

History, Relativity, and Pluralism

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Theology in the nineteenth century and even more in the twentieth has experienced its own life as afflicted by critical history, cognitive relativity, and religious pluralism. Ernst Troeltsch can stand as an exemplary figure who focused these challenges. They remain challenges for theology today. He was an “insider,” a Christian theologian and philosopher who took them to heart. Outsiders could be dismissed, but with Troeltsch, the legitimacy of the problem has been acknowledged. It can no longer be denied.

I would like to argue in this paper that history, relativity, and pluralism are not threats to Christian orthodoxy but should be taken as its best friends.

To do that, I presuppose the argument about exposure, limitation, and need in the paper that Edward Hobbs and I wrote on the Trinity.¹ In that paper, we argued that exposure, whatever insults one’s sense of legitimacy and rightness, should be met with acknowledgement, repentance, remorse, and amendment of life. Exposure brings freedom. Limitation, whatever limits one’s plans and desires for action, should be met with innovation, initiative, and gratitude. Limitation opens the way to creativity. Need, other people’s need for my time and efforts and resources, should be met with open eyes, open hands, and an open heart. Need brings fellowship.

The thesis in this paper is that critical history, cultural relativity, and religious pluralism are respectively species of exposure, limitation, and need. They should be welcomed, for they bring blessings. We shall see how theology meets such challenges.

The theologian may, of course, reject the challenges, and seek instead to reprimarinate the tradition as if the challenges were of no merit. But if history,

¹Andrew P. Porter and Edward C. Hobbs, “The Trinity and the Indo-European Tripartite Worldview,” *Budhi* 3:2-3 (1999) 1-28. It is on the Net at <http://www.jedp.com/trinity.html>.

relativity, and pluralism are admitted as important, then other responses will be necessary. If reparation is chosen, the theologian can retreat to the tradition as if the modern challenges could be fended off unscathed. If the theologian remains open to critical history, the tradition as it has been *literally* received from the past cannot be continued, because one or another of its features has been undermined by critical history and the awareness of relativity and pluralism. It is nevertheless still possible to vindicate that tradition, if one can honestly retell its story so as to see the analogies between faith in the past and in the present.

The challenge of evolution was and is superficial compared to the challenge of critical history, a challenge that was built up slowly over several centuries, many careers, and many issues. Evolution could be coopted, if necessary, as merely God's miraculous way of creating. It would have been the same game by different means. Critical history, on the other hand, goes much deeper, and could not be fended off so easily.² For it undermines an entire way of thinking about biblical history. To think critically about history is to undergo a conversion of method and a conversion of standards.

Indeed, things came to a head in the figure of Ernst Troeltsch. Orthodox theology accepted the Biblical narratives as more or less literally true. Liberal Theology, on the other hand, of which Troeltsch was in many ways in his own time the dean, felt obliged to face the critical history that had developed among biblical scholars in the nineteenth century.

As Troeltsch understood it, orthodox Christianity was obliged to claim an absoluteness that was independent of history, invulnerable to the uncertainties of historical knowledge, and superior to the claims of any other religion. He sought to overcome the uncertainties of critical history, cultural relativity, and religious pluralism, on the assumption that orthodox Christianity was incompatible with them. Yet he sought a way to overcome them by living with them, for he himself was committed to critical history and aware of its destructive implications for the traditional dogmatic method as few others have ever been. His constructive thought ended in retreat, with the critical problems unsolved. I would like to build constructively on his critical rather than on his constructive thought. The critical thought is a more reliable starting point.

It takes but a little reflection to notice that what exposure does for or to individuals, critical history does to entire traditions. Critical history of the Bible

²See for example, Troeltsch's "Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology," in *Religion in History*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1991.

had shown that things in Israelite religion and early Christianity were not as advertised. Some rejoiced in the excuse to dismiss Christianity as bunk. Others persisted in scholarship, in the spirit of “If it was not what we thought, then what *was* it?”

Similarly, what limitation does for individuals, cultural relativity does for entire traditions. It defines the limits of the possible, and enables the tradition to live within those limits.

And as others’ need on an individual scale brings demands for help and offers of fellowship, a parallel can be seen on the scale of cultures and religious traditions. Actually, there are precedents *within* the Bible for multiple traditions coming together. Edward C. Hobbs has collected the evidence of much scholarship to trace pluralism throughout the Bible.³ The tribes that came out of Egypt, or at any rate came together in the Land of Israel, were not originally related to one another, and did not originally have common gods. They forged a unity over a period of centuries. Their original pluralism was forgotten but it remained as a dynamic within biblical religion well into the Common Era. Indeed, pluralism keeps coming back. No sooner does monotheism becomes uniform in a particular age and culture than people reinvent variety, and pluralism returns again.

