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Roland Deines

Acts of God in History

Studies Towards Recovering
a Theological Historiography

Edited by
Christoph Ochs and Peter Watts

Mohr Siebeck

Roland Deines, born 1961; studied Theology and Judaism in Basel, Tübingen and Jerusalem; 1997 PhD; 2004 Habilitation; 2001–Research Assistant for the Corpus Judaeo-Hellenisticum Novi Testamenti in Jena and Adjunct Professor at the Ben Gurion University in Beer-Sheva, Israel; since 2006 at the University of Nottingham, currently Professor for New Testament Studies.

Christoph Ochs, born 1977; PhD in Theology at the University of Nottingham, currently working as a Research Assistant in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Nottingham.

Peter Watts, born 1981; PhD candidate and Teaching Associate in Biblical Studies in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Nottingham.

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God's Role in History as a Methodological Problem for Exegesis

1. Towards a Historical-Critical Assessment of the Conviction that God Acts in History

This long title attempts to encapsulate as precisely as possible one of the dilemmas with which biblical scholars are confronted when they attempt to understand themselves as theologians as well. For as theologians we find ourselves unable to follow the pattern so often found in the works of the Jewish historian Josephus when he is forced by his biblical *Vorlage* to talk about a miraculous event. After referring to such an event in a way that remains essentially faithful to the biblical text — though typically providing a rationalising explanation — Josephus frequently concludes with this kind of formula: “However, concerning such matters let each one judge as is pleasing to him” (*Ant.* 1.108: *περὶ μὲν [οὖν] τούτων, ὡς ἑκάστοις ἢ φίλον, οὕτω σκοπεῖτωσαν*).¹ By doing so Josephus follows a practice that is well-established in Greek and Roman historiography, and which is also adopted by Lucian of Samosata in the 2nd century AD.² Their recommended approach can be paraphrased as a ‘reserved objectivity,’ which is careful to show no partiality. This seems to be the perfect approach for an historian, and one may well wish that modern historians (and also biblical scholars) could be content with such. Unfortunately such an approach is no longer practicable. What separates our reading of the world and historical processes from that of Josephus, Lucian, and others up until the 18th century is that they lived at a time when,

¹ Trans. by L. H. Feldman, *Judean Antiquities 1–4: Translation and Commentary* (Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary 3; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 39, n. 271.

² Lucian, in the final chapters of his work *Quomodo historia sit conscribenda* (Πῶς δεῖ Ἱστορίαν συγγράφειν), which contain criticism of contemporary historians, outlines how the ideal historian should approach this topic. Among the points Lucian addresses briefly is the issue of myth (imagine a modern handbook for historiography including a theoretical discussion of such a point): “Again, if a myth (μῦθος) comes along you must tell it but not believe it entirely (οὐ μὴν πιστωτέος πάντως); no, make it known for your audience to make of it what they will — you run no risk and lean to neither side,” in “How to Write History,” in *Lucian VI* (LCL 430; transl. K. Kilburn; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 2–73 (70–1, § 60).

as John Milbank puts it, “there was no ‘secular’.”³ This means that the causation of so-called “*transempirical realities*”⁴ within the cosmos was not denied but held as a fundamental conviction, a kind of basic position in discourse about reality that more or less all participants accepted. The question was not “does God exist,” or, less theistically formulated, do “spiritual powers” and “cosmic forces” exist (cf. Eph 6:12; Col 1:16 etc.). As long as they are presupposed and acknowledged, the issue is not *whether* they intervene at all, but *how, when, where, and why* they intervene, or are claimed by some to do so.

The ‘reserved objectivity’ of the ancient historians with regard to the supernatural existed within the context of a world full of gods and spiritual powers. In such a world when there was no secular, critical discourse about God(s) sought to understand divine action in the right way and to ensure that the general acceptance of transempirical realities was not abused for mundane and selfish ends. The authority of the sentence, “God wills it” is a dangerous weapon in the hands of religious leaders, and even more so, from a theological perspective, within the reality of a fallen humanity, for which ‘will to power’ is one of the most disastrous sins. The misuse of that purported to be God’s will for selfish ends has cost the lives of millions who have died on all too many battlefields. And in the wake of catastrophic wars there has arisen the notion that the world would be better off if politics were to be handled *etsi deus non daretur* (“as though God were not a given”). This famous phrase was coined by the Dutch jurist, philosopher, politician and biblical exegete Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) in the prolegomena to his book, *De iure belli ac pacis*, published in 1625 during the 30 years war.⁵ In the midst of a religiously motivated conflict he made the claim that politics should be conducted without ‘playing the God card’ for political ends. This does not mean, however, that he was unconvinced about God’s active participation within this world, which is evident when one reads the whole paragraph in context:

What we have been saying would have a degree of validity even if we should concede that which cannot be conceded without the utmost wickedness, that there is no God, or that the affairs of men are of no concern to Him. The very opposite of this view has been implanted in us partly by reason, partly by unbroken tradition, and confirmed by many proofs as well as by miracles attested by all ages. Hence it follows that we must without exception render obedience to God as our Creator, to whom we owe all that we are and have; especially since, in manifold ways, He has shown Himself supremely good and supremely powerful, so that to

³ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 9.

⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 377 (italics original).

⁵ Hugo Grotius, *The Law of War and Peace* (trans. Francis W. Kelsey et al.; Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925), 13 (Prolegomena, XI), cf. Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism* (trans. Darrell L. Guder; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), 18–9, 58.

those who obey Him He is able to give supremely great rewards, even rewards that are eternal, since He Himself is eternal.

The same attitude can also be seen in his later apologetic work *De veritate religionis christianae* written after *De iure belli ac pacis*, but which started in the form of a Dutch poem written in 1619/20 while he was a prisoner. In this Grotius defends the superiority of the Christian religion against atheism, paganism, Judaism and Islam,⁶ which he considers to be confirmed — in a very traditional way — through the miracles reported in the Bible and the resurrection of Jesus. This was the time when there was no secular, although the dawn of a secularized age was appearing.

2. Neutrality as the Price for Acceptability

Our situation today is completely different. The secular success-story regarding the reality discourses within the western world during the last three centuries is impressive, and its dominance is perhaps even stronger than it is perceived by many on account of the fact that secular societies leave certain places of refuge for religions. As long as theological discourse is willing to confine itself to these designated areas, no open conflict arises.⁷ But as John Milbank rightly observes: “If theology no longer seeks to position, qualify or criticize other discourses, then it is inevitable that these discourses will position theology” (1). This results in theology and religion becoming objects of study and subjected to a methodology not derived from their own understanding of reality, and instead confined to a so-called ‘objective’ approach that treats religion and faith purely as objects of investigation. This in turn precludes serious participation in reality discourses, let alone making any value judgments or discerning between true and false. The formulation of equality and antidiscrimination rules — as important as they are to certain aspects within the public sphere — correlates well to this expected academic neutrality. Accepting such a positioning seems to be the price to be paid to a secular society, which in return enables biblical scholars to work within the academic setting of publicly funded theology and religious studies departments.

George Marsden comments on this situation in his stimulating little book *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*:

⁶ Cf. Jan Paul Heering, *Hugo Grotius as Apologist for the Christian Religion: A Study of His Work De veritate religionis christianae* (1640) (Studies in the History of Christian Thought 111; Leiden: Brill, 2004).

⁷ Examples are abundant; cf. Milbank, *Social Theory*, 1–2; also the discussion between Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007), see below in this volume pp. 368, 403–6.

Many contemporary academics affirm as dogma that the only respectable place for religion in the academy is as an object of study. Suggestions that religious perspectives might be relevant to interpretation in other fields are viewed with puzzlement or even consternation.⁸

Marsden further suggests that the prominent place theology still holds within many academic institutions is not a sign of its strength or acceptance within contemporary academia, but rather a vestige of the idea of the traditional university where theology often held a prestigious and time-honoured position. Moreover, he indicates that hostility towards “religious perspectives” increased significantly between the 1950s and the 1980s:

Old secular liberals and postmoderns, despite their differences, typically agreed that acceptable theories about humans or reality must begin with the premise that the universe is a self-contained entity.

