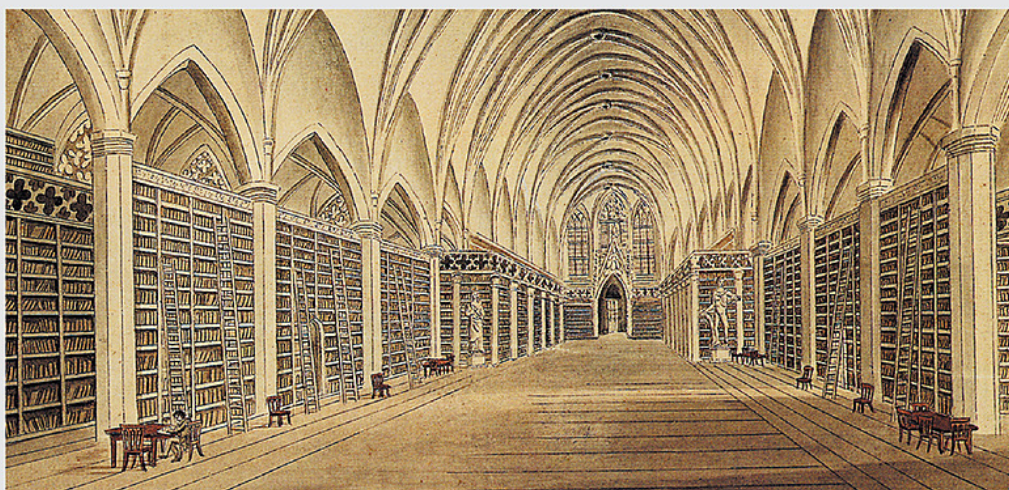


# Theology, History, and the Modern German University

Edited by  
Kevin M. Vander Schel  
and Michael P. DeJonge



*Christentum in der modernen Welt 1*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

# Christentum in der modernen Welt

## Christianity in the Modern World

Edited by

Martin Keßler (Basel) · Tim Lorentzen (Kiel)

Cornelia Richter (Bonn) · Johannes Zachhuber (Oxford)

1





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and Michael P. DeJonge

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## Editors' Introduction

It has become common practice, in discussing the development of the modern academic study of theology, to acknowledge the decisive role played by the emergence of historical consciousness in nineteenth-century Christian thought. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, in the wake of the European Enlightenment, there arose in theological circles a heightened sensitivity to the historically constructed and therefore contingent character of religious beliefs, texts, and traditions. The extensive implications of this “historical turn” are reflected in the shifting compositions of university faculties and curricula during this time, as universities themselves grew beyond the medieval organizational structures to become centres of historical scholarship.<sup>1</sup> With regard to the study of theology, this emerging historical mindset signalled both crisis and opportunity, giving rise to new modes of historical and critical study of biblical texts, bold revisions of central Christian doctrines, and a progressive refashioning of the methods of theological enquiry around the determinative and foundational role of historical understanding. Displaced from its long-held seat as *sacra facultas* and queen of the sciences, university theology was no longer singly concerned with the sapiential task of clarifying and illuminating timeless Christian truths but with careful and rigorous study of the historical development of Christian life and thought.<sup>2</sup> While some vigorously resisted these new approaches, many theologians and biblical scholars came to emphasise the foundational role that historical scholarship played in responsible theological study. As Friedrich Schleiermacher writes in his 1799 speeches *On Religion*, in terms

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<sup>1</sup> See Johannes Zachhuber, “The Historical Turn”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Christian Thought*, eds. Joel D.S. Rasmussen, Judith Wolfe, and Johannes Zachhuber (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 53–57. In the early nineteenth century, the fields of history and classical philology in particular, previously considered as subordinate “helping sciences (*Hilfswissenschaften*)”, emerged as fully independent disciplines that experienced rapid growth in influence and prestige, such that their rigorous scholarly methods became normative for other university disciplines. See Thomas Albert Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 274–276.

