnack.

Nevertheless, we should push the issue of Harnack’s optimistic definiteness a step further. Part of the reason for this definiteness may well have been Harnack’s conviction of the importance of the Christian gospel and his confidence in its content. Harnack as historian may have been unduly influenced by such considerations, but it is important to note that *What Is Christianity?* is not simply a work of history. As is well known, it is also and more characteristically *theological*, for at every point Harnack was concerned to present the relevance and liveliness of the Christian gospel for his contemporaries. In the end, this may be the best explanation for Harnack’s exhibition of confidence and the most telling evidence for its strategic character: since Harnack needed to recapture historical material in a relevant way for his context, the judicious historical sense of Harnack *qua* *historian* had to yield to some extent to his evidently intense *theological* interest by becoming more definite than it might otherwise have been. Alternative interpretations of the historical material do



make an appearance as steps along the way to the “correct” reading, but Harnack rarely entertained the potential practical and proclamatory significance of *those* alternatives. This would have diluted *his* theological solution, which, however, remains strong by means of a strategic separation of the uncertainty of the historical material from faith’s need for more or less unequivocal and relevant access to it.

### *Invoking the Biblical Pictures of Christ*

The increasingly cautious attitude to the sources forced theologians to search for grounds other than detailed biographical knowledge about Jesus for their abiding confidence that dependence of Christology on life-of-Jesus research could be theologically managed. In particular, if Christological assertions referring to Jesus inevitably assume more historically than can be established by historical research, then a different interpretation of historical responsibility must be found. Thus many modern theologians have emphasized the importance of the biblical pictures of Christ (*Bilder Jesu*). These gospel portraits were not in question in the same way as the historical reconstructions of the person who gave rise to them. Though their relevance for Christological construction had to be established, at least that relevance did not depend on the supposition that the Gospels contained a great deal of reliable information about the actual historical figure of Jesus; it was necessary only that the biblical *pictures* of Christ could be understood in the light of the early churches’ usage of them. This is a more practical task for historians than the quest for the historical Jesus, though it has its own complexities.

Building relevant connections between Christology and the Gospels’ pictures of Jesus seemed to some theologians quite promising as a solution to the problems forced on theology by the quest for the historical Jesus. This quest was not just an extended argument over historical critical details about Jesus’ life, though it was certainly that. It was fundamentally a theologically driven enterprise, for the most obvious consequence of life-of-Jesus research was its effect on the theological conception of living faith in Christ of the Christian churches. Did the Christ proclaimed in worship and understood in doctrine correspond to the man of Nazareth, as unearthed by historical research? If this question is answered in the affirmative, is it only because that research is the result of what Schweitzer thought of as each epoch’s and each person’s tendency to find in the his-

torical Jesus a reflection of itself?<sup>10</sup> Or perhaps a correlation is found because so little is asked of it, the personality, teaching, and biography of Jesus having been rendered superfluous to the conception of the Christ of contemporary faith, so that Christian faith in Jesus Christ is made independent of all but the barest facts about Jesus' life?<sup>11</sup> And if no substantial correspondence can be shown—because of paucity of reliable information or adverse historical findings—is this a great problem for theology or for the practical life of the churches? Have not the churches from the earliest times made do with inaccurate, sometimes fantastic, usually docetic images of Jesus of Nazareth?<sup>12</sup> Thus, ought not the emphasis be laid upon the early churches' kerygma and their pictures of Christ—spelling these out is, after all, an achievable goal for historical research—rather than upon the biography of Jesus? Does not the direct encounter with the living Christ as testified to in the biblical pictures of him, and in the worship and preaching of the church, make irrelevant disputes about the life of Jesus as well as the dogmatic development of his saving significance?

So it was that the biblical pictures of Jesus were appealed to wholeheartedly. Relying on the biblical pictures of Jesus Christ to make sense of the dependence of Christian dogmatics and practice on history, however, seems to require some additional consideration by which those biblical pictures could be thought secure from major errors. Thus it was usually carried off in conjunction with an appeal to the authorizing import either of religious experience or the Christian tradition, both of which are to be discussed shortly. Alternatively, historical research was regarded as a way of keeping in check the possible excesses of faith's appropriation of the biblical pictures of Jesus Christ, without thereby becoming a foundation for faith. All of these elements are present in the thought of Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889), the grandfather of the tradition Troeltsch inherited.