This means that drawing upon a religious perspective is tantamount to “violating canons of academic respectability.”⁹ Angus Paddison in a chapter on “Scripture, Participation and Universities” reminds us not to “forget how tightly policed by secular presumptions academic pluralism is.”¹⁰ The result is a growing pressure upon theology to justify itself as an academic discipline.

Biblical scholars, however, are not at the centre of the storm because Biblical Studies as a historical and literary discipline shares a number of characteristics with other text based disciplines: engagement in textual criticism, source criticism, and literary analysis; the employment of the tools of grammar, semiotics and linguistics; and the writing of commentaries and historical monographs where God appears only in the margins — if at all. When God is discussed, it is not as subject but as object, an expression of cultural and social codes to which religious beliefs also belong. Committed Christians within Biblical Studies sometimes try to bracket out a supra-historical core from historical examination to leave their central beliefs unthreatened. The result is an apparent half-heartedness in (often conservative or evangelical) parts of Christian scholarship resulting from a sense of divided loyalty: On the one hand the desire to do objective and critical scholarship and on the other to pursue a religious commitment. The problem, however, is not the latter, but the pressure exerted from the former to set faith aside for historical enquiry. No wonder, therefore, that the flight into canonical exegesis, narratology, literary criticism and theological exegesis is quite common among evangelical PhD candidates.

⁸ George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 13; and idem, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁹ Marsden, *Outrageous Idea*, 18–9, see also 27.

¹⁰ Angus Paddison, *Scripture: A Very Theological Proposal* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 123.

This was, and still is, possible because of the traditional place given to theology in western academia, rather than because of the inherent strength of the discipline. But recently, even Biblical Studies has faced attack and been labelled a pseudo-discipline. In this regard it is worth reading Hector Avalos' 2007 book, *The End of Biblical Studies*, in which he calls for a complete abandonment of Biblical Studies on account of it being a form of 'scholarly' research that is largely driven by confessional interests, subjective eisegesis, and dubious historical assumptions.¹¹ Avalos is still a lonely voice in the desert, but this may change in the not-too-distant future. Therefore, Biblical Studies would do well to invest some thought into its self-understanding as a historical *and* theological discipline, and to describe more precisely what it offers to the academy. Its genuine, irreplaceable contribution however, is the insistence on the fact that history is not without God and therefore the world is not without God. The fact that the vigorous debate about the plausibility and necessity of theology and religious studies has so far barely impinged upon Biblical Studies (at least as long as it does what is expected from it as "part of a scientific community")¹² should not be taken as an excuse for staying silent. If God's active role in the history of the world is lost in Biblical Studies, no other theological discipline can retrieve it. Theological contributions to ethical, political, ecological and economic discourses are without foundation when God is no more than a story, or, as Markus Bockmuehl puts it, "to the extent that theologians are not answerable to a biblical account of doctrine, their work is no longer based on Christianity's historic creeds and confessions."¹³ That a new current has developed within biblical scholarship

¹¹ Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2007). His opening sentence leaves no room for doubt: "The only mission of biblical studies should be to end biblical studies as we know it" (1, see also 341). It is worth noting, however, that Avalos's critique is not primarily directed against more conservative scholars or evangelicals (for whom he has no sympathy nevertheless) as he equally (or even more so) scorns liberal and modernist positions. A pleading for a strict division between secular Biblical Studies in the university setting and theological readings of the Bible in ecclesial contexts can be found in Philip Davies, *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* (2nd ed., London: T&T Clark International, 2004); Paddison, *Scripture*, 135, against Davies, argues that the university needs "the witness of theology ... to resist adopting a universal perspective on truth in abstraction from particular practices, commitments and the narrative of Scripture" (see also 123–35).

¹² This expectation is most clearly expressed by Tor Egil Følrand, "Acts of God? Miracles and Scientific Explanations," *History and Theory* 47 (2008): 483–94: "I suggest that when doing historical research, historians are part of a scientific community; consequently, historiographical explanations must be compatible with accepted scientific beliefs. Whereas many historians and natural scientists in private believe in supernatural entities, *qua* professional members in the scientific community they must subscribe to metaphysical naturalism, which is a basic working hypothesis in the empirical quest of science" (483).

¹³ Markus Bockmuehl, "Introduction," in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics* (ed. idem and Alan J. Torrance; Grand

seeking to engage in *theological* interpretation without recourse to *historical* interpretation should be seen as an alarming sign. It looks like yielding the historical realism of the biblical witness to God's acts in order to gain a licence to do 'only' theology.¹⁴ This is alarming because history-making is a characteristic of the biblical God who revealed himself to mankind by making himself accessible, knowable, identifiable, visible and audible within this world. The Elder John writes in his first letter that he, and those for whom he speaks, testify according to what they have heard, what they have seen with their eyes, and what they have looked upon and touched with their own hands (1 John 1:1–3). That which could be seen and heard and touched by the apostles is the revelation of God in his Son Jesus Christ within the context of this world. The apostles were actively involved in the history of God with the world, and yet repeatedly it seems to be the case that neither revelation nor incarnation nor anything else that might be described as God's involvement in mundane matters is understood to fall within the reach or realm of historiography. This does not mean that such transempirical realities are openly denied. Rather, they must remain in their assigned area of 'subjective beliefs' and ought not interfere with objective scholarly research. This is the situation that needs to be challenged. The earlier solution of 'reserved objectivity' is no longer practicable because now "there is a 'secular'."

3. Challenging the Dichotomy of Faith and History

Theistically motivated historiography, therefore, needs to engage with the question of God's role within the historical process in its conceptual and methodological deliberations — at least in such a way that this issue remains a nagging presence, even if one comes to the conclusion that no simple solution that works for all and always is possible. Even a cursory glance at the New Testament (and the Bible as a whole) confronts the reader with a God who is the subject of earthly events: he has spoken through the prophets (Matt 1:22; 2:15), and speaks again in the time of Jesus to his Son (Matt 3:16–17). He sends rain upon the earth (Matt 5:44), he sees the secret deeds of humans and rewards them (Matt 6:4, 6), and he invites those who are called his children to pray to him (Matt 6:9–13). In the prayer Jesus teaches his disciples he encourages them to address God so that he acts on their behalf on a daily basis: to give them their daily bread, to forgive their sins, to lead them away from temptation and to deliver them from evil. God is further described

Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 7–13 (12). See also Francesca Aran Murphy, *God is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ Bockmuehl, "Introduction," 7; and later in this volume p. 307, note 118.

as active in this world through his Spirit (Matt 1:20; 4:1) and heavenly messengers (Matt 1:20; 2:13), who speak in his place. The list could be continued nearly endlessly, from God's acts in creation to re-creation down to taking care of the grass in the fields (Matt 6:30) and the hair of one's head (Matt 10:30), but these few examples suffice for the key question: How can we take these texts seriously as Christian theologians and biblical scholars in that we allow them to influence our way of seeing the world and what happens in it?

The first chapters of Matthew's Gospel have already provided enough material to make the dilemma clear between 'subjective' faith convictions (which are, however, shared by a universal community) and 'objective' reality discourses: Each time the Lord's prayer is prayed, or when Christians pray for somebody else, or that something might happen, this is done on the basis of the underlying assumption that God can act in response to this prayer. And there is thanksgiving for the way he has already acted — either in general, through sustaining life, health and so on, or in the more specific sense that relates to a kind of subjective certainty (a 'feeling' or 'impression') that God has done something special on behalf of the individual.¹⁵ Obviously, therefore, these elements should play a role in a Christian understanding of history as well. Can the biography of a believer be written without reflecting the question of what God has done in and through their life? Probably not. And yet this is exactly what is usually done: A scholarly biography might describe an individual as one who has led an active prayer life and expected that God would answer his prayers, but would bracket out the question of whether this had truly happened. And if any scholar should dare to treat this question in a more substantial way, the biography would no longer be labelled as scholarly, but rather as hagiographic, or a devotional work.¹⁶ Such charac-

¹⁵ For an interesting attempt to use Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Rahner to overcome the divide between God and the world on the basis that God, understood "as first cause of existence itself," is known in human conscious activity, see Anne E. Inman, *Evidence and Transcendence: Religious Epistemology and the God-World Relationship* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

