Historicism, Religionsgeschichte, and the Rhetoric of Eschatology

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Abstract
The article discusses the central role of the history of religion in the debate on the so-called “crisis of historicism” during the first half of the twentieth century. I argue that the seemingly marginal question of how to write the history of religion informs major debates about the writing of history and history’s place in culture. Focusing on Ernst Troeltsch’s On Historical and Dogmatical Method in Theology (1900) and Rudolf Bultmann’s History and Eschatology (1955), I analyze how theological and historical arguments and concepts interact in their respective histories of religion. According to Troeltsch, the methods of contemporary Religionsgeschichte (history of religion) undermine not only theological dogma but also such common historicist categories as “reason,” “teleology,” or “essence.” Bultmann, using similar methods, develops a similar critique based on the idea of “historicity,” i.e. an anthropological fundament of understanding oneself historically. Here too, the simple and linear understanding of history is called into question by a decidedly religious element, namely eschatology understood as a radically different temporality. Both cases thus show how tightly religious problems, theological arguments, and historical methods are interwoven, and how much our understanding of history, religion, and their mutual relations is informed by this entanglement.

I
“History’s religion” is an ambivalent term. Like other formulas—religion of history, history of religion—the term belongs to the notorious genre of the genitive construction that allows for multiple interpretations: as a religious attitude towards history—in contrast to a knowledge of history—as a religion that is concerned with history—in contrast to a religion of nature—as a historiography interested in religion—in contrast to a history of mathematics—etc. Discourses, especially disciplinary ones, often try to reduce this ambiguity by establishing a firmer relation between these terms. They may try to control the ambiguity by distinguishing or even contrasting these terms: history is what religion is not, “where religion was, history should be”—arguments that support history as an academic discipline. But one can also deal with this ambiguity in a different manner, opting not for difference, but for identity: history is religion, “in the last instance,” since it has the same “structure,” or “function,” or both are related by a third term, as
“testimony,” “memory,” or, “eschatology.” History and religion would both be forms of memory and thus similar, if not identical.

As long as scholarly history writing conceived of itself as a stable practice, well rooted in the context of the humanities, if not the social sciences, the view that contrasts “historical knowledge” with religion would be used to support its claims, often in the form of a narrative of secularization according to which modernity rests on the gradual decline of the cultural importance of religion. Religion was, in academia, not too interesting and clearly something from the past or from far away, little more than a distant origin from which one had “emancipated” oneself. However, since the 1980s this narrative has crumbled at both ends. The cultural turn, the advent of global history, and the memory turn have shattered the disciplinary stability of history. At the same time, religion became important again in both public and academic discourse and the narrative of secularization lost its plausibility and was increasingly criticized as simplistic, reductive, or even a “myth of modernity.” In fact, a different counternarrative of secularization that had been prominent in the first half of the twentieth century has resurfaced: the notion that secularization is not the decline of religion but its transformation. Most famously expressed by Carl Schmitt, modern politics did not replace theology; rather it is “secularized” theology—an argument that became prominent when global politics seemed to face new states of exception in the twenty-first century. Especially in the context of postcolonial critique, the Western claim of “secularity” was increasingly considered a hegemonic strategy, most succinctly in a formula by Gil Anidjar: “Secularism is a name Christianity gave itself when it invented religion, when it named its other or others as religion.”

The two narratives of secularization as loss or as identity inform the discussion on history’s religion as well. In fact, they are not as opposed to each other as they appear. Historically, they both go back to the same source, namely the Weberian notion of the “disenchantment of the modern world,” which is never as unambiguous as we tend to read it today—after all, “disenchantment” is a metaphor itself and Weber famously also saw the “old gods ascend from their graves.”

Rhetorically, more often than not the ideas of the decline or transformation of religion, and of identity and difference between the religious and the modern, mutually imply each other in complex ways. Asserting the identity of history and religion, for example, usually draws on a narrative that is itself historical in the way it develops a genealogy of that relation, a genealogy that will moreover involve religious concepts and assumptions about the religious “origin” (or “structure”) of history. Instead of replacing one version of “secularization” by its opposite, it might be more fruitful to understand both of them in dialogue.