Ritschl was at some pains to emphasize both the role of historical knowledge of Jesus and the reality of personal piety in the contemporary context for faith, and he was not unaware of the basic sources from which the problem of faith and history developed, including especially David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1835). He strongly encouraged historical research into the life of Jesus but recognized at the same time that faith needed no proof from history and indeed was incompatible with such foreign assurances. Moreover, he was dubious about the possibility of establishing dogmatics on the basis of historical research, believing in-

stead that it could only take shape in relation to a general idea of Jesus, informed and controlled by the New Testament pictures of him. These pictures constitute the fundamental historical connecting point for dogmatic Christology. This perspective lived on in a related way in the theologies of Kähler and Herrmann and again with variations in the Christologies of Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich.

*Invoking Immediacy: Kähler, Herrmann, Schweitzer*

As different as they were in other ways, Martin Kähler (1835–1912), Wilhelm Herrmann (1846–1922) and Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) were faced with the dual problem of deficient sources and irreducible dependence of faith on those sources. They all attempted to separate faith and history as much as possible by invoking some external principle that could mediate faith's dependence on history. This, in short, minimizes dependence. Each in his own way appealed to an immediacy of encounter of the Christian with the ever-present spirit of Jesus Christ, witnessed to in the early churches' kerygma and preserved in the New Testament writings. This encounter was seen as an unbreakable bond that transcended (without abrogating) the connection of Christological statements to the historical Jesus.

Schweitzer is well known for arguing that the separation of the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith was the final but *unintended* result of the bold attempt to find out once and for all about the life, teaching, and personality of Jesus. Originally, historical research into the life of Jesus was envisaged as the star witness in the emancipation of true faith in Christ from its dogmatic bondage, for it drove a spectacular wedge between the dogmatic Christ of ecclesiastical tradition and the man of Nazareth about whom those dogmatic claims were supposed to apply. It was discovered, however, that the Jesus of history was a more awkward figure than expected. The emancipatory effort was largely successful, it is true, and responsible dogmatic Christology was forever changed as a result. But the historical Jesus was no more amenable to the theological interests of enlightened modernity than he had been to the ancient dogmatics of ecclesiastical authority. The star witness had turned hostile. Historical criticism had in a very real sense betrayed theology, according to Schweitzer. It had begun by undermining the reliability of the biblical

sources for Christological statements and had finished by returning as historically probable a view of Jesus that was indigestible by traditional Christology.

Thus Schweitzer was led to espouse a more or less unexplained Christ mysticism that could mediate between the problematic state of knowledge about the historical Jesus and the reality of the experience of encounter with Christ in faith. For Schweitzer, it is Christ to whom the believer must give allegiance, and it is Christ who calls the believer to faithful service in the cause of the kingdom of God, even as Schweitzer understood Christ to have called him to missionary service in Africa. The relation of this Christ to Jesus the man of Nazareth is obscure, however. Finding a satisfactory interpretation is complicated further by the fact that this mystical stance can be called "Jesus mysticism" as aptly as "Christ mysticism," on the basis of Schweitzer's way of continually describing the encounter with the mystical Christ in relation to Jesus. For example, in arguing for the importance of conceiving the Christian faith independently of specific facts about the historical Jesus, Schweitzer wrote:

We are experiencing what Paul experienced. In the very moment when we were coming nearer to the historical Jesus than men had ever come before, and were already stretching out our hands to draw Him into our own time, we have been obliged to give up the attempt and acknowledge our failure in that paradoxical saying: "If we have known Christ after the flesh yet henceforth know we Him no more." And further we must be prepared to find the historical knowledge of the personality and life of Jesus will not be a help, but perhaps even an offence to religion.

But the truth is, it is not Jesus as historically known, but Jesus as spiritually arisen within men, who is significant for our time and can help it. Not the historical Jesus, but the spirit which goes forth from Him and in the spirits of men strives for new influence and rule, is that which overcomes the world.