¹⁶ A good example is the work of the Swiss pastor, church historian and biographical author Walter Nigg (1903–1988), who emphasized in his books that for biblical figures, saints, 'heretics,' artists, and other types of remarkable believers the course of their lives (and the impact they often had on subsequent history) cannot be understood without the historians' openness to the divine element present in those lives. It is a hopeful sign that in 2009 a major biography on Nigg appeared that discusses all his writings in their biographical and wider social and political context; that only three years later a second edition became necessary demonstrates the interest in this topic: Uwe Wolff, *»Das Geheimnis ist mein«: Walter Nigg — Eine Biographie* (2nd. ed.; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2012 [1st ed. 2009]). One could further point to the historiography of Christian writers and novelists, who are able — unrestricted by scholarly conventions — to trace and integrate the experience of the divine in their 'vision' of the life or period they describe. Reinhold Schneider (1903–1958) and Jochen Klepper (1903–1942) come to mind as German Protestant representatives of this genre.

teristics are used to mark a conceptual shift from serious scholarship to preaching, and from objectivity and rationality to purely subjective, irrational, and non-communicable beliefs.¹⁷ The perceivable dichotomy herein between religious beliefs and historical (scil. scientific) knowledge is as old as the biblical texts themselves. And since the Enlightenment period these two ways of formulating truth claims, namely through religious beliefs and historical/scientific knowledge, have no longer been regarded as compatible and enriching each other, but as antagonistic or hierarchically differentiated in such a way that historical knowledge is the acceptable core, or the 'real' thing, whereas associated religious beliefs are something of an optional extra. The removal of such religious beliefs would not affect the analysis of the scientific core of knowledge in any meaningful way. Biblical scholars are all too familiar with this concept in differentiating between the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith." Knowledge about the historical Jesus relates to head, brain and *ratio*, and is ascertained on the basis of historical-critical evidence. The "Christ of faith," however, is a projection onto the historical Jesus that results from spiritual and/or emotional experiences and processes, which are, in all cases, subjective and less 'real.'

But instead of carrying this dichotomy forward unwittingly, it should be discussed and addressed critically. Is it a helpful distinction that needs to be upheld and even promoted as good news of liberation from a supposedly faith-rooted ignorance, which is often identified as the root of all evils of modern society (fundamentalism; intolerance; racism; violence; zealotism; proselytism; homophobia; etc.), as many would claim?¹⁸ And, in this respect, can a politically corrected and purified form of Christianity, stripped from all claims to exclusivity and absoluteness, function as a role model for other more traditional faith communities? In the discussion of so-called Islamic extremism or fundamentalism one often comes across the notion that Islam's enlightenment process is yet to come. Hidden in this attitude is the assumption that a critical deconstruction of Islam's faith based assumptions about God, the world, and the obedience the faithful owe to God, would make it easier for a liberal western society to tame what is perceived as threatening in relation to the Muslim world. Since religious approaches to reality tend to make things more complicated, rather than easier, the general climate in

¹⁷ Cf. Marsden, *Outrageous Idea*, 9, where he expresses his reluctance to reduce "faith-informed perspectives" (8) to the idea of "interpreting history in terms of God's particular providences ... , or identifying when the Holy Spirit is or is not shaping events." Indeed, "faith-informed perspectives" include a much wider range of topics, but those quoted are part of the parcel all the same.

¹⁸ Cf. Peter Sloterdijk, *Gottes Eifer: Vom Kampf der drei Monotheismen* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2007).

society and academia is clearly in favour of a de-potentialisation of religion.¹⁹ However, if the extant distinction between religious beliefs and scientific knowledge, or — in the field of Biblical Studies — between historical and dogmatic truth, is challenged in favour of a stronger representation of faith-based truth claims within the university (and especially theology departments), how can these two sets of ‘processed’ experiences be reconnected in an informed and communicable way?

What I am not inclined to do in the remainder of this paper, is engage with the most fundamental assumption for this kind of question, namely whether God exists. For my own deliberations in the following (and in this whole book) I simply accept the reasonable assumption that the God to whom the Holy Scriptures of the Jewish-Christian tradition bear witness is indeed a major cause in our world. Even a cursory look at the literature shows that there are good arguments available for the rationality of a theistic approach to reality.²⁰ Authors I find stimulating — in addition to those already mentioned — include Nicholas Wolterstorff, Richard Swinburne, David Bartholomew, and Louis Dupré among others, although — from a historical perspective — I am convinced that in the beginning is not an epistemological discourse about the existence of God but an experience of being in relation to God (see n. 16).

4. Positing God in History: Troeltsch, Hengel, and Ratzinger

How, then, can Christian theologians, who see themselves also as historians, (or historians who approach their subject matter with an openness to the God who acts in history) be honest to both (experienced) faith (in the past and present) in a living, inspiring, ruling, and guiding God, and a historical, critical, methodologically controlled approach to religious texts, which is the result of reflecting on such experiences of God? These experiences would be described as ‘real’ or ‘true’ by those individuals initially affected by them,

¹⁹ For a new attempt in this direction from the side of a sociologist see Ulrich Beck, *A God of One's Own: Religion's Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010; ET of *Der eigene Gott: Von der Friedensfähigkeit und dem Gewaltpotential der Weltreligionen*, Frankfurt: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2008). Beck criticises “the firm belief in the redemptive power of sociological enlightenment” meaning that “with the advance of modernization, religion will automatically disappear” (1), and calls instead for acceptance “that religious terms must be understood and explained in religious terms.” The reason is that the striving for a “demystification of the religious sphere” ignores the “remystification of reality by religion” (2).

²⁰ For a critical survey see Philipp L. Quinn, “Epistemology in Philosophy of Religion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology* (ed. Paul K. Moser; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 513–38.

and — where the testimony of what they experienced is accepted by a community — they become the source of faith for others. Their approach to the encounters between humans and the divine will be similarly ‘realistic’ as that of the original witnesses, notwithstanding the fact that certain philosophers and literary critics will tell them that there is nothing like ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ to be found in this way. To talk about such topics as an exegete is to expose oneself to the vulnerability of encroaching the terrain of the supposedly more reflective disciplines as one who seems — from their perspective — not informed enough. The deplorable side-effect of this is that biblical scholars with strong historical interests often simply avoid these kind of questions, leaving them instead for the systematic theologians, and continuing to do philological, archaeological, and text-critical work. Signs of a shift in attitude have become evident recently, however, as Dale Allison’s thought-provoking recent book *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* serves to demonstrate. He states right at the beginning that, “the religious implications of my activities have been at the margin of my awareness,” but “recent circumstances have pushed me out of my historical-critical pose.”²¹

In the following, I will discuss and compare three different approaches to the question of faith and history, namely those of Ernst Troeltsch, Martin Hengel, and Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, which represent what Robert L. Webb categorizes as “ontological naturalistic history,” “methodological naturalistic history” and “critical theistic history.”²²

4.1 Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923)

Although not a biblical scholar himself, the influence of the historian, philosopher, and theologian Ernst Troeltsch on New Testament scholarship can hardly be overestimated. As one of the founders of the ‘religionsgeschichtliche Schule’ (history of religions school) and a close friend of Wilhelm Bousset, he exerted a formative influence at the beginning of this movement. His later work stands under the influence of Max Weber with whom he also shared bonds of friendship.²³ Troeltsch’s famous essay “Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology” was written in 1898 in response to an attack by Friedrich Niebergall, who blamed Troeltsch for a “historical relativism” that hindered theologians and historians. The essay was also intended to

²¹ Dale C. Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), ix.

²² Robert L. Webb, “The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research,” in *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus* (ed. Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb; WUNT 247; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 9–93 (43).

²³ For a comprehensive biography see Hans-Georg Drescher, *Ernst Troeltsch: Leben und Werk* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991).

demonstrate the superiority of Christianity.²⁴ Interestingly, Troeltsch and Niebergall agreed that Christianity (in its liberal Protestant form, one must add) is the highest form religion can achieve, but Troeltsch — here in contrast to Niebergall — insists that this cannot be demonstrated or proved by way of history: “History is no place for ‘absolute religions’ or ‘absolute personalities.’ Such terms are self-contradictory.”²⁵ Troeltsch therefore distinguishes between history based on “the old authoritarian concept of revelation” and the “genuine historical scholarship of the present” (“ächte, moderne Historie”).²⁶ He compares this new form of history to the revolutionary turn in the natural sciences: “Like the modern natural sciences, it [the historical method] represents a complete revolution in our patterns of thought vis-à-vis antiquity and the Middle Ages.”²⁷ The only way to be part of this new scientific world is the rigorous application of a strict and limited set of historical and sociological methods and the relinquishing of all dogmatic remnants.