<sup>2</sup> See Gijsbert van den Brink, “How Theology Stopped Being *Regina Scientiarum* – And How its Story Continues”, *Studies in Christian Ethics* 32, no. 4 (2019), pp. 442–454.



that would become programmatic for the century to come, “History, in the most proper sense, is the highest object of religion.”<sup>3</sup>

This shift towards historicisation within theology has had longstanding implications, and the fascination with historical research and the critical study of religious texts and traditions has become a defining feature of modern western Christian thought. Yet descriptions of this historical mindset at times also overlook the complex, varied, and discordant character of the attempts to integrate historical understanding and Christian belief. Throughout the nineteenth century, the twin tasks of grasping the “the most proper sense” of history alluded to by Schleiermacher and of discerning the role and implications of empirical historical research within theology would yield disparate and often contradictory perspectives. Together with the shared conviction of the need for a thoroughly historical framework in Christian theology stood a number of enduring tensions concerning the method and scope of historical scholarship overall. Among nineteenth-century theologians, divisions began to surface concerning the proper relation between philosophical speculation or “presuppositions” and empirical research, whether historical development was better conceived as an organic and interconnected unity or treated in the particularity of individual movements and events, and how the uncertain and probabilistic character of historical judgements could lend support to the absolute claims of faith. What united thinkers of this time, then, was less a consensus position regarding the method and implications of historical research in theology than a common acknowledgement of the ongoing challenge of reconciling historical and critical methods with the central tenets of Christian faith, and of doing so in a manner that would not undermine the integrity of the Christian tradition. Ernst Troeltsch, writing at the close of the nineteenth century, captures the precarious position of such historically minded theology: “Once applied to the scientific study of the Bible and church history, the historical method acts as a leaven, transforming everything and ultimately exploding the very form of earlier theological methods.”<sup>4</sup>

The fifteen essays gathered in this volume pursue these various dimensions of the growing historicisation in academic theology, examining both the far-reaching influence of this emergent historical consciousness in Christian thought and the diverse and at times clashing attempts to establish a properly historical theological method. As these essays indicate, the rising trend towards

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<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. and ed. Richard Crouter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 42. Quoted in Zachhuber, “The Historical Turn”, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> See Ernst Troeltsch’s 1898 essay, “On the Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology” in Troeltsch, *Religion in History*, trans. James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), p. 12. See also Christophe Chalamet, ed., *The Challenge of History* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2020), pp. 9–11.

historicism in the modern study of theology and religion itself reflects a particular historical context, the development of the modern German research university in the long nineteenth century. Academic theology's historical turn in large part owes its character to reform movements and curricular revisions at the universities of Göttingen and Halle in the late eighteenth century, the founding of the self-consciously modern University of Berlin in 1810, and the prominence of the Protestant and Catholic faculties of the University of Tübingen in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Within this university context, newly discovered Enlightenment historiographical methods combined with the Romantic ideal of "science" as *Wissenschaft* and with a particular conception of history as an organic interconnected development, a continuum of growth by which the present is understood through the past. The resulting mindset, what the Catholic church historian Ignaz von Döllinger later described as the "German historical sense", presented itself in a disinterested commitment to the ongoing enterprise of human knowing and the ceaseless drive for "independent and historical research" that would press beyond the bounds of traditional doctrinal formula to get to "the very core and bottom of things".<sup>6</sup>

The transformative impact of this methodological approach for nineteenth- and twentieth-century German theology is clearly apparent in the essays that follow. Yet its influence goes well beyond German universities. By the late nineteenth century, the scholarship produced by such *wissenschaftliche* theology<sup>7</sup> had been translated and received in American seminaries, had come to reshape university curricula in the United Kingdom and the United States, and had given rise to further scholarly movements that fall outside the ambit of Christian theology, as in the development of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.<sup>8</sup>

As these essays further demonstrate, however, the growth of this historical and "scientific" theological mindset was neither smooth nor continuous. From the outset, "*wissenschaftliche* theology" and "historical theology" appeared as sharply contested terms. Accordingly, while many figures and schools treated in this volume take up this language, each invests it with a distinct and partic-

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<sup>5</sup> See Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University*, pp. 104–121.

<sup>6</sup> Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University*, p. 326.