... The abiding and eternal in Jesus is absolutely independent of historical knowledge and can only be understood by contact with His spirit which is still at work in the world. In proportion as we have the Spirit of Jesus we have the true knowledge of Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

There are so many conventional distinctions (presumably deliberately) confused here that it is not at all clear precisely how Schweitzer envisaged "Jesus," "Christ," "spirit" (or "Spirit"), and Christology as a whole.

The situation is no clearer elsewhere, so it is not possible to attain a completely satisfactory analysis of Schweitzer's Christology. However, invoking the conventional distinction between Christ (as the abiding and eternal in Jesus, and not merely a synonym for Messiah) and Jesus (as the actual earthly Jesus of Nazareth), which Schweitzer did not use in the quotation, it is possible to see that he thought Christ was at least contingently expressed in Jesus. Christ, as the "Spirit of Jesus," is living, capable of entering into intimate contact with human beings, actively at work in the world, and genuinely able to help our time. And this Christ is to be conceived independently of Jesus, in whom it (or perhaps he?) is contingently expressed. Here we see the beginnings of the same strategy that Troeltsch was to explore, though in a different way. Going further with this reading of Schweitzer, however, raises more questions than answers.

What is clearer is that this kind of mystical Christology was for Schweitzer's own life and thought jointly operative with a passionate recognition of and voluntary participation in a fundamental, intuitive ethical stance of reverence for life. It is more in Schweitzer's life than in his thought, however, that the systematic implications of the integration of Christ mysticism with the principle of reverence for life appear, thus leaving many questions open.<sup>14</sup> One of the sharpest is asked by Nils Dahl about the viability of Schweitzer's view as a whole, seeing that his "life-work attests to the power which can lie in a liberal Christianity, but may also raise the question whether it can exist elsewhere than in the shadows of a churchly Christianity. Schweitzer's intensely personal solution could not guide the further work of theology on the problem of the historical Jesus."<sup>15</sup>

The first concern of both Herrmann and Kähler was to do justice to the inviolable character of faith and to defend the right of ordinary Christian believers to hold their faith intelligibly without thereby being at the mercy of the endlessly winding interstices of modern historical research. From one point of view, the certainty of faith made its dependence on tentative historical knowledge unthinkable, in the sense of a category mistake, for these were instances of knowledge of different orders. Yet, in a general way at least, faith was obviously dependent on historical research, if not for its establishment, then at least for its justification and correction, for most expressions of faith in Jesus Christ involved statements that were partly historical in character. Neither was willing to assume that the Bible contained historical information whose accuracy was divinely guaranteed

in order to assure a safe source of historical knowledge for theology. Neither possessed Harnack's optimistic sense of what could be obtained in the form of stable historical knowledge from the available sources. And neither was prepared to make appeal to principles of universal, rational religion to secure a foundation for faith that was less subject to the vicissitudes of history. We are fortunate that Herrmann engaged Kähler's solution to the resulting problem, in the process of restating his own with the aid of Kähler's distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte*.<sup>16</sup>

These two words for history were used more or less interchangeably until Kähler's useful magnification of nuances in 1892 to stipulate a difference of meaning.<sup>17</sup> *Historie* is the domain of critical historians, wherein they ply their craft with as little deference as possible to assumptions drawn from Christian faith, or from any other particular stance, in accordance with the impulse to discover and describe "what happened" so as to win assent from the community of historians. *Geschichte* is history regarded *from a point of view*, in which interpretation from the very outset is knowingly conditioned by one's allegiances—in Kähler's case, one's allegiance to Jesus Christ. Herrmann approved of Kähler's distinction, but they used it differently.

Kähler, in the process of his wholesale attack on life-of-Jesus research, bluntly debunked the purported objectivity and presuppositionlessness of *Historie*—especially *historisch* research into the object of dogmatic concern such as Jesus—as unrealistic.

Today everyone is on his guard when a dogma is frankly presented as such. But when Christology appears in the form of a "Life of Jesus," there are not many who will perceive the stage manager behind the scenes, manipulating, according to his own dogmatic script, the fascinating spectacle of a colorful biography. . . . Therefore, the dogmatician has the right to set up a warning sign before the allegedly presuppositionless historical (*historisch*) research that ceases to do real research and turns instead to a fanciful reshaping of the data.