Anidjar relates his slogan of a Christianity that disguises itself as secularism to Karl Löwith’s Meaning and History from 1949, according to which modern history is essentially determined by Christian eschatology. Löwith’s work is not only a good starting point since it is clearly embedded in the broad debate on secularization. It

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also relates the question of secularization to the notion of history. If one begins to unpack this relation, however, it soon becomes clear that Löwith’s answer is much more ambiguous than Anidjar claims. In fact, it relates to other discourses in ways that are essential to understand both Löwith and more generally the relation of religion to history, namely to the history of religion. In the following I will first give a short glance on Löwith and the meaning of eschatology in his argument and then discuss two examples from the broad spectrum of the school of the history of religion on which Löwith drew: Ernst Troeltsch’s early reflections on the implications of historical method from 1900 and Rudolf Bultmann’s thoughts on history and eschatology from the middle of the century.

II

If secularism is “nothing but” Christianity, then history might also be “nothing but” eschatology. In Meaning and History, Karl Löwith famously claimed that the modern understanding of history is “entirely dependent on theology of history, in particular on the theological concept of history as a history of fulfilment and salvation.” In the introduction of this book, Löwith contrasts modern historiography with the classical Greek historians to support this claim:

The classical historian asks: How did it come about? The modern historian: How shall we go ahead? The reason for this modern concern with the future is that the Hebrew and Christian faith has perverted the classic meaning of *histrórein* and, at the same time, invalidated the classical view of the future as something which can be investigated and known like a fact.4

At this point, Löwith inserts a long quotation from Hermann Cohen’s *Religion of Reason from the Sources of Reason*: “The concept of history is a product of propheticism … What Greek intellectualism could not produce, prophetism has achieved … Time becomes primarily future, and future the primary content of our historical thought.”

Here we see the argument of Löwith’s book in a nutshell: modern history—history as a collective singular, to use Koselleck’s words—is essentially futuristic, and this can be traced back to a religious genealogy. On closer inspection, however, Löwith’s argument is puzzling in different respects. Not only may we wonder whether the religious genealogy really makes the idea of history as dependent on its origin as Löwith suggests. The origin itself is presented quite indirectly: in his own words, Löwith identifies both Jewish prophetism and Christian eschatology as sources. His reference, however, deals exclusively with Jewish prophetism, whereas Löwith’s book will be devoted to Christian eschatology exclusively and never really come back to Jewish prophetism. Moreover, when finally discussing the Christian origin at the end of the book, in a chapter on the New Testament that heavily relies on a contemporary theological interpretation by Oscar Cullmann, he highlights the very difference

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4Ibid., 17.
5Ibid., 17–18.
between the biblical and modern understanding of time: the latter is oriented towards the steady progress of history whereas the biblical texts are focused on the imminent moment, be it the moment of the individual’s decision or the moment of the imminent apocalypse. As a Jew in exile, Löwith seems to claim that there are two origins of history’s religion, one which he will not talk about, and a second one that is not an authentic origin either, since it differs radically from its modern descendants. The Jewish–Christian ambivalence implied here as well as the more specific discourses of reference—Cohen, Cullmann—if taken into account, would not only reveal the fundamentally ironic structure of Löwith’s narrative which stresses again and again that a Christian philosophy of history is inconsistent. Such a perspective would also show that Löwith’s seemingly simple philosophical argument draws on sources that are less visible.

Accordingly, I argue that these sources, the discourses in the background of the philosophical argument, are highly important and worth exploring, since debates of history’s religion have too often focused on the argumentative surface and on the philosophy of history, but ignored the historical and theological presuppositions and implications of that background. I will focus on a specific discourse to which Löwith belongs as well, namely historicism and its crisis, which is important up to the first half of the twentieth century. I maintain that the discussions about the crisis of historicism are often driven by questions about history’s religion and that the way they discuss them is again and again influenced by a common discourse, namely the “history of religion school” (Religionsgeschichtliche Schule), a certain approach in biblical studies current at that time to which, e.g., also the work of Oskar Cullmann belongs. This movement stressed the eschatological element in the formation of Christianity, and its highly specific discussions are also linked to broad questions of history and the fierce debates about historicism and its limits.