<sup>7</sup> The German terms *Wissenschaft* and *wissenschaftlich* pose a variety of challenges for translation, particularly as the words "science" and "scientific", the nearest English equivalents, are more commonly used to refer specifically to the physical or natural sciences rather than to broader historical or cultural studies. Recognizing this difficulty, the essays in the present volume at times leave these terms untranslated, as in the description "*wissenschaftliche* theology", in order to underscore their broader connotations.

<sup>8</sup> On the influence of this German model on American universities, see the essays in *The Rise of the Research University: A Sourcebook*, eds. Louis Menand, Paul Reitter, and Chad Wellmon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), especially pp. 123–228.

ular meaning. The project of historical theology pursued by Ferdinand Christian Baur is – quite pointedly – not the sense of the historical theology or historical criticism outlined by Friedrich Schleiermacher in his *Brief Outline of Theology*. Similarly, Adolf von Harnack’s intricate understanding of the tasks of *wissenschaftliche Theologie*, which were later repudiated by Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, differs notably from the emphatically scientific approach to theology proposed by Albrecht Ritschl. If scholars of nineteenth-century Christian thought broadly agree that this was a time of theology’s progressive *Verwissenschaftlichung* and the growth of theological historicism overall, still during this period one finds significantly differing understandings of what exactly such an historicist and scientific theological approach entails.

In this respect, the debate concerning the properly scientific study of theology, which occupied the leading thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was not so much resolved but rather overtaken by a new set of theological concerns and the urgent demands of a changing social and political context. Yet this debate also establishes a continuing legacy in the persistent call for methods and approaches in the academic study of theology and religion that closely attend to historical and social context. As these essays indicate, the implications of this conversation continue to shape contemporary discussions of the place of the study of theology and religion in the university.

## A. Aims of the Volume

Questions surrounding the genesis and development of modern academic theology, and its uneasy relationship with the shifting intellectual culture of the modern research university, have drawn renewed interest in recent years. Over the past few decades, an increasing number of detailed studies have inquired into the emergence of scientific, or *wissenschaftliche*, theology in the nineteenth century and offered nuanced understandings of particular thinkers and debates associated with this movement.<sup>9</sup> This volume presents a unique contribution to this ongoing conversation, offering a focused treatment of the shifting contours of historical and critical theology as it develops in the modern German research university during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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<sup>9</sup> See *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought*, eds. Nicholas Adams, George Pattison, and Graham Ward (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Christian Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). See also Johannes Zachhuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth-Century Germany: From F.C. Baur to Ernst Troeltsch* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Zachary Purvis, *Theology and the University in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

The principal aim of this work is to advance a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of the complex debate concerning *wissenschaftliche* theology and its place in the modern university. In more specific terms, however, the volume aims to illuminate four interrelated aspects of this debate.

It first considers the disputed relationship between Christian thought and the demands of *Wissenschaftlichkeit* in the various theological programmes that attempted to reconcile central tenets of Christian faith with critical and historical research methods in the modern German university. The question of whether, and to what degree, the academic study of theology could claim to be scientific and *wissenschaftlich* recurs in each generation in the long nineteenth century, and is asked by virtually every significant theologian from Schleiermacher to Harnack to Bonhoeffer. Accordingly, scientific, or “*wissenschaftliche*”, theology and historical criticism are terms that appear repeatedly throughout this volume. Despite this consistent focus, however, *wissenschaftliche* theology was not a stable category but rather a contested concept that does not admit of a final, settled definition.

Second, this work attends to the diverse mid- and late-nineteenth-century attempts to appropriate scientific and historical-critical methods within both Protestant and Catholic university theology, and to clarify the ambiguous institutional standing of theology in its relationship to communities of faith, ecclesiastical authorities, and state-sponsored universities. Each chapter of the volume examines the challenge of the historical study of theology in foundational figures and contexts, while also attending to ongoing debates concerning the relationship between supernatural revelation and empirical-historical research, the rise and fall of “historicism” in theology, the competing locales of church and university, the tension between universities and the state, and the place and function of theology in the increasingly specialised modern research university.

Third, and following upon this variety of methodological approaches within the university, the volume situates the early-twentieth-century crisis of historicism and the theological debates concerning revelation within the broader discussion of the continued viability of these scientific and historical-critical research methods. The question of theology's place in the modern university and the challenge of relating empirical historical research to enduring norms and values were pressing concerns for Adolf von Harnack as well as Ernst Troeltsch. So too both the dialectical theology of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's christocentric understanding of revelation in the church develop against the backdrop of scientific and historicised academic theology, even as they shift focus away from it.