. . . How many authors of the "Lives" blithely compose epics and dramas without being aware that this is what they are doing! And because this is done in prose, perhaps even from the pulpit, people think that this is merely a presentation of the historic (*geschichtlich*), biblical picture of Christ. Far from it! What is usually happening is that the image of Jesus is being refracted through the spirit of these gentlemen themselves.<sup>18</sup>

It is profoundly difficult to liberate ourselves from the interests we bring to the historical study of the life of Jesus. This may be seen in an obvious but compelling way by observing that secular historians with no Christian commitment rarely if ever have found in the gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection reasons to think that a bodily resurrection occurred. It is only among *Christian* historians that we find some who think they see there the kind of evidence that can pass muster with the standards of secular historiography. Is this just a blind coincidence? Of course not; it is a case of historical judgment being influenced by personal, confessional stance, possibly on both sides. Should all historians therefore relinquish their teaching posts and go back to school to learn how to do history properly? Again, of course not. Work in the realm of *Historie* presupposes analogical continuities between the present context of interpretation and the past at every level. As a result, occurrences that are unique, in the sense of not being the analogical precedents of the contemporary historian's experience, are rendered translucent to the searching light of the contemporary historian's method. So there is no *historisch* possibility of comprehending the resurrection of Jesus, or the unique appearance within history of the divine principle of creation.

What warrants the suspension of ordinary historiographical assumptions so that the resurrection, the miracles, or the life of Jesus as a whole may be dealt with positively, and from a Christian point of view? For Kähler, it is the Christian experience of encounter with Christ. Since this element cannot be avoided—and a truly empirical approach might demand that it be *embraced*, conventional historiography notwithstanding—it is better to recognize it explicitly in theological method, according to Kähler. Correspondingly, the primary interest of dogmatic construction should not be in the historical Jesus as such, but in the earliest interpretations of him from a Christian standpoint. After all, contemporary Christian historians themselves inevitably present interpretations of the historical Jesus, and Christologies are precisely that. Historical (*historisch*) tools should be used to reconstruct the historic (*geschichtlich*), biblical Christ, as he is presented in the biblical pictures of him, and dogmatics should be oriented to those pictures.

Kähler anticipated dialectical theology's insistence that it is Jesus' *geschichtlich* significance that has always been and must now be affirmed, whether or not the events that triggered the cascading chain of influences at the origins of Christianity can be reconstructed. Proclamation of the

kerygma of the early churches was therefore for him the starting point for biblical and systematic theology, as well as for preaching and practical Christian piety. The obvious result of Kähler's strategy is that dependence of Christological constructions upon historical details about Jesus' life is significantly reduced. This is potentially the case whenever the biblical pictures of Christ are taken to be the appropriate starting point for Christology, though the importance of warranting or correcting or supporting the pictures of Christ with *historisch* research about Jesus still can be assessed differently. Kähler thought this was less important than Herrmann did.

Herrmann was less internally consistent but could proceed more adequately than Kähler, precisely because he was more realistic about the need to know that the historic significance of Jesus was not the result of delusory desire, mythical power, or social enthusiasm outrunning the facts.<sup>19</sup> Of course, for both theologians, faith gave immediate assurance of this fact, for by faith the believer experiences an immediacy of encounter with the actual Jesus, now risen as Lord. Herrmann insisted that nothing could interfere with the judgment of faith, and that the living Christ to which the inner life of the believer is joined is the inner life of the actual earthly Jesus, as discernible in and through the biblical pictures of him. But this is not merely a matter of interpretation for Herrmann; it was an *encounter* sparked from a generalized but clear impression of Jesus that could be gained directly from the Gospels and from the kerygma. He did retain a place for historical (*historisch*) research as a way of ruling out Christological excesses, but such historical results contributed no more than basic guidance and correction. The experience of Christ so understood finally determines the value of the results both of historical research into the life of Jesus and of dogmatic expositions of his significance.<sup>20</sup>

In spite of the fact that both Kähler and Herrmann were committed to beginning Christology from the historic, biblical pictures of Christ, Herrmann had a higher estimate of the value of *historisch* explication and justification of the cognitive edges of the faith experience—especially for removing false props from faith and for correcting egregious errors. This was so much the case that Troeltsch was able to observe in Herrmann an interesting “struggle between history writing and subjective mysticism.”<sup>21</sup>