There are warrants for seeing history, relativity, and pluralism as instances of exposure, limitation, and need, and for welcoming them accordingly.

What was not in the Trinity paper of Hobbs and Porter was attention to the important role of history in biblical religion. Mircea Eliade saw it in *Cosmos and History*,⁴ Paul Ricoeur picked up some of it in *The Symbolism of Evil*,⁵ and Merold Westphal presents a student’s guide to it in *God, Guilt, and Death*.⁶ Contemporary with Eliade was H. Richard Niebuhr’s analysis of history in *The Meaning of Revelation*,⁷ to which we shall come momentarily. In Westphal’s appraisal, there are at least three qualitatively different basic kinds of religion. In the first, human life is affirmed as part of nature, and there is no such thing as

³“Pluralism in the Biblical Context,” Pacific Coast Theological Society, November 16-17 1973, available on the Net at <http://www.pcts.org/pluralism.html>.

⁴Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History / The Myth of the Eternal Return*. The original was published in 1949, and translated in 1959. Princeton University Press, 1965, 1971, 1974.

⁵Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1967.

⁶Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt and Death; An Existential Phenomenology of Religion*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984.

⁷H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, hardback, New York, Macmillan, 1941; paperback, New York, Collier Macmillan, 1960.

history. History is disorder and so evil, if it is seen at all. Your job is to fit into nature naturally. In the second, human life in this world is affirmed as part of history, included in which is nature. The mode of affirmation in world-affirming historical religions will be somewhat different from the world-affirming nature religions. In Westphal's third type, exilic religion, one can reject life in this world as defective and seek a better life in some other, treating human life in this world as a state of exile from that earlier and better state. The ancient gnosticisms are the conspicuous examples of exilic religion in the West.

There are doubtless other possibilities. H. Richard Niebuhr found at least one more, in which a human community effectively worships itself. He called this type of religion a *henotheism*, one what has one god, but not the God that creates and defines all being as good, simply as being. When any human concept or institution becomes the ultimate focus of meaning, the resulting way of life is defined to be a henotheism. Religions in fact are more often of mixed type than pure. Be all that as it may, our focus in this paper is on world-affirming historical religions, "historical-covenantal" religion in Westphal's phrase, religions of the biblical type.

The task of historical religion is to affirm human life in this world in history. That can be difficult, in view of its pains. Some days it can seem easy, some days it can seem hard. Suffering can mount to affliction. The sequence of documents from Qoheleth to Job and Deutero-Isaiah, the New Testament and the Talmuds sharpens the problem of pain in life. The rabbis in the Bavli, meditating on Isaiah 45.7, state the claim in theoretical clarity and appalling bluntness:

What is meant by being bound to bless for the evil in the same way as for the good? Shall I say that, just as for good one says the benediction, "Who is good and bestows good," so for evil one should say the benediction, "Who is good and bestows good"?⁸

They answer in the affirmative. It is this transformation of the pains and evils of life into good and blessings that is the heart of radical monotheism. Now critical history, cultural relativity, and religious pluralism hardly seem like big pains in contrast to all the bloody travails of the twentieth century. But they are painful enough that many theologians and the majority of believers reject them as barren and devoid of any possibility for blessing.

It should be noticed at this point that what counts as exposure, what counts as truth in human lives, is itself a historical concept. The categories by which we

⁸Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 60b; Soncino translation, p. 379 (London: Soncino Press, 1978). The Mishnah is 9.5.

understand human life after Kant, Feuerbach, Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger and so on, are very different from what they were before Kant. In slightly different words, you only get answers to questions that you actually ask about human lives, but you learn how to ask new and better questions as history moves on.

If history is seen at all, it is an essential condition of human life. If human life in this world is to be affirmed in full view of its pains, then history had better enable human life as it ought to be lived. Indeed, historical existence as such is not part of the problem, but rather the essential condition for the possibility of a solution to the problem of the pains of life. It is the only place where the divine-human encounter can occur. History has meaning in proportion as it is the stage for this encounter.⁹

I would like to look briefly at H. Richard Niebuhr's explanation of history as revelation, and then return to the problem of the theologian confronted with critical history.