The polemical nature of these debates still tempts us to take sides either with the historicists or with their critics. Instead, I will explore the shared premises and the common grammar of the different approaches as well as the specific way in which they constellate the elements and agents of their arguments: Judaism and Christianity; prophetism, apocalypticism, and gnosis; the Synoptics, Paul, and John. As we will see, these arguments are mostly historical in themselves, for their plausibility consists less in specific concepts—by contrast, these concepts remain rather vague as, for instance, in the case of Löwith’s “origin”—than in their narrative structure, which allows the organization of the different materials and constitutes relations between seeming opposites, such as eschatology and progress or meaning and history. This is what I describe as a “rhetoric of eschatology”: eschatology functions less as a clear-cut concept or a highly specific historical phenomenon and more as a rhetorical figure: a figure of thought that organizes the plot of the argument, a narrative shifter that connects different stories into comprehensive arguments, or even a metaphor whose function is rather suggestive than assertive. We can unfold these implicit meanings when we go back to other texts and discourses that make up the background of Löwith’s argument and that also deal intensively with the relation of religion and history: with Ernst Troeltsch and Rudolf Bultmann.
In retrospect, the publication of Adolf von Harnack’s *The Essence of Christianity* in 1900 is often seen as the apex of liberal German Protestantism and its unproblematic, affirmative synthesis of religion, *Wissenschaft*, and culture. In this small booklet, Harnack presented the simple teaching of Jesus as the essential core of Christianity which should be distinguished both from its historical precursors which Harnack painted as moralistic Pharisaism, and from its reception in the emerging church which he had characterized as hellenization in his famous *History of Christian Dogma*. For Harnack, the question of who Jesus was and what he taught—the main topic of the “life-of-Jesus” research throughout the nineteenth century—could be answered by the methods of historical criticism: Jesus taught the Kingdom of God as the inner, individual experience, which has been and will forever remain the core of Christianity. In this constellation, the implied claim goes, the scientific method of historical criticism and the true morality of Christianity work hand in hand, and it is this collaboration that reinforces the claims of cultural Protestantism in both ways: the reconstruction of truth in an emphatic sense is one of the greatest benefits of history; the authenticity of Christianity supports Protestant claims about the value of the origin.

Harnack’s book was very well received, but did not remain unchallenged. Jewish historians argued that Harnack painted Jewish religion in deliberately negative colors to have a counterfoil for Jesus. Others questioned the use Harnack made of the historical method. Among them was Ernst Troeltsch, who would become one of the leading representatives of liberal Protestantism himself and also strongly contribute to the discussion of historicism later on, namely in his magisterial *Historicism and Its Problems* from 1922, arguably the most extensive and most subtle discussion of historicism. His early review of Harnack, published prominently in *Die Christliche Welt* in 1903, shows to what extent the general debate goes back to questions specific to the history of religion.6

After expressing his general admiration for Harnack’s work, Troeltsch poses the methodological question of what the idea of the “essence” of Christianity implies, which is, according to Troeltsch, a very specific concept to be distinguished from others:

The whole expression “essence of Christianity” is linked to modern, critical and evolutionary history. Catholic theology would never have used it. It would have said “the faith of the church” and would thereby merely have distinguished between the full knowledge to be demanded from the cleric and the relative incomplete knowledge demanded of the laity and conveyed through belief in the church. Nor would orthodox Protestantism have used it. It would have said “the revelation of the Bible” and would thereby have

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distinguished between fundamental and non-fundamental items. Even for the Enlightenment the expression would have had no sense. The Enlightenment stands, with Locke, for the “rationality of Christianity”.7

Here Troeltsch historicizes the notion of “essence” in so far as the concept belongs to a certain historical formation of thought that carries a series of presuppositions and implications, a formation that Troeltsch would also call “worldview” (Weltanschauung), and that we could also call episteme. Thus Harnack’s answer to the question of what Christianity is has more implications than he is willing to admit: “The definition of the essence is indeed a purely historical task. But, ‘purely historical’ entails a whole world-view.”8 As a worldview, history has, first, numerous implications that Troeltsch will unfold in his review; it is, second, not something that one simply chooses but that is determined by the epoch one lives in. Moreover, third, as the German expression Anschauung also implies, the historical worldview is not merely a scientific and conceptual fact. It also has an aesthetic aspect that transcends and frames its relation to methodology. It is precisely this function at the border of Wissenschaft (science) and its beyond where the question of history and eschatology will reappear.