On the one hand, Kähler could lay hold of the biblical pictures of Christ in the early churches' kerygma with relative certainty, leaving aside the antecedent influences for the most part, and then derive a relevant



Christology. The confidence with which those antecedent influences are laid aside, however, smacks of an unjustifiable kind of biblical positivism. Herrmann, on the other hand, dissatisfied with this awkward positivism in Kähler's view, remained committed to the *historisch* task of investigating Jesus' life, *not* in order to produce faith but in order to guide and correct it, even as electrical current is carried in and constrained by wires. The electrical current itself, however, comes not from *historisch* research but from the fellowship of the Christian with the personal life of Jesus, disclosed in the historical (*geschichtlich*) pictures of him in the New Testament. Faith, as Troeltsch put it in speaking of Herrmann, "needs a power supply from history and a foundation outside itself,"<sup>22</sup> but it is Jesus' *geschichtlich* significance rather than *historisch* research that provides this power.

#### *Invoking Tradition: Blondel*

French Catholic philosopher Maurice Blondel (1861–1949) presented an alternative approach to those of the Ritschlian tradition we have been considering. Though Blondel's work stands outside the liberal Protestant tradition, he was aware of much of it and was attempting to respond to the same concerns. Blondel's essay on *History and Dogma*<sup>23</sup> affirmed the role of tradition and the believing community in mediating the dependence of faith on history. Thus, he achieved greater social and historical realism than the other views discussed so far, notwithstanding the fact that Ritschl and his successors had lofty views of the church.

Blondel defended the thesis that what he calls "historicism" and "extrinsicism" can be avoided through an appropriate understanding of "tradition." In attacking historicism, Blondel had in mind an apparently skewed interpretation of Alfred Loisy's conception of history,<sup>24</sup> itself a reply in kind to Harnack's *What Is Christianity?* According to Blondel, historicism assumes that historical research is able to light the path from historical occurrences to dogmatic pronouncements unaided and to evoke faith directly out of the content of its own discoveries. On the opposite extreme, extrinsicism factors in history only in an *ad hoc* or extrinsic way as a dispensable source of evidence for already established dogma. Against this extreme view, a reasonably common one among Roman Catholic traditionalists, Blondel insisted on the indispensability of history for faith. And against historicism, which is at best an unfair caricature of Loisy's

view, he urged that history had to be mediated by tradition if it were to elicit faith and support dogma, for it was not independently capable of doing so. If faith had to depend upon tradition isolated from history, it would quickly be reduced to an empty shell, with no inner content; if faith had to depend upon history isolated from tradition, the content of faith would be decontextualized and finally unintelligible. Only if tradition and history were united was there hope of passing testimony to the living reality of Christ from generation to generation, and of retaining the historical material in proper relation to that living reality.

### Criticism of the Extant Dependence Strategies

Neither Ritschl, Harnack, Schweitzer, Kähler, Herrmann, nor Blondel thought that completely setting aside historical research into the life of Jesus was acceptable, though Kähler's thought had some momentum in that direction as far as *historisch* research into the life of Jesus was concerned. None of them, moreover, thought that faith in Christ could be produced by historical research alone, including Harnack, who was the most optimistic with regard to the historical sources. However, against the unrealistic and polar extreme views that faith was immune from historical research or more or less completely correlative with it, each one of these theologians in his own way and to various degrees thought that faith *had* to relate itself to the probabilistic and shifting results of historical research, that Lessing's famous ugly, broad ditch had to be crossed somehow.

Their solutions were optimism with regard to what historical research could accomplish (Harnack), an optimistic interpretation of the self-authenticating character of the immediacy of encounter with Jesus Christ (Schweitzer), an optimistic view of the authorizing import of this immediacy for the biblical pictures of Jesus Christ (Herrmann and Kähler in their various ways), or an optimistic reading of the stability conferred on the process of transmission of the Christian faith by tradition (Blondel). In all these cases, at least in theory, faith's dependence upon history comes to appear feasible, maintaining belief in Jesus Christ as psychologically possible and the fact of dependence theologically tolerable.