H. Richard Niebuhr pioneered these issues. *The Meaning of Revelation* would make a frustrating guide, for it is a complicated work. I shall extract a small part of its argument, and leave its problems for another time. Niebuhr cut his theological teeth on Troeltsch's thought, and prized Troeltsch's critical thought alongside the constructive thought of Karl Barth. The central part of the argument in *The Meaning of Revelation* tells how history works as revelation in the life of a community that is open to its gifts. It is a very different and very upbeat account in comparison to the last chapter of *Cosmos and History*, for Eliade saw focused in history the very pains that can destroy you. It is not as if Niebuhr did not see them. He responded, with Job, seeing them quite clearly: "Though it slay us, yet will we trust it."¹⁰

Niebuhr defines revelation as "that part of our inner history which illuminates the rest of it and which is itself intelligible."¹¹ This is a phenomenological approach to the problem. Revelation is not taken to be a supernatural phenomenon at the outset, making phenomenology impossible. In what followed, there were many qualifications, a host of misunderstandings were fended off, and a neo-Kantian conceptual apparatus was erected to frame the concept of history as revelation.

⁹Cf. *God, Guilt, and Death* (Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 243.

¹⁰*Radical Monotheism*, p. 122.

¹¹*The Meaning of Revelation*, p. 93 (hardback edition), p. 68 (paperback edition).

Be all that as it may, I would like to limit matters to the immediate issue, what Niebuhr says history does for a community of faith.

In Niebuhr's exposition, the revelatory moment in history makes the past intelligible. We remember more, and it fits together in a coherent narrative. The past is no longer senseless. In effect, it becomes possible to function in history, to make sense of choices and possibilities in the present because they fit into a larger narrative. This is how history functions as blessing in limitation: it endows its children with possibility in limitation.

History also works as exposure, for revelation resurrects the forgotten and buried and embarrassing past. The sins, betrayals, denials, follies, what we had denied and suppressed, all come back in the light of the revelatory moment. Unburyng the past is confession of sin.

And history as revelation works to meet need. For those who join the community not only bring their own histories to it but also adopt and appropriate its history as their own. (This is exactly what happened with the tribes of Israel, some of whom came out of Egypt, some of whom came from parts unknown; cf. Edward Hobbs on pluralism in the Bible.) Niebuhr goes on to say that history at this point makes it possible for estranged communities to be reconciled. This may seem counter-intuitive, and we shall overcome that intuition in a moment.

If this is how history works for good in the life of a community, how is a historian to make sense of historical religion in hindsight? That is the problem we began with, the plight of the theologian confronted with critical history. There are, it seems to me, two kinds of options. The theologian can seek to repriminate the tradition, to restore it to its sparkling and unblemished state before the challenges arrived. That is done by fending off the challenges, undermining them, rebutting them. In practice, now, it means a retreat to some age before Kant. Kant is not the messiah, but he was a kind of watershed, a crossing-point into the modern world in which theologians are expected to be critical of their own traditions in ways that they never were before. Fundamentalisms are one form of reprimination, but by no means the only form.

What is the theologian to do if revisionist history tells us that things were not as the nineteenth-century version of tradition says they were? This will take more work. In a sense, the tradition itself is undermined. The minimalist account of Jesus leaves us with the childhood in Nazareth, the baptism, and the crucifixion, and very little else. No messianic consciousness, no details of the life of Jesus, no physical resurrection. And in the Common Documents—the documents shared

by the Church and the Synagogue—we find similar bereavements. Actually, the “damage” was done there first. Christians were less invested in the “Old Testament” (functional Marcionites, embarrassingly), and they perfected the tools of critical history on the Common Documents. Little of solid detail is left of the patriarchs, nothing of the primeval history and the creation stories, and only a minimalist account of the Exodus. The first real history begins with the monarchy, in the Succession Narrative of the reigns of David and Solomon. Given the central place that the Exodus is now seen to occupy in the Common Documents, even by Christian scholars, this turn of events is not without its chills.

Put baldly, it is impossible to say that God came down and spoke to human beings in anything like what the Baroque orthodoxy took as the literal sense. Even the traditional figurative senses won’t work. What we have is not immediately what one could recognize as “revelation,” but rather just history of religions. It is a complex development of world-affirming historical religion out of a matrix of originally world-affirming nature religions and henotheisms. Later, there were also entanglements with gnosticisms in and after the disasters of the first century. The Deuteronomic historians’ (or their sources’) disapprovals extend even to David and Solomon; the modern scholar’s disapprovals are radical and all-pervasive by comparison.