Finally, this volume considers the shifting location of the academic study of religion in the modern research university under the growing influence of historical and philological methodologies. In this respect, while not directly considering the late-nineteenth-century emergence of *Religionswissenschaft* as an

alternative academic discipline, the volume sets the background for understanding the subsequent divergence of academic theology and the comparative “science of religion” as distinct and competing fields of enquiry.<sup>10</sup>

While these four areas largely concern developments within nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century German theology, they also confront issues that continue to resound in methodological debates within European and North American universities. It is our hope that a fuller understanding of these developments may thus shed light on the ongoing and unresolved methodological disputes in the academic study of theology and religion.

## B. Organization of the Volume

The fifteen chapters of this volume trace the evolving discussions concerning *wissenschaftliche* theology both within and beyond the modern German university. The initial chapters present foundational discussions of theology’s historical and scientific character that developed at the universities of Halle, Berlin, and Tübingen through the contributions of figures such as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schleiermacher, F.C. Baur, and Albrecht Ritschl. As Michael Legaspi argues (chapter 1), the narrative of the nineteenth-century rise of historicism obscures and neglects the sophisticated historical scholarship that had already developed in the eighteenth century at the University of Halle, in the civil philosophy of Christian Thomasius and the “civil theology” of J.S. Semler. Yet at the turn of the nineteenth century, the academic study of theology takes a new and distinctive course through the decisive influences of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Jacqueline Mariña inquires into the contrasting positions of Kant and Schleiermacher on the understanding of religion and the ground and limits of religious knowledge claims (chapter 2), outlining two distinct visions for the place of theology in the modern university. Kevin Vander Schel continues this enquiry into Schleiermacher’s vision for theology in the university by further considering his unique brand of “historicism” (chapter 3), which envisions a critical framework of “mixed” disciplines for historical enquiry that hold empirical and speculative aspects in tension, and

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<sup>10</sup> In this connection it is notable that Friedrich Max Müller, who is often credited with laying the groundwork for this new “science of religion”, received his doctorate in 1843 from the University of Leipzig in comparative philology. See Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University*, pp. 282–283. If Schleiermacher’s 1799 speeches on religion set the theological programme for the nineteenth century, Harnack’s 1901 University of Berlin address, “The Task of Theological Faculties and the General History of Religion” sets out the problems that dominate the twentieth-century, in the divergence of academic theology from the comparative study of religion.

which establishes a lasting yet ambiguous legacy for historically minded theological scholarship.

As Peter Hodgson and Johannes Zachhuber indicate, the subsequent theological programmes of F.C. Baur and Albrecht Ritschl at the University of Tübingen at once build upon and reshape this new enterprise of scientific and historically grounded theology (chapters 4 and 5). Baur's posthumously published *Church and Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, Hodgson argues, richly illustrates his influential conception of historical theology as a critical discipline mediating between faith and *Wissenschaft*, while also underscoring his awareness of the increasing tensions between Christian confessional truths and empirical historical study in nineteenth-century German theology. These tensions are also evident in the 1861 academic debate between Albrecht Ritschl and Eduard Zeller concerning the significance of historical criticism for theology and the legacy of Baur's theological programme. Zachhuber explores Ritschl's criticisms of Baur's method as overly indebted to positivistic Hegelian philosophical presuppositions and tending towards a reductive historical approach, a position that contrasts notably with Ritschl's alternative programme of historical theology and its emphasis on religious practice and historical individuality.

This continuing dispute surrounding the proper role and limits of historical research within theology also highlights the tenuous position of university theology in relation to the church and the academy. Zachary Purvis considers the far-reaching but curiously neglected influence of August Neander on the development of church history and historical theology (chapter 7). A principal member of the theological faculty at the University of Berlin, Neander's rigorously detailed monographs in church history, Purvis maintains, provide a unique and distinctively empathetic approach to historical enquiry, which merits closer comparison with the works of Baur and Leopold von Ranke. Grant Kaplan examines the innovative understanding of *wissenschaftliche* theology that emerges in the Catholic Tübingen School, particularly in the writings of Johann Sebastian von Drey and Johannes Kuhn (chapter 6), which developed in conscious relation to the influences of Schleiermacher and Baur and outline an influential and distinctively Catholic approach to recovering the relationship between history and theology.