According to Troeltsch, one must decide between the historical or the dogmatic approach to theology. There is — methodologically — no possible middle ground for the individual scholar. They must decide whether they want to access the biblical texts historically (implying a purely naturalistic methodology) or dogmatically.²⁸ For Troeltsch — and this is often over-

²⁴ For a discussion of the historical context see Drescher, *Ernst Troeltsch*, 160–6; Text and introduction can be found in Ernst Troeltsch, “Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology,” in *Religion in History* (ed. J. L. Adams and W. F. Bense; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 11–32 (also in: G. W. Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Search for the Jesus of History* [Leiden: Deo, 1999], 29–53). The English translation is based on the republication of this lecture in Ernst Troeltsch, *Zur religiösen Lage, Religionsphilosophie und Ethik* (Gesammelte Schriften II; 2nd. ed.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1922 [repr. Aalen: Scientia, 1962]), 729–53, which differs from the first German edition (published in 1900), which is easily accessible in: *Ernst Troeltsch Lesebuch: Ausgewählte Texte* (ed. Friedemann Voigt; UTB 2452; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 2–25.

²⁵ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions* (transl. David Reid; 2nd ed.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 78.

²⁶ “Historical and Dogmatic Method,” 12–3 (= ed. Dawes, 31).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16 (= ed. Dawes, 35).

²⁸ Later Troeltsch seemed to have agreed to a kind of compromise, because “total exclusion of religious faith from scientific work is only a possibility for those who for special reasons have killed or let die their notion of religion. Those in whom religion continues to live ... will always be convinced that the different sources of knowledge [i.e. scientific and religious] must somehow coincide and harmonise.” The practical religious interest of the Church therefore required a way in which historical theology and dogmatic theology could be allowed to exist next to each other, and he describes the “characteristic division of interests” that resulted from this: “One part is the servant of pure science and only serves the church indirectly. The other part serves the church and practical work; it directly and as a matter of principle assumes the special task of mediating between science and practice. It is obvious that the first part falls to the historical disciplines and the second to dogmatics and ethics. The separation of history and dogmatics, the purely scientific free development of the former and

looked — there is no way to integrate the two. If one opts for the historical method, everything must be explained historically, which, according to the paradigm of Troeltsch and his followers, precludes recourse to transempirical realities that cannot be demonstrated and proven by his famous triad of criticism, analogy, and correlation. To these must be added a strict inner-worldly and mechanical form of causality: “Once employed, the inner logic of the method drives us forward; and all the counter-measures essayed by the theologians to neutralize its effects or to confine them to some limited area have failed, despite eager efforts to demonstrate their validity.”²⁹ With such a method it is “impossible to arrive at some supra-historical core.”³⁰ Therefore, neither the incarnation of Jesus, nor his resurrection can be described as historical events in any way. So too the idea of salvation history is dismissed by Troeltsch, because it establishes “a separate methodology” and claims “special conditions independent of ordinary history.” All this “vitiates and distorts the methodology of secular history in various ways.”³¹ For Troeltsch, there is no longer any gap into which one can squeeze something like God’s action in the world: “Give the historical method an inch and it will take a mile. From a strictly orthodox standpoint, therefore, it seems to bear a certain similarity with the devil.”³²

It is often overlooked that this method exerts a totalitarian approach. It does not allow questions relating to transempirical realities to be left open, which is the way that many scholars today deal with them on account of being faithful Christians. However, Joseph Ratzinger, is well aware of this trajectory when he characterizes the “radicalizing process” of the historical-critical method with these words.³³

the latter’s practical mediating way of working without a strictly scientific attitude, is the result of this changed situation.” Ernst Troeltsch, “Half a Century of Theology: A Review,” in: *Writings on Theology and Religion* (transl. and ed. by Robert Morgan and Michael Pye; London: Duckworth, 1977), 53–81 (57–8). The German original (“Rückblick auf ein halbes Jahrhundert der theologischen Wissenschaft”) appeared in 1909.

²⁹ “Historical and Dogmatic Method,” 18 (= ed. Dawes, 37).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 18 (= ed. Dawes, 38).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 22–3 (= ed. Dawes, 42).

³² In the first German edition (published in 1900), nothing is said about the devil: “Wer ihr den kleinen Finger gegeben hat, wird von ihr [= the historical method] so energisch ergriffen, dass er ihr die ganze Hand geben muss” see *Ernst Troeltsch Lesebuch*, 7. The additional sentence appears only in the republication in *Gesammelte Schriften II*, 734. Here the sentence goes: “Wer ihr den kleinen Finger gegeben hat, der muß ihr auch die ganze Hand geben. Daher scheint sie auch von einem echt orthodoxen Standpunkt aus eine Art Ähnlichkeit mit dem Teufel zu haben.”

³³ Joseph Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict,” in *God’s Word: Scripture — Tradition — Office* (ed. P. Hünermann and T. Söding; trans. H. Taylor; San Francisco: Ignatius, 2008), 91–126 (92); for the full quote see in this volume p. 394.

Troeltsch remains an important point of departure. He was one of the first to take the question posed by the history of religions seriously. The dilemma he faced was, at its core, apologetic: He was convinced of the absoluteness of Christianity (which includes a sense of uniqueness) but the increased knowledge of “religionsgeschichtliche” parallels to the decisive religious phenomena of the Jewish-Christian tradition (creation; miracles; virgin birth; resurrection; appearances of angels; divine, immediate revelation; etc.) and the demonstration of their dependency upon other religious or cultural influences ruled out any proof of Christianity's absoluteness on the basis of such (meta-)historical phenomena or events. From a historical point of view, it was impossible for Troeltsch to set Christianity apart, that is, as absolute. Instead he demonstrated its absoluteness by applying Hegel's evolutionary concept through which it can be demonstrated that Christianity comprises the perfected idea of religion in general (“die vollendete Idee der Religion überhaupt”).³⁴ That Troeltsch chose this option is understandable given that he published this article at the turn of the 20th century in Protestant Germany. The optimism that liberal Protestantism would be the final stage of humanity was still unshaken as — from a different perspective — Harnack's famous centennial lectures on *The Essence of Christianity* (1900) demonstrate.³⁵ This optimism was misplaced, however, as is now clearly evident, and it might be time to develop the option that Troeltsch dismissed, not trying to find proofs for absolute religion, but in keeping with his critical attitude:

If the cosmic-historical and apocalyptic nature of Christ's lordship is to render the ‘truth’ of history, precisely by way of its concentration on the singular historicity of God incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, such a truth must be communicable without betraying and evading the crisis and burden which Troeltsch and modern theological historicism has discerned and bequeathed to us. If Christian apocalyptic is (. . .) to insist that apocalyptic has to do with the singular act of *God's* decisive transformation of history in the historical reality that is the Messianic *arrival* of Jesus of Nazareth, then Christian apocalyptic must be able to take up the challenge of historicity and in doing so must give way to its *own distinctively theological historicism*, a historicism no less rooted in an committed to the complexities, contingencies, and disaccord of historical ‘reality’ than that of someone like Troeltsch.³⁶

³⁴ Ernst Troeltsch, “Die Stellung des Christentums unter den Weltreligionen,” in *Der Historismus und seine Überwindung: Fünf Vorträge* (Berlin: Pan Verlag Rolf Heise, 1924), 62–83 (67 = *Ernst Troeltsch Lesebuch*, 45–60 [48]). On this tension between the all-relativizing effect of historicism and his upholding of Christianity as absolute religion based on a “teleological history” (that is “a transhistorical reality which stands beyond history”) see Nathan R. Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission* (Veritas; London: SCM, 2008), 27–30 (the chapter on Troeltsch [23–62] is titled “The Triumph of Ideology and the Eclipse of Apocalyptic”).