Yet all is not lost. At this point, the historically-minded theologian is not bereft or abandoned. For, surveying the history of religions, one can locate in the Exodus, dim and minimally visible though it be to the historian, the watershed at which the crossing was made into world-affirming historical religion. And thereby began a process that continues into the present, radicalizing the understanding of what it means to affirm human life in history at the crucial turning points since the beginning. We can do the “same thing” as they did, in an analogical sense, and so continue in the same religion, in either of the two surviving Exodus traditions. But equally clearly, we have surrendered and overturned the accounts of “orthodoxy” that were accepted as recently as the nineteenth century (and still are, for those who would repristinate them).

Now there are parallels to such a turn of intellectual fortune, parallels that are widely known if not widely mastered in their technical details. For this is what happened in physics to classical mechanics, first with relativity, and then again with quantum mechanics. (And unknown outside of mathematics departments is the fact that something similar happened to the calculus in the nineteenth century.) One could multiply examples. Just to exhibit the formidable algebraic aspect of

the change, the formulas for kinetic energy in classical and relativistic mechanics don't look at all alike: In classical mechanics, kinetic energy is given by $(1/2)mv^2$. In relativity, it is given by $mc^2/\sqrt{1 - v^2/c^2}$. It takes some work with the latter hideous expression to show that it is approximated by the former expression (plus a constant that does not matter). At this point, one may say that relativity *vindicates* classical mechanics at the same time as it overthrows it. For relativity shows that in circumstances where the velocities are small compared to c , the velocity of light, the classical formulas work quite well. Extremely well, in fact.

This is how vindication of a past tradition works: the past tradition is simultaneously relativized (and often overthrown in that relativization) and at the same time shown to be valid, under a new interpretation. This is a move that has been remarked some in recent philosophy of science, but such moves are not new, nor original in the sciences. Covenantal religion has been reinvented more than once, each time with a deep creativity and a sense of how to vindicate the past. But usually, the creativity has been covered up. Sometimes even from those who were creative.

Something like this is what I am proposing as a general method in the critical history of biblical religion. The means to do it have been around, and are from time to time deployed successfully by theologians even now. It is hardly original with me. At this point, one may well ask, if it was so easy in physics, why is it so hard in theology? Let me develop that problem in what remains of the paper. First, we should look at what can happen when vindication is not possible.

Sometimes the theologian in hindsight must deal with events that remain deplorable. In my view, there was much that was reprehensible in the way that the Church and the Synagogue parted company. They both assumed that only one daughter religion could inherit legitimately from the ashes of the Second Temple. And each devised characteristic apologetic strategies for disinheriting the other. On the Christian side, things took a very nasty further turn in the Marcionite crisis. For out of the response to Marcion came the supersessionist rhetoric that festered until, loosed from its doctrinal restraints by the Enlightenment, it evolved into simple anti-semitism. The Church repudiated Marcion—officially—but adopted far too many of his presuppositions. One could cite other examples, to be sure, but the history of anti-Jewish theology is in present perspective the largest and longest-running failed engagement in Christian theology.

What is the theologian to do? All the figures in the parting of the ways between the Church and the Synagogue can be redeemed—none were depraved—

but it will not be easy. The story has to be retold, by re-contextualizing it with new possibilities that were not seen at the time. And often, in subsequent centuries, it was not to be pretty, and the retelling also will not be pretty.

We count them as mere human beings like ourselves, but credit them for the intent to live within the covenant. Others have begun to re-envision the history of the first century, and to see how both the surviving rabbis and the leaders of the Jesus movement sought, each in their different ways, to continue the covenant inherited from Second Temple Judaism—without the Second Temple. In the light of that appraisal, neither need be disinherited from the Exodus covenant. This is an example of what H. Richard Niebuhr meant by retelling history so that estranged communities could be reconciled. The retelling is in progress, not finished yet. Nor is the reconciliation.

At this point, we have two options for the theologian. The first response is repristination, for those inclined to reject critical history, cognitive relativity, and religious pluralism as theologically barren. For those who are willing to be open to history, relativity, and pluralism, the second response lies in the pair of strategies in vindication of the past (where possible) and redemption (where necessary), and it can work to reclaim the tradition in a living form. Vindication has a high cost—for the tradition is first overthrown, as a prelude to its vindication. Repristination would seem to be much more comforting.

Let us dig deeper. What are the means and the motives of these different strategies?