Troeltsch's assessment of this dilemma led him in a number of places to be sharply critical of these strategies for managing the problem of the biblical sources for Christological construction. Thus we turn now to

Troeltsch's critique of his Ritschlian colleagues and teachers, weaving these criticisms in with a discussion of the various proposals. We also will consider what we may infer from Troeltsch's thought by way of critique of Blondel's use of tradition in effect to authorize the reliance of Christian doctrine and practice on the biblical pictures of Christ.

### *On Ritschl*

In *Justification and Reconciliation* (1870–1874), Ritschl spent little time exploring the tension induced in his thought by his double emphasis on historical knowledge of Jesus and personal piety, the problem to which Harnack, Herrmann, and Kähler gave more explicit attention. Ritschl apparently was quite comfortable with his two-pronged solution. Troeltsch thought the result was problematically dualistic, because of “the harsh tension in which Ritschl's picture of Christ stood to the historical critical research which he himself acknowledged,”<sup>25</sup> and he believed that the problem, admitted as a difficult one by Ritschl, “could only be resolved by sheer assertions”<sup>26</sup> in Ritschl's theology. Ritschl, however, evidently was not troubled by the dualism about which Troeltsch complained and would doubtless have thought his own position not dualistic in the least.

Ritschl functioned as the inspiration for Harnack and Herrmann as they sought to grapple with the implications of the double sensitivity they inherited from him toward historical criticism and Christian piety. In passing on this double sensitivity, Ritschl played a vital role in generating awareness of the problem of faith and history and in sparking methods of solution. His thought on this matter functioned as a kind of lattice structure against which the later Ritschlians naturally perceived the problem of faith and history. Troeltsch put the formation of the history of religions method down to the harshness of the bare lattice structure, saying that it was “a natural reaction against the violence of Ritschl's procedure,”<sup>27</sup> thereby indicating indirectly his indebtedness to Ritschl, as well as an often repeated line of criticism.

In the same way, it was the whole character of Ritschl's thought that suggested the Harnackian and Herrmannian strategies for managing the problem of faith and history: Harnack explored Ritschl's emphasis on historical research, and Herrmann made powerful use of Ritschl's stress on the place of the Christian experience of fellowship with Christ. Both of them developed optimistic strategies for managing the dependence of

faith on historical research, Harnack in terms of the quality and amount of information that historical research could yield, and Herrmann in terms of the all-important experience of communion with God through Christ. Thus, Ritschl's somewhat under-explicit dual affirmation of historical knowledge and experienced faith helped form the two strategies that dominated the late-nineteenth-century Protestant debate. It is unsurprising therefore that Troeltsch's criticisms of Harnack and Herrmann were elaborated forms of his criticism of Ritschl.

### *On Harnack*

Against Harnack, Troeltsch pointed out that it simply *was not possible* to fulfill his optimistic program—obtaining knowledge about Jesus sufficiently precise and complete to place faith on a secure footing (without, of course, *causing* faith). In fact, Troeltsch charged that Harnack was inclined to “treat those points of history given prominence by religious value-judgments very differently from the rest of history,” implying that Harnack's procedure was covertly prejudiced in favor of the results he wanted to obtain.<sup>28</sup> The same criticism was famously made in a more systematic way by Alfred Loisy.<sup>29</sup> Here we see in essence what the twentieth century has played out on a grand scale. Harnack's nonapocalyptic interpretation of Jesus was first challenged and then overwhelmed by Weiss and Schweitzer's apocalyptic treatments, which against considerable resistance eventually gained wide acceptance in Germany and North America in the succeeding decades.<sup>30</sup> And now, with the so-called third quest, the North American consensus of life-of-Jesus researchers is returning to a nonapocalyptic interpretation, actually even less inclined to ascribe apocalyptic instincts to Jesus than Harnack was.<sup>31</sup>

It is not difficult to imagine a systematic Christology accepting a high degree of dependence on historical research in the stable periods between interpretative shifts and rendering the significance of Jesus Christ in intimate connection with the reigning *historisch* reconstruction of his life. But from the point of view of a longer time scale, Christological construction evidently must do justice to the possibility that any of these *historisch* reconstructions might be correct, or else it is forced to solidify around one interpretation, opposing other historical construals for dogmatic reasons. This last position is precisely the one against which the first quest railed so effectively: historical research is not to be dictated to by