³⁵ See Roland Deines, *Die Pharisäer* (WUNT 101; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 194–206.

³⁶ Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic*, 61.

4.2 Martin Hengel (1926–2009)

Martin Hengel was not just a great teacher for many of us, but one of the greatest New Testament scholars of the 20th century. His legacy, I am sure, will continue to influence, stimulate, and direct our discipline. He was an inspiring teacher, supervisor and colleague, whose knowledge of the sources was phenomenal. Nevertheless, one particular criticism was frequently levelled against him, namely that for all his knowledge he eschewed methodology. In an autobiographical article, written in 2002, he remarks: “There is only *one* exegesis appropriate to the subject-matter, namely the one that does justice to the text (and its contexts).”³⁷ Perhaps having no methodology is indeed a method and possibly even a very good one at that. It is certainly the case that Hengel never followed fashionable methodological trends but relied instead on his own historical ‘instincts,’ which resulted from the medley of his enormous familiarity with ancient sources, practical and economic reason, common sense, an astonishing interest in the details of ordinary life such as finance, health, family relations, and a very grounded Lutheran pietistic form of Christianity, with its strong concern for grace in personal life. Because of this he was able to view his life, career, and achievements as a result of grace even though he worked hard until the final days of his life. He was not a genius but a hard worker. Nevertheless, he regarded even his seemingly boundless energy as a gift, as grace, and was thus very thankful.

These characteristics are reflected in what was in effect his ‘methodology’: Hard work on the sources, common sense and an approach to theological as well as social questions from the perspective of ordinary people. But all this was encompassed by a conviction — seldom expressed though always deeply held — that God’s grace held the seemingly unconnected lines together. Frequently one finds in the final sentences of his longer articles or book prefaces theological statements that seem somehow unconnected to the preceding historical argumentation. Yet these express for Hengel what also needs to be said, as is evident on the final page of his aforementioned autobiographical article:

The truth, one could also say the ‘center’ of this book [the NT] ... consists in the theological unity of Christology and soteriology. Anthropology, ecclesiology and ethics do not form the point of departure or the foundation but contain the materially necessary consequences. The

³⁷ Martin Hengel, “Eine junge theologische Disziplin in der Krise,” in *Theologische, historische und biographische Skizzen* (Kleine Schriften VII; ed. Claus-Jürgen Thornton; WUNT 253; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 279–91 (283): “Es gibt nur *eine* sachgemäße Exegese, nämlich diejenige, die dem Text (und seinen Kontexten) gerecht wird.” ET: “A Young Theological Discipline in Crisis,” in *Earliest Christian History: History, Literature, and Theology* (ed. Michael F. Bird and Jason Maston; WUNT 2.320; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 459–71 (463). See also in the same volume Roland Deines, “Martin Hengel (1926–2009): A Scholar’s Life in the Service of Christology,” 33–72.

concern is basically with what God has done, does and will do for us ἐν Χριστῷ (2 Cor 5:19). One could indeed describe this with the term 'salvation history,' which is so offensive to many.³⁸

In other words, God does something for humans, and when these acts of God are tied together they form what is traditionally called salvation history. But the question remains whether such a statement should be considered as a historical conclusion or 'merely' as a confession of faith?

In other words, should the sentence, "The concern is basically with what God has done, does and will do for us ἐν Χριστῷ," be treated as history and therefore incorporated when writing history, or is it solely a faith-based conclusion, which adds a supra-historical meaning to an event that can be sufficiently explained without it? And, if one takes the latter position, does this release the exegete in his historical work from any engagement with this issue at all?

To answer this question one has to look at a sequence of short theses that addressed the problem of "Historical Methods and the Theological Interpretation of the New Testament," which Hengel published as early as 1973.³⁹ It is not possible to discuss them here in any detail and a few remarks must suffice. Not surprisingly in view of his overall work, Hengel strongly defends an historical approach to theological claims (see esp. theses 4.2–4.2.2, cf. 4.4.4) since "the writings of the New Testament bear witness that God has spoken once and for all in a particular human being at a particular time" (4.2.1) and, consequently, "we cannot talk theologically of God's disclosure of himself in Jesus ... without at the same time grasping the form and content of this communication by means of historical research" (4.2.2). 'No theology without history' is his starting point, even if he addresses this only in the fourth and final group of theses. Earlier in the theses he differentiates carefully between what historical research can provide and the truth claims of theology: "Historical research provided [the German uses the present tense here: "Historische Forschung vermittelt der Theologie ..."] access for theology to its decisive content by means of biblical disciplines and church history. However, it cannot provide a basis for the truth-claim of theology" (2.4.4). And while "the question of the meaning of our existence as individuals" (3.3.1) cannot be separated from "the meaning and unity of history" (3.3),⁴⁰ the

³⁸ "A Young Theological Discipline in Crisis," 471.

³⁹ Martin Hengel, "Historische Methoden und theologische Auslegung des Neuen Testaments," *KuD* 19 (1973): 85–90. Now in: *Studien zum Urchristentum* (Kleine Schriften VI; ed. Claus-Jürgen Thornton; WUNT 234; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 99–104. ET: "Historical Methods and the Theological Interpretation of the New Testament," in *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM, 1979), 127–36.

⁴⁰ Cf. the quote of Ortega y Gasset in Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, 172: "Man ... has no nature; what he has is ... history," and within this volume 314–26, 347–50.

decisive answers “can only be given by ‘theological judgments’ and not “with the instruments of historical method” (3.3.2). Despite the estimation of history in Hengel’s work, he is very modest in what he thinks historical research can contribute to theology as a whole: it is a “Hilfsdisziplin,” an *ancilla theologiae*, a maidservant for the ultimate truth claims of theology. Historical knowledge cannot produce the certainty necessary for faith because historical judgments are never absolute but entail degrees of probability (2.4.1–2). Moreover, while “historical method” cannot produce “theological truth” but only prepare for it, “an inappropriate application of historical methods can distort the truth-claim inherent in a text both for me and for others” (2.3.6). He finds such an “inappropriate application of historical methods” in Troeltsch, whose distinction between historical and dogmatic method is for Hengel the “clearest expression” of “the historical-critical method” (1.2–1.2.1). Hengel is particularly critical of Troeltsch’s postulation of “the similarity in principle of all historical events” that makes “unparalleled events” (“analogieloses Geschehen”) reported in “biblical history” inaccessible for the historical method (1.2.7).

However, Hengel does not turn his critique of Troeltsch into a positive statement of what should be done instead. He goes no further than saying that “unparalleled events” are part of the “biblical history” but cannot be dealt with properly by Troeltsch’s method. At the same time he insists that “the New Testament writings do not require for their interpretation [a] specifically ‘theological method of interpretation’ which is qualitatively different from all ‘historical methods’” (4.3). But how, then, would the historian be able to allow for these “unparalleled events” to happen? The solution to this problem is not to be found in Hengel’s theses, and only a few hints towards how he dealt with it can be traced in his other writings. I will give just one example: In the final chapter of his last monograph *Jesus und das Judentum* (co-authored with Anna Maria Schwemer),⁴¹ which was intended to be the first of a projected four volume *Geschichte des frühen Christentums*, he deals with the testimony regarding Jesus’ resurrection. In the introductory paragraph he outlines the notion that early Christian confession about the resurrection was, “to the best of one’s knowledge a completely unexpected turnaround.”⁴² He then continues to explain that for the women at the tomb, the disciples, and Paul, the resurrection was “a real event in space and time which transcended at the same time the human experience of space and time” (627). He highlights, however, that the early Christian testimonies to this supposedly real

⁴¹ Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, *Jesus und das Judentum* (Geschichte des frühen Christentums 1; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007). For Hengel’s discussion of the trans-historical (mythical) elements related to Jesus see in this volume “Pre-existence, Incarnation and Messianic Self-understanding of Jesus in the Work of Martin Hengel.”