As for the first aspect, the correlation between historical method and historical worldview, Troeltsch had already argued in an earlier essay on Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology9—in which he defended his own theology against conservative critics—that it is not a matter of choice to place Christian history in the wider context of general history, but a mere consequence of the historical method he uses: “The historical method itself, by its use of criticism, analogy, and correlation, produces with irresistible necessity a web of mutually interacting activities of the human spirit, which are never independent and absolute but always interrelated and therefore understandable only within the context of the most comprehensive whole.”10 Here, Troeltsch mainly argues that one has to be consistent in using that method, which not only implies a series of assumptions but also precludes others: neither does it allow us to set apart a specific part of history as “revelation” or “miracle,” nor does it align with philosophical determinations of an absolute religion that then, in a second step, are identified with a historical fact: “Today all kind of things are labeled as ‘historical’ and as ‘facts’ which are nothing of the kind, and which ought not to be so labeled, since they are miraculous in nature and can only be apprehended by faith.”11 Too many theologians, Troeltsch implies, try to reconcile dogmatic and historic methods. Because of its very implications, however, the historical method has to be applied with full consequence: “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 to the devil.

8Ibid., 133.
10Ibid., 15.
11Ibid., 21.
Like the modern natural sciences, it represents a complete revolution in our patterns of thought vis-à-vis antiquity and the Middle Ages.”

Even though Troeltsch speaks about the historical method in general here, the context of these arguments is more specific. The program unfolded in this and other texts is that of a group of mostly biblical scholars such as Hermann Gunkel, Wilhelm Bousset, or Richard Reitzenstein that later was called “the history of religion school” (Religionsgeschichtliche Schule). Their methodological innovation in biblical criticism, as well as in the emerging history of religion, can be described as a twofold broadening of perspectives. On the one hand, they treated biblical religion or Christianity in constant comparison with the surrounding religions, e.g. detecting Babylonian influences in the Genesis narrative or ideas from pagan mystery cults in early Christianity. On the other hand, they did not focus exclusively on what the texts to be interpreted say explicitly but on how they are used in social reality, e.g. in liturgy—a proto-sociological approach that consistently analyzes that which is called the “seat in life” (Sitz im Leben) of religious texts. For the history of religion school, the history of Christianity is therefore not only always hybrid, but also always dynamic, driven by forces that are not necessarily explicit in the texts.

Consequently, the entire history of Christianity becomes more complex. Whereas Harnack, for example, described the formation of the Christian Church as the Hellenization of Christian faith, i.e. as a more or less autonomous process of degradation, scholars such as Troeltsch would regard this process as an adoption of quite different concepts with often ironic, involuntary consequences, e.g. when the early church adopted the social teaching of the Stoa or when Protestantism, which initially emerged as an attempt to renew and strengthen the church, finally led to individualism. Thus, whereas Harnack sees a more or less clear continuity between original Christianity, Protestantism, and the present, for Troeltsch this relation is much more indirect and ambivalent: if Protestantism contributed to the evolution of the modern world, it did so at its fringes—in the radical sects of the left wing of the Reformation that originally conceived the ideas of freedom of conscience—and more often than not, the qualities brought about by Protestantism later turned against its progenitor and tended to ignore it, if not destroy it. Max Weber’s famous argument of the evolution of capitalism out of Calvinist Protestantism clearly follows this ironic plot.

From the perspective of history of religion, however, not only the end, but also the beginning of Christianity becomes more complex. One topic that became particularly prominent among exegetes around 1900 is apocalypticism: Hermann Gunkel tried to show that there is a continuous tradition of apocalyptic imagery from the Old to the New Testament, and different New Testament scholars stressed

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12Ibid., 16.
that Jesus’ teaching of the Kingdom of God owes a lot to that tradition. In that respect, Harnack’s attempt to construct a simple image of Jesus that would be relevant to the present becomes increasingly difficult, as Albert Schweitzer prominently stated: “The study of the Life of Jesus has had a curious history. It set out in quest of the historical Jesus, believing that when it had found Him it could bring Him straight into our time as a Teacher and Savior. … But He does not stay; He passes by our time and returns to His own.” Thus Jesus does not seem to have taught a gospel of love, but a strange and outdated doctrine of the imminent end of the world, or, in other words, historical criticism does not end up with a clear idea but rather with a question, a veritable gap. When Troeltsch writes in his essay on *Historical and Dogmatic Method*, “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,” the metaphor highlights not only the inner consequence of that method but also its ambivalence: being fruitful, it also has potentially disruptive consequences.