The volume further inquires into the transmission of this research model outside the context of German university theology. Matthew Muller and Kenneth Parker consider the reception of historical research in Catholic theology by examining the prominent role John Henry Newman assigns to historical study in his understanding of academic theology (chapter 8). While remaining critical of the research-driven university model that had emerged in Germany, Newman's 1873 work *The Idea of a University* outlines an educational vision for the Catholic University in Dublin that nonetheless sought to incorporate

and remain open to aspects of modern historical scholarship, such as the writings produced by the Catholic Tübingen School and the Catholic historian Ignaz von Döllinger. Such historical approaches to theological scholarship also exerted an increasing influence in England, as Mark Chapman indicates (chapter 9). While many English academics and theologians remained wary of adopting the ideals of *Wissenschaftlichkeit* and *Historismus* that characterised their German counterparts, other scholars such as Julius Hare and Connop Thirlwall embraced this perspective and played an important role in mediating German historical and critical thinking into Anglican theology. A cautious admiration for such scientific and historically rigorous methods in theology was also found in American seminaries, where works of German historical theology were translated throughout the late nineteenth century. A particularly influential figure in this transatlantic exchange, Annette Aubert argues (chapter 10), was Union Theological Seminary professor Henry Boynton Smith, whose work in synthesising and translating theological encyclopedia and texts in German historical theology helped to cultivate a more rigorous discipline of church history in American colleges and seminaries in the late nineteenth century. Such historical-critical methodologies also had an impact outside the bounds of Christian theology, as in the nineteenth-century movement of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, which carried out critical investigations into Jewish thought and culture. As Asher Biemann illustrates (chapter 11), this movement played a significant role in the works of thinkers such as Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, and Franz Rosenzweig.

Finally, the volume examines the early-twentieth-century crisis surrounding historicised, *wissenschaftliche* theology, and the debates concerning historicism and revelation. The chapters by Jonathan Teubner and Christian Polke examine responses to the concerns of historicism and the continued viability of historical theology in the writings of Adolf von Harnack and Ernst Troeltsch. Harnack's dedication to rigorously scientific historical scholarship in theology, Teubner maintains, is manifested in his painstakingly methodical historical investigations, which aimed at understanding and appropriating the living significance of the person and life of Jesus Christ apart from supernatural and metaphysical claims (chapter 12). In a similar vein, Polke suggests, Troeltsch's influential understanding of historicism in theology does not signal a relativising or value-free critical method but outlines a constructive reflective orientation that includes constitutive, existential, and religious dimensions (chapter 14). Karl Barth developed his own unique theological approach, as Christophe Chalameat demonstrates, in conscious distinction from the historicised methodologies of Troeltsch and Harnack, arguing that the scientific character of theology properly resides in its uncompromising adherence to the recollection that its first subject matter is the revealed Word of God (chapter 13). Michael DeJonge shows how Bonhoeffer, with a *mélange* of Barthian, Kierkegaardian, and Heideggerian insights, dissolves the nineteenth-century problem of faith

and history, and with it the need for historical criticism to make a revelatory past available to the present (chapter 15).

The variety of approaches outlined in these essays serves to indicate both the wide-ranging scope and the tenacious character of the debate surrounding the use of historical-critical methods in theology, the echoes of which continue to resound in the ongoing methodological disputes in theology and the academic study of religion.

This volume is the product of a broad and sustained collaborative effort. We wish to extend thanks in particular to each of the contributing authors, for their investment in this project and commitment to the volume throughout each stage of its development. Our thanks are also due to Jeanie LeGendre, Mikayla Kaiser, and Barbara Bicelis, research assistants at the University of South Florida, for their careful work in revising and formatting earlier drafts of the chapters included here. We are indebted as well to Morgan Driess for their valuable assistance in copyediting and formatting the manuscript in its final stages. And we are grateful to the James F. Strange fund for generously supporting this editorial labor.

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