⁴² *Ibid.*, 625: “eine radikale, nach menschlichem Ermessen völlig unerwartete Wende.”

event are confessions of faith. They cannot be accessed by objectifying means and remain alien in a world determined by natural sciences and technology (626). The resurrected Jesus is described in the gospels as “real” but at the same time “mysterious and non-affixable.”⁴³ This seems to me a typical expression of Webb’s methodological naturalistic history, where history is located solely in the natural world, without denying the existence of the supernatural, which is, however, unintegrated into the natural world.⁴⁴

This is Hengel’s very subtle way of expressing his own belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus and the empty tomb without crossing the line from an argument that is supposedly purely historical, towards a confession of faith. But Hengel would not be Hengel if the final sentence did not also include a rather more bold confession: “The constitution of the earliest church through the power of the Holy Spirit, looking presently to the God-exalted Jesus and retrospectively to his earthly ministry, is for us the visible and continuing miracle of Easter.”⁴⁵ Hengel’s approach might be summarized in the following way: the historian who deals with religious history must respect the mysterium that veils some events and keeps them from historical access in the narrow sense. In other words, Hengel’s approach would fall under the verdict of Troeltsch and his followers insofar as he brackets out certain ‘dogmatic’ remnants (even if Hengel calls them mysteries) from a purely historical analysis. Although Hengel attempts to give historical reasons for this, I am not sure that this is convincing for those who do not share Hengel’s religious reverence for Jesus’ resurrection. Why should historical enquiry stop here when immanent historical reasons can be given for the resurrection appearances, such as post-traumatic stress or psychosis in those who grieve over the loss of Jesus? What is lacking is the move to change the range of what ‘historical’ means and should include in a theological perspective.

4.3 Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI

Ratzinger’s, or (now) Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI’s, book, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* ignited what I see as a helpful and necessary discussion within New Testament scholarship, which has already been documented in a number of books, reviews and articles that runs into the hundreds.⁴⁶ What I find challenging, in the best

⁴³ Hengel and Schwemer, *Jesus und das Judentum*, 647.

⁴⁴ Webb, “The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research,” 43.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 652: “Die Konstitution der Urgemeinde in der Kraft des Geistes, im Aufblick auf ihren jetzt zu Gott erhöhten Herrn und im Rückblick auf sein irdisches Wirken ist das für uns sichtbare und bis heute fortwirkende Wunder von Ostern.”

⁴⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (trans. Adrian Walker; London: Bloomsbury, 2008). For a discussion see in this

sense of the word, is Ratzinger's methodological deliberation, especially in the first few pages of his book. As a biblical scholar who normally deals more with historical questions than with 'pure theology,' I find myself concerned with history and historical questions primarily for theological reasons, because I consider that Christian theology is not possible without a strong historical foundation.

At the same time I am well aware that faith and history, "Glaube und Geschichte," do not make an easy match, which is why many in Biblical Studies seek to remedy this awkward situation through a separation along the lines of Troeltsch, namely a division between a historical and a dogmatic method, whereby the former is defined (and defended) as a secular and positivistic discipline. As such it can work within the boundaries of 'accepted' academic standards, which have remained very much the same as those defined by Troeltsch.⁴⁷ History and faith can live peacefully together so long as they are divorced from each other; as long as faith-based claims about certain occurrences are clearly demarcated as confessional statements only. Moreover, as the Jewish historian and Jesus scholar Geza Vermes shows very clearly in his review of Benedict's first volume, for him (and in this respect he represents many others) there is, in fact, no longer any issue to be addressed: The man Jesus of Nazareth is the only subject matter for the historian and everything beyond the pure (secular) historical paradigm is merely "the product of ... musings" without any value or interest for "a seeker after historical truth."⁴⁸ The Christ of faith and the historical Jesus are, for Vermes, as for many others, two completely separate figures that should not even be attempted to be merged into one comprehensive picture. And this is exactly the situation Benedict challenges because he thinks – and rightly so – that this is an unhealthy situation, not only for theology but also for history.

Ratzinger claims emphatically in the preface of his book that "The *factum historicum* (historical fact) is not an interchangeable symbolic cipher for biblical faith, but the foundation on which it stands: *Et incarnatus est* — when we say these words, we acknowledge God's actual entry into real history."⁴⁹ If one traces his scholarly legacy to discern the meaning of this sentence, one finds throughout his writing a sustained emphasis on this very element: God

volume "Can the 'Real' Jesus be Identified with the Historical Jesus? Joseph Ratzinger's (Pope Benedict XVI) Challenge to Biblical Scholarship."

⁴⁷ Helpful discussions can be found in Webb, "The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research," and Alexander J. M. Wedderburn, *Jesus and the Historians* (WUNT 269; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

⁴⁸ His review of the first volume of *Jesus of Nazareth* was published under the title: "Jesus of Nazareth: The scholar Ratzinger bravely declares that he and not the Pope is the author of the book and that everyone is free to contradict him," in *The Times*, May 19, 2007. For a detailed discussion see in this volume, pp. 353–7.

⁴⁹ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1.xv.

should not be precluded from being a discernible cause within the reality of this world. The biblical scholar “must not” — as Ratzinger stated in his famous Erasmus lecture on “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict” — exclude the possibility that God, as himself, could act in and enter into history.”⁵⁰

The first volume of Ratzinger’s work on Jesus omits the birth and resurrection narratives and, therefore, the crucial elements relating to what he calls the “real” Jesus. Some reviewers expressed their hope that he would be more careful (which, in fact, means less driven by his Christian conviction that the historical Jesus was indeed the pre-existent eternal Son of the Father) in addressing these topics in his second volume, but this did not transpire, quite to the contrary (as the now available second and third volume demonstrate). Already in a small pamphlet, which appeared in 2004 and had reached a third edition by 2005, Ratzinger laid out his thought on the virginal conception of Jesus and the empty tomb, and its title, *Scandalous Realism?* (“Skandalöser Realismus”),⁵¹ immediately sets the tone. It opens with a short description of what Ratzinger calls “a new Gnosticism”, which relegates God into the realm of subjectivity and bans him from “the world of matter — the objective world” (7), and in so doing denies God to be creator. Against all such anti-creational Gnosticisms he posits the virginal birth and the resurrection of Jesus as God’s reminder of himself as creator in this world. They are deliberate revelatory acts of God for the sake of humanity. To miss them being God’s deeds is to miss them (and God in turn) completely.

For Ratzinger, the foremost task of theology as a discipline is, therefore, “to recognize again God as acting subject,” for only this vantage point will (re-)connect the various theological disciplines with each other.⁵² Ratzinger differentiates in this short talk (which addressed a lay audience and not scholars) between historical knowledge gained by (secular) historical research (which can give only hypothetical certainty [“hypothetische Gewissheit”]) and between the certainty about historical events (“Gewissheit über historisches Geschehen”) which only faith can give.⁵³ This is not to say that faith should replace historical research, but certain events cannot be adequately understood without it. One must keep in mind that Ratzinger is dealing in this talk with the virginal birth and the resurrection, that is events on the borderline between the empirical and transempirical. What deserves attention here (despite the obvious shortcomings) is his attempt to widen the range of what can be called historical knowledge by integrating ‘faith-based certainties’ within the process of understanding the past. Nevertheless, his argument

⁵⁰ Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict,” 116.

⁵¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Skandalöser Realismus? Gott handelt in der Geschichte* (3rd ed.; Bad Tölz: Urfeld, 2005).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 9.

remains basically within the secular historical paradigm when he suggests a kind of two-tiered knowledge, one for the mundane facts and one for the spiritual realities. History in this sense is still part of the secular enterprise and faith desires to add to it somewhat randomly. So the question remains: ought not an openness to the transempirical be integrated in the historical method itself? In other words, should one not start with a theistic approach to history that presupposes God's involvement from the beginning instead of trying to introduce him later?