In his review of Harnack’s *Essence of Christianity*, Troeltsch criticized Harnack for not being consistent, i.e. for infusing historical research with dogmatism and for not living up to the standards of the history of religion. Given the general continuity, correlation, and relativity of historical statements that is implied in historical method, the essence can never be as simple as Harnack claims it to be: “If we are to speak of the essence at all it cannot be an unchangeable idea given for once at all in the teachings of Jesus … In reality, however, the essence has to be an entity with an inner, living flexibility, and a productive power for new creation and assimilation.” Therefore the essence cannot be simply a concept but has to be more complex and “dualistic” that Troeltsch compares to an ellipsis which does not have one center but two focal points. Accordingly, this essence cannot simply be seen on the surface of historical phenomena. On the contrary, it might be something that becomes visible only in retrospect, as seems to become clear in Jesus’ teaching: “In the preaching of Jesus precisely that is after all essential for us which for the preaching itself was not directly essential; not the approaching end of the world and the coming Kingdom, but the conditions for the reception of the kingdom and the community which grows up in the fulfilment of these conditions is essential for us.” Here, Troeltsch follows not only the methodological reflections on the implications of the historical method, but also the eschatological interpretation of early Christian history. If Jesus understood himself in apocalyptic terms, then it seems obvious that we cannot simply adopt this interpretation. Therefore the essence cannot simply be revealed at the origin, but only in the very historical process, in which the origin is always only one of the “dualistic”

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17Troeltsch, *Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology*, 12.
19Ibid., 154.
20Ibid., 153.
or “elliptic” elements: “original time [Urzeit] always remains in that it calls human hearts again and again out of all culture and immanence to that which is above them both.”21

However, this eschatological distance to the world, culture, and history is not only something that dovetails with Protestant terms of existing both in the world and at a distance to it. It is, according to Troeltsch, also not completely alien to history and its worldview. As mentioned before, history as a worldview not only is the complement to critical methodology, but reaches beyond it towards a more general and more aesthetic aspect that grasps the entirety of the world. In his review, Troeltsch argues therefore that Harnack’s “essence” is actually not only an “abstraction from the multiplicity of historical phenomena,” but also a “critique” of these phenomena. Historical knowledge also implies a certain judgment beyond correlation and continuity, and in that respect some of the characteristics that are unhistorical in Harnack, namely the privileging of the origin, have their own right from the perspective of Protestantism. According to Troeltsch, this is a feature not only of the essence of Christianity, but of historical thought in general, for the continuity of historical phenomena extends not only to the past, but also to the future, which implies that history, despite being always incomplete and always relative, has to be made. At that point, the rhetorical register of the text changes remarkably:

Only the courage of an act combines the past and the future, by so emphasising the historically grasped essence of a cultural complex for the present, that the future arises out of the essence in a manner demanded by the present and yet at the same time exhausting the depth of the historical impulse. But if in this sense the definition of the essence is an act, then it is no longer merely a judgement about history but it is itself a piece of history.22

While Troeltsch had argued earlier that a certain relativism is a consequence of the use of historical methods, he now concedes that the determination of the essence goes beyond this and implies a certain subjectivism, which he goes on to defend: even if such a voluntarist choice might run the risk of cutting off the relation to the continuum of the history of Christianity, it cannot be avoided today, given the present crisis of religion: “The definition of the essence is the crown and at the same time the self-abrogation of historical theology.”23 Like the “sourdough” of historical method, the concept of the essence is deeply ambivalent and stands both for the fulfillment and the disruption of the historical method, thus keeping a relation of “tension” to history that is obviously associated with the eschatological distance mentioned.

Troeltsch discusses history and history’s religion on various levels. He reflects on the use of historical method and its implications in so far as they concern the worldview of history. Religion has to be historicized, and it changes its appearance and epistemic profile in that process which distinguishes it from faith, revelation, or reason. However, religion does not simply dissolve in history, but also unfolds a

21Ibid., 155.
22Ibid., 161.
23Ibid., 164.
certain resistance, or a countermove. Historically, this is linked to the eschatological aspect that cannot so easily be integrated into the historical narrative since it acts as a sort of remainder, or even a catalyst, or, if you like biblical allusions, a thorn in the flesh: something not yet understood and something alien to us. Epistemically, this gap or distance is depicted as the contingency of choice that still inhabits the historical worldview, or as the courageous “act” that the historical method asks for without giving a proper rationale for it. Here, a problem that Troeltsch will later define as the crisis of historicism is formulated in terms that one might call existentialist and that obviously draw on religious resources as well.