A program to repristinate the tradition would attempt to recover for the theological language of the past an objectivity and solidity and over-against-us facticity that it appears to have had in that blessed past. There are at least two possible motives for a program of repristination. The first is that it makes the content of religious faith objective. This is built into its method. The believer is then relieved of responsibility for his faith. One can then answer Jesus's question (just to take an example), "Who do you say that I am?" with "You said that you were so-and-so," or "We know that you are so-and-so, from such-and-such evidence." The question has been dodged in its dimension of asking for existential commitment. At this point, the believer can evade the exposure that is built-in as an essential feature of a confessional stance, accountability for his own religion.

A second motive for repristination comes from a feature of its content. It travels with a "literal" interpretation of the miracle texts. In the literal interpretation of the miracles, people subject to limitation are excused from their limitations. But

there is another way to read these texts. Edward Hobbs tumbled to the similarity between the miracle texts and contemporary television advertisements, in which the “miraculous” happens routinely, and the viewer is expected to know that these special effects are not “literally” true.¹² A product is being promoted in both cases. The problem is not just that the modern reading of the miracle texts is perverse; there is more. The God who works these “miracles” is “all-powerful,” which in this context means that he is not himself subject to limitation. The gods of human beings usually are what human beings aspire to imitate, and this one is no exception. The people of this god want to get out of limitation, and it is appropriate that their god gets people out of limitation in their reading of the miracle texts.

One may then ask about need. Need tends to be forgotten, and the needy just get stiffed. Specifically, in the cosmos of the traditional dogmatic orthodoxy, the needy will either be provided for in eternity (so we don’t have to help them now), or the people of other religions will be consigned to hell (so we can even blame them as we abandon them).

Clearly, the old dogmatic method and attempts to recover and repriminate it put these goals within reach of the theologian. One may fairly ask at this point, If evasion of exposure, limitation, and need was not the goal of a program of reprimination, why is such a program necessary?

There is one conceivably honorable motive for attempts at reprimination, but it is based on a misunderstanding. Reprimination is presented as a way to oppose nihilism. One hears often enough attributed to deconstruction and postmodernism what is in fact just a nihilistic relativism, the idea that nothing means anything, and only power relations are left. In the estimate of twentieth-century critics who accused it of “onto-theology,” the older dogmatic theology that reprimination programs seek to recover thought that it could grasp the deepest conditions of its own existence. A philosophy and theology that make this impossible could indeed seem to be promoting nihilistic relativism—but only on the additional assumption that one must actually have a grasp on one’s own deepest conditions in order to do anything positive or constructive with life. At this point, we might notice that “relativism” is an odd term for nihilism, for a thesis of relativity to time and place would seem to indicate that one really does know what to do and believe—relative to one’s own time and place. This is quite the opposite of nihilism. At this point, the

¹²Edward Craig Hobbs, "Gospel Miracle Story and Modern Miracle Stories," in *Gospel Studies in Honor of Sherman Elbridge Johnson*, ed. Massey H. Shepherd Jr. and Edward C. Hobbs, *Anglican Theological Review*, Supplemental Series, Number Three, March 1974.

game of both the nihilists and those who react to them can be unmasked. They both want an absoluteness that does not merely transcend relativity to time and place but abolishes it outright. The nihilist thinks it can't be had; the reactionary thinks it can. By contrast, the thesis of relativity is but another name for creaturehood, for it simply asserts the limitations that a creature is subject to. Both the nihilist and the reactionary are in rebellion against the limits of creaturehood.

What then is necessary for a program of vindication and/or redemption to work? The theologian and believer must be open to a confessional method. This means surrender of all claims of proof for the "content" of religious belief. It leaves one helpless before an adversary who taunts, "Where, now, O Israel, is your God?" It means that in the asking and giving of reasons for how one lives, eventually one comes to a stopping point, or better, the starting point, and answers "Why" questions with just "Because that's the way things are." The confessional commitment at this point has presumably made clear what it is committed to, and no further answers are possible. This is not fideism, a demand for faith beyond the limits of reason or intellect, but rather merely the observation that reason (and indeed, life itself) must start someplace, and the starting point is called faith. For people can see how other people live, and choose accordingly. If you ask me *why* should we embrace the pains of life as blessing-bearing, I cannot give you a reason. The most that can be said is that in the end, one can see those who rejected the disappointments of life next to those who embraced them and found blessing in them, sometimes at great cost to themselves. Those who have rejected exposure, limitation, and need can see the comparison, too, and they are unlikely to be pleased by it. That goes also for history, relativity, and pluralism, in particular, as species respectively of exposure, limitation, and need.