5. Probing towards a Theological Historiography

The final part, though perhaps the most crucial, remains — intentionally — a work in progress. So far, I have attempted to demonstrate that biblical exegetes cannot avoid the question of God's role and action in this world, and then I examined three major approaches to dealing with the interrelation of God and history. What remains is to discuss and develop a critical methodology (by which I mean a set of questions that need to be asked) that appeals to God not merely when every other attempt to find an explanation has failed. God is not to be found primarily in the gaps of our knowledge,⁵⁴ and as a last resort in our investigations. Rather he is to be understood as a major cause, disposed to manifest himself in the historical process from the outset, in attempting to describe the past as meaningful history within the setting of a theistic world-view. Therefore I have given this paper the highly, and perhaps

⁵⁴ Cf. Thomas Dixon, *Science and Religion: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 44–6; Dietrich Bonhoeffer also reflected on this question, after he had read in prison the book of Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, *Zum Weltbild der Physik* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1943), in a letter to his friend Eberhard Bethge, 29 May 1944: “. . . how wrong it is to use God as a stop-gap (“Lückenbüßer”) for the incompleteness of our knowledge. If in fact the frontiers of knowledge are being pushed further and further back (and that is bound to be the case), then God is being pushed back with them, and is therefore continually in retreat. We are to find God in what we know, not in what we don't know.” But he finds the same mistake made also in other parts of life, where God is sought only at the beginning and end or in critical situation: “God is no stop-gap . . . It is his will to be recognized in life, and not only when death comes,” see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (ed. Eberhard Bethge; London: SCM, 1971), 312. Cf. also the sarcastic comments of Troeltsch, “Historical and Dogmatic Method,” 31 (Dawes, 52), on “the modesty of a theology that has come to the point of finding its foundation ultimately in a gap.” Pushing God into the gaps beyond our responsibility occurs also in the language of legal contracts, where an ‘Act of God’ is a “*force majeure*,” which can include natural disasters, but also “acts of foreign enemies,” “civil war,” labour disputes, down to limited access to utilities, see *Encyclopaedia of Forms and Precedents (EFP)* § 22.2 (LexisNexis Butterworths). I owe this reference to Ellie Wreford. For a more light-hearted example of this idea see Mark Joffe's film, “The Man Who Sued God” (2001).

overly ambitious subtitle “Towards a Historical-Critical Assessment of the Conviction that God Acts in History.” This reflects the fact that — for some at least — it is plausible, reasonable, and worthwhile to write history based on the assumption that God acted, is acting and will act in the lives of individuals, as well as in larger social bodies like families, the Church, the people of Israel, in particular, and perhaps within other peoples *qua* peoples as well. I am aware that such a simple proposition brings with it an array of problems that all seem unsolvable and all of which have their own rich, diverse, and controversial intellectual traditions and scholarly legacies, which a single person cannot so much as trace, let alone fully appreciate and understand. And yet, to avoid these problems completely or to solve them through a compartmentalisation of the ‘historical’ and ‘dogmatic’ (following here Troeltsch’s use of these terms) — with that which is objective and ‘real’ placed in contrast to that which is subjective, and, therefore, mere private musing — seems unsatisfactory.

Therefore, I want to encourage these issues to be addressed. First, because of the way the Bible reveals God as a compassionate contemporary of his chosen people. Secondly, because throughout the centuries, and across ethnic, cultural and intellectual borders, individuals as well as groups have described their own and/or their group’s life experiences in conformity with this compassionate contemporary.⁵⁵ The question about God’s involvement in the history of the world should not be reduced to the rather rare phenomena of what are usually called miracles or supernatural events, although these will undoubtedly remain a prominent feature in such an endeavour. But the presentness of God is a much more pervasive concept than the idea that he intervenes only occasionally and seemingly at random.

I have simplified the issue thus far by referring only to the Christian tradition and its understanding of God’s role in the world. But I agree with George Marsden that what is to be claimed for a specific form of Christian scholarship “should apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and persons of other religious faiths or of no formal faith.” Marsden continues: “Recognition of the necessity and value of a plurality of voices in the academic mainstream means that religious scholars must accommodate their messages to the legitimate demands of a pluralistic setting.”⁵⁶ This means that if one wants to deal with transempirical realities as one element of a historiographic agenda, then it is impossible to limit this approach to one’s own religious tradition in a pluralistic setting.⁵⁷ If we begin by subscribing to the

⁵⁵ For a similar line of thought see Allison, *Historical Christ*, 46–52.

⁵⁶ Marsden, *Outrageous Idea*, 10–1.

⁵⁷ Even in the biblical literature one can find a pluriform approach to ‘other’ religious traditions, cf. inter alia Gerhard Büttner, ed., *Zwischen Nachbarschaft und Abgrenzung:*

proposition that transempirical realities can influence mundane matters then the experience of being called or commanded by God/a god in a specific way is an event that needs to be treated with the same openness and scrutiny aside from one's own religious predilections. There are two major traditional ways of dealing with this point, a religious and a scientific one, and both turn out to be dissatisfying:

1. The religious solution operates according to a scheme in which what one's god did, does and will do, is right and real, and whatever religious or supernatural experiences others claim are wrong: either they are an illusion, a fraud, or another form of deception, or they are the mimicry of spiritual powers hostile to the 'true' god.⁵⁸ The biblical polemic against other gods runs, to a large extent, along these lines, even if there are some noteworthy exceptions. Martin Luther is quoted as saying: "Wherever God builds a church, there the devil erects a chapel next to it."⁵⁹ While this allows for religious experiences outside of one's own tradition, they are always deceptive and wrong. This is surely no satisfying solution for the topic in question although it cannot and should not be dismissed completely as long as one holds with Paul that there are powers past and present (cf. Rom 8:38–9) able to separate us from the one true God.⁶⁰
2. The scientific solution can be found in many commentaries and monographs on the Bible. Wherever the Bible reports a revelatory or miraculous event, commentators pile up long lists of parallels, either in the biblical tradition or in other religious traditions. The reason to do this is not always made explicit, but in fact this kind of presentation seems to indicate that the existence of narratives about miraculous conceptions and births in the Old Testament, and in Greek and Roman mythology, proves that Jesus' birth narratives are modelled along these lines. The tacit point then is that

Fremde Religionen in der Bibel (FS Hans Grewel; Dortmunder Beiträge zu Theologie und Religionspädagogik 1; Münster: Lit, 2007).

⁵⁸ Already Justin develops the idea of demonic mimesis of the works of God or Jesus, cf. Annette Yoshiko Reed, "The Trickery of the Fallen Angels and the Demonic Mimesis of the Divine: Aetiology, Demonology, and Polemics in the Writings of Justin Martyr," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12 (2004): 141–71; Andrew Dauntton-Fear, *Healing in the Early Church: The Church's Ministry of Healing and Exorcism from the First to the Fifth Century* (SCHT; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 48–9; other apologists, like Tatian and Theophilus, followed a similar line (depending on Justin, cf. *ibid.* 52–3, 54–5).

⁵⁹ "Wo Gott eine Kirche baut, da baut der Teufel eine Kapelle daneben," quoted in Erwin Mühlhaupt, ed., *D. M. Luthers Evangelienauslegung Teil 1: Die Weihnachts- und Vorgeschichten bei Matthäus und Lukas* (4th. ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), 237.

⁶⁰ For a defence of the ontological reality of malevolent forces, see Richard H. Bell, *Deliver Us from Evil: Interpreting the Redemption from the Power of Satan in New Testament Theology* (WUNT 216; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007)

because the former are not regarded as historical (which can be agreed upon without further comment), then the same is true for the latter. Again, just as in the religious solution, there is some truth in this notion, and the “religionsgeschichtliche Vergleich” (“history of religions comparison”) is indispensable for any critical approach. But is the proposed non-historical character of an event explained properly by pointing to similar assumedly non-historical events? Is it not possible to reverse Troeltsch’s criterion of analogy for events involving transempirical realities when they appear analogous to each other? So, for example, Dale C. Allison, in his aforementioned book, uses the temptation of Jesus by Satan as an example “of how Jesus is present in places where modern historians typically see only the church.” One of his points as to why this cannot be “sober history” is that we have “similar dialogues between rabbis and Satan” in the rabbinic literature which he dismisses from the outset as ahistorical. And then he asks the question: “Why should I evaluate the Synoptic encounter differently?”⁶¹ Indeed, why? Why not treat them in analogy to what is described in rabbinic literature (and occasionally in church history as well)? This does not mean that, in the end, all of this is historical. But it might help to understand better the language employed to describe something which ‘really’ happened, even if it is indescribable to some extent, but needs to be communicated nevertheless. An approach which excludes the agency of the divine from the outset cannot go any further. But, again, if one starts with the acceptance of transempirical realities — should it not be possible to understand such an event differently in a legitimate scholarly way?