IV

Roughly half a century after Troeltsch’s review of Harnack, Rudolf Bultmann delivered the prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh entitled History and Eschatology. In these lectures the prominent New Testament scholar addresses the issue of history and historicism once more, but in quite different terms. History, as he opens his lectures, is our biggest problem today, since we just experienced to what extent man is completely subjected to history, especially to the fate of modern technology. Moreover, for us moderns, history seems to have lost its meaning, as Bultmann writes:

Can there be a salvation from nihilism? Can there be a way to detect meaning in history and therewith meaning in historical human life? … Is it possible to ignore the historicity of man? Or must we say that the historicity of man is not yet fully understood and must be thought out to its final conclusions in order to banish the conclusion of nihilism? Such questions can be answered only when we consider exactly the essence of the idea of history. It seems to me that the very problem is veiled by the one-sided question about meaning in history.24

Bultmann asks the same question as Troeltsch about how to conceive of history and historical knowledge, and he too performs a shift from historical questions to the question of its methodical and epistemological implications that are epitomized in the construction of historical essences. However, the terms in which this question is discussed have changed significantly: its context is now less the discipline of historical criticism and historiography than what he calls the “historicity of man”—i.e. those anthropological components that make history possible—a terminology that refers to the existentialist anthropology that Bultmann had developed in the 1920s in close cooperation with Heidegger.25 In this understanding of history, not only will the decisive force of eschatology become much more explicit than in Troeltsch, but the reference to eschatology will also allow us to criticize the very claims of historicism much more effectively. The language of historicity


will be operative in depicting the stock image of “mere historicism” that is broadly used in polemic debates after the “antihistoricist revolution” of the 1920s and 1930s, a revolution that was indeed deeply influenced by theological thought, namely by the dialectical theology of Karl Barth, Friedrich Gogarten, Rudolf Bultmann, and others.26

In the Gifford Lectures, however, Bultmann does not argue straightforwardly as an antihistoricist. Instead, he integrates historical knowledge and the existentialist approach into a narrative that is similar to Troeltsch’s historization of worldviews and the account of a “secularization” that leads to modernity. Thus we see once more how the complex and ambiguous relation of history and eschatology can be used not only to organize a great narrative that integrates both religion and history, but also to negotiate the specific claims of historical knowledge.

The lectures take different approaches to that goal. In a first series of lectures, he gives an account of the “understanding of history” as well as of the correlating “understanding of man” in antiquity. Here Bultmann claims that when historiography evolved in ancient Greece as a scientific discipline, it neither asked for the meaning of history nor considered history essential for man, for man was regarded “as an unchanging substance in relation to which his actions are accidental.”27 Since Greek thought, most explicitly in the Stoa, regards man as an essentially free spirit, “the future cannot bring anything new in so far as man is independent of time in realizing his real nature.”28 By contrast, biblical historiography is interested in all of history as a divine plan, and apocalypticism in particular plays a decisive role in the conception of the unity of history: “In later Judaism cosmology was historicized by substituting the destiny of humanity for that of the world … history is understood from the point of view of eschatology.”29 The totality of history is thus understood in its contrast to the coming salvation. This future, however, is less the completion than “its breaking off,” which implies that human existence with its encounters, its everyday history, is still not meaningful in itself. In the German version, Bultmann speaks of the “De-historization of history” (“Entgeschichtlichung der Geschichte”), since history has a meaning, albeit determined only from the outside, by divine decree. In this argument, the historization (of cosmology) and de-historization (of history itself) set in motion a complex dialectic that finally culminates in Bultmann’s reading of the New Testament.

For Bultmann, too, the teaching of Jesus is essentially apocalyptic, i.e. determined by the expectation of an imminent end of our world, an expectation that he shared with his Jewish contemporaries as well as with the first Christian disciples:

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27Bultmann, History and Eschatology, 17.
28Ibid., 94.
29Ibid., 29.
The New Covenant is not grounded in an event in the history of the people as was the Old Covenant. For the death of Christ on which it is founded is not a “historical event” to which one may look back as one may to the story of Moses. The new people of God has no real history for it is the community of the end-time, an eschatological phenomenon. How could it have a history now when the world-time is finished and the end is imminent?30

As in Troeltsch, but much more explicitly and even emphatically, early Christianity is essentially described as an eschatological phenomenon that does not understand itself in historical terms: “history is swallowed up in eschatology.”31 It is only in the next step that eschatology is transformed and becomes truly fruitful for the understanding of man as well as history—a step that is provoked by the mere fact that the expected end did not occur. This delay of the parousia (Parusieverzögerung) becomes the driving force of what Bultmann now regards as the “historicizing and neutralizing of eschatology,”32 another aspect in the dialectic mentioned that leads to different developments in early Christian doctrine. This can be seen in Luke (who begins to write as a historian), Paul (who interprets the eschatology in anthropological terms), John (who draws eschatology to the very moment of now), and the later church (which replaces the eschatological by the sacramental practice of the church itself).