A further complication lies in the fact that even within the context of a given religious tradition not every claim about a transempirical experience that an individual or group relates back to God’s (or a god’s) intervention can be taken as true without any critical assessment. Individuals quite often believe that God has said, revealed, or shown them something, or that God has done something in their lives, which bystanders — even if they belong to the same religious tradition — do not believe at all. At best they see such a thing as wishful thinking or naive piety, at worst as intentional fraud. More than once biblical texts themselves caution against those who declare their dreams to be God’s word,⁶² and similar warnings can be found in other religious traditions. In order to open the door to the inclusion of transempirical realities for one mode⁶³ of writing history, it must be undertaken critically from an historical as well as a theological angle.

⁶¹ Allison, *Historical Christ*, 25.

⁶² Deut 13:1–15; 18:9–22; Jer 23:9–40; Ez 13; Matt 7:15–23; 24:11, 23–4; etc.

⁶³ It is necessary to highlight that this proposal for a faith-informed historiography is *one* form of historiography, not the only one. But it is one important way, which should not be given up just because it is not a universally accepted approach (an ideal of the sciences and

The task ahead of an historical-critical assessment involves finding ways to address such ambiguities as well as 'real' revelatory events within all forms of belief-systems. This requires critical criteria to differentiate between that which can be conceived and discussed as a 'special' act of God (or, in a wider sense, events caused by transempirical realities) and other forms of religious expression where this might not be the case. A related difficulty here is that a religious or revelatory meaning can often be attached to an event only from hindsight. This phenomenon is already evident in the Bible, and stated explicitly in the Gospel of John (2:22; 7:39; 12:16; see also 16:5–15). But history writing is, with the exception of the special forms of annals and diaries, always the product of hindsight, and distance from the events is not necessarily a disadvantage; indeed, it can and should be seen favourably. Only distance allows for the understanding of the meaning and importance of an event in light of its history of impact. But the critical task for a theistically motivated historiography remains to discern whether God's involvement should indeed be seen or heard in an event (even if this is possible only from hindsight, and can only be done with a limited degree of probability), or whether revelatory claims function as an attempt to embellish someone or something for some particular reason.

If I were to map out some first elements of such a critical methodology that allows for consideration of transempirical realities, it should fulfil the following criteria:

1. It needs to be *critical*. This means that it must allow for a differentiation between true and false, and it must be capable of taking criticism; all sorts of self-immunisation should therefore be excluded.
2. It needs to be *coherent*. This means that what are taken initially as fundamental propositions in approaching the historical process should result in a disposition that enables the application of these propositions to the given evidence.⁶⁴ That attitude by which a single person can differentiate between being a 'churchgoer' and an academic historian, such that something that holds true in an existential and even ontological way in the former category is effectively denied as historically possible in the latter, is, therefore, incoherent.⁶⁵ Coherence also requires that the historical pro-

not of the humanities). I am not aiming at the dominion of any approach at all, but favour strongly multiple perspectives that are able to enrich our understanding of a phenomenon. At the same time multiple perspectives should engage, criticise and limit each other.

⁶⁴ Cf. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, 19–42, on the "Dispositional Accounts of Belief." The underlying belief "becomes articulated precisely when someone denies it" (37). In the same way one's basic understanding of the historical process (theistic or a-theistic) is an underlying belief that has to develop its narrative of history in a manner coherent to its initial proposition.

⁶⁵ As examples cf. Allison, *Historical Christ*, 43.

cess can be explained without gaps, that is, in a way that developments can be described as — to use Troeltsch's definition of correlation — “forming a current in which everything is interconnected and each single event is related to all others.”⁶⁶ What Troeltsch requires is actually impossible for an atheistic approach to reality, whereas one based on Heb 1:3 can do exactly this.

3. It needs to be *rational* without being trapped in the notion that what is rational is solely that discovered by the Enlightenment tradition.⁶⁷ Rational, as I would like to understand it, is that which can be described and made understandable across time, cultures, and ethnic boundaries. In other words, it must — at least theoretically — have the potential to be universally true (the proper German term would be *Universalisierbarkeit*; perhaps *universalibility* comes close?). The famous sentence of Saint Vincent of Lérins (died c. 445 AD) in defining catholicity can be modified for this purpose as well: Rational in a universal sense is something that can be explained in such a way that it allows for meaningful discourse everywhere, always and by all who are interested in it.⁶⁸
4. It needs to be *describable* in such a way that those taking differing approaches are able to appreciate why this position is held within academia, even if they disagree with it. This implies the acceptance of different levels of “intersubjectivity,” which is the ability to explain why certain things are accepted as true without being able to provide objective evidence for them.
5. The demand for describability calls for *comprehensiveness* (*Nachvollziehbarkeit*), even if it will be achievable only by decreasing levels of probability and plausibility. The tripartite scheme proposed by Martin Hengel in his aforementioned theses can be used as point of departure. There he distinguishes between (1) “clearly defined facts”, where the mode of appropriation is “knowing” and “complete intersubjectivity is most easily possible” (2.3.1); and (2) “geistesgeschichtliches Verstehen” (the English

⁶⁶ “Historical and Dogmatic Method,” 14 (= ed. Dawes, 33).

⁶⁷ For secularism as a specific development of Western Europe only see Beck, *A God of One's Own*, 22–40, and the debate of Habermas and Ratzinger, in this volume, 368, 403–6.

⁶⁸ “In the Catholic Church itself, every care should be taken to hold fast to what has been believed, everywhere, always, and by all (ut id teneamus, quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est). This is truly and properly ‘Catholic,’ as indicated by the force of the etymology of the name itself, which comprises everything truly universal. This general rule will be truly applied if we follow the principles of universality, antiquity, and consent (si sequamur universitatem antiquitatem consensium).” Rudolph E. Morris, “Vincent of Lérins, *The Commonitories (Commonitoria)*,” in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (vol. 7; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1949), 255–332 (270). For the Latin text see Vinzenc von Lerinum, *Commonitorium pro catholicae fidei antiquitate et universitate adversus profanas omnium haereticorum novitates* (ed. Adolf Jülicher; SAQ I.10; 2nd ed.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1925), 3.

translation is “understanding cultural history” which is too narrow because it does not include the religious element), with “interpretation” as the mode of appropriation; and (3) “value judgements, or the positive or negative answer to the truth-claim of historical sources, persons or groups,” which are appropriated by way of “assenting or dissenting” (2.3.1–4). He admits that “the possibility of controlling communication diminishes with each stage” and becomes only “a contingent possibility”. But this is true for any interpretative work of history. The second step in Hengel’s triad is therefore decisive, because here the interpreters have to reflect their presuppositions and relate to their peers what it is that guides their interpretations. Only if this is done can the assent or dissent on level three be comprehended (not shared) by those who come to a different judgment on the basis of their interpretation.

6. What follows from the previous point is the demand for an intellectual and *scholarly climate of fostering a plurality of reasonable interpretations*, rather than one where only the currently dominant view receives support. It has to be said that the Church did exactly the latter in times and places when and where it held interpretative power, and the same happened in ideologically grounded political regimes. Academic freedom is therefore the most valuable asset for academia. Any proponent of a reasonable interpretation ought only *to argue* for such without attempting to enforce its truth claims and value judgments. Non-totalitarian scholarship will always welcome differing approaches that allow the understanding of specific truth claims through careful description of the chosen presuppositions.

It follows from the foregoing that any attempt to enforce the abandonment of a faith-informed vantage point in academic discussion just because its intersubjectivity is limited, is ill-advised. It would mean that people bound by religious convictions can speak about and explain religion to non-religious people only if they leave their mode of interpretation behind and adopt a position that precludes any ‘reality talk’ about religious truth. Ultimately it *coerces* those who desire to talk intelligibly and rationally about God acting in history, and in their own lives, to *convert* first to a worldview where the very thing they seek to communicate is already assigned to the non-real. And such a mind-set would be of no benefit — either for the university, or the church, or society as a whole. The responsibility of Biblical Studies for a wider audience should not be lost, and this is even more the case if we are convinced that what we believe is not ‘just’ true in an existential and subjective way related to our inner self, but that it is an “ontological truth claim,” which is also meaningful for other disciplines within the university. To stay silent about truth, even if religiously based, even if disputed, is against the ethos of the university and the practice of good scholarship.