Decisive is Bultmann’s reading of Paul. In Paul, the idea of the end of the world and the coming of salvation is once more transformed, this time in anthropological terms, since it is understood as the change from the old Adam into the new man: “although the history of the nation and the world had lost interest for Paul he brings to light another phenomenon, the historicity of man, the true historical life of the human being, the history which everyone experiences for himself and by which he gains his real essence.”33 Here, according to Bultmann, historicity is truly captured, since Paul is aware of the necessary, but also precarious, human fundament of history, and even when Paul adopts the Greek term of freedom he gives it a new meaning, not as a given but as a possibility that man might or might not realize: “This freedom does not belong to the timeless nature of man but can only happen as an event.”34 Consequently, Bultmann inserts a sort of existentialist credo in his reading of Paul, which makes it very clear how this new decisionism can adopt the religious language of call and vocation:

This history of the human person comes into being in the encounters which man experiences whether with other people or with events and in the decisions he takes in them … Therefore, the life of a man is always one which stands before him and acquires its character as forfeited or as real by his decisions … Man is free in his decisions from a formal point of view. Each encounter brings him into a new situation and each situation is so to speak a call, a

30Ibid., 36.
31Ibid., 37.
32Ibid., 38.
33Ibid., 43.
34Ibid., 98.
claiming, of him as a free man. The question is whether he is able to hear the
call—the call to be himself in free decision.35

Thus the futurity of history is related to the ability, but also the need, of man to
decide, an ability that is not itself a timeless essence but something that always
implies the risk of missing oneself—a clear allusion to Heidegger’s
Uneigentlichkeit (“inauthenticity”). Thus for Troeltsch history first relativizes the
different claims and possibilities and only leads to a decision at its very limit,
whereas Bultmann grounds his understanding of history in an existentialist anthro-
pology with clear decisionist undertones. Similarly, in narrative terms, Troeltsch
considers the need to decide in the context of the modern situation, be it the situation
of the modern historian or, more generally, our modern situation in a time of
crisis, whereas Bultmann locates the decisionist element in early Christianity. This
correlates with a methodological difference: Troeltsch’s reflections on history depart
from historical criticism, whereas Bultmann adopts a hermeneutical method that
claims to be oriented towards the object.

These differences, however, are only relative ones. Bultmann’s argument, too, is
developed in the argumentative realm of the “history of religion,” as is made most
obvious by the fact that his main focus is not the very origin of Christianity, the
teaching of Jesus, but its transformation in Paul, John, and—to a somewhat lesser
extent—Luke, which Bultmann sees as the authentic Christian understanding of
man and thus of history. Therefore the origin is already a complex and multiple
one, and precisely this allows us to depict the primal history (Urgeschichte) of
Christianity as a process of “historization” and “de-historization” of eschatology
and of “eschatologization” and “de-eschatologization” of history. It is only in this
process that an understanding of the world evolves which is not that different
from Troeltsch’s understanding: “It is the paradox of Christian being that the
believer is taken out of the world and exists so to speak as unworldly and that at
the same time he remains within the world within his historicity.”36

Bultmann spoke about historicity mostly as an exegetical category to describe
what is essential in Christianity. However, the Gifford Lectures also have a second
part: as he follows the afterlife of Christian historicity, he looks at how the under-
standing of history developed in the early church, medieval times, and modernity.
He also discusses problems of contemporary philosophy of history and historical
hermeneutics. Broadly speaking, the problem of method, which was the starting
point for Troeltsch’s argument, is thus developed in a second step with a conception
of true historicity already at hand. This allows Bultmann to integrate the meth-
odological discussion into one large meta-narrative of secularization which is even
more important for our topic. For several of the concepts by which we describe his-
tory’s religion—as “historization” or “de-historization,” or “sacralization” or even
“secularization” proper—are part of this narrative and can only be understood in
its context.37

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36Ibid., 152–3.
37See my “Rhetoric of Secularization.”
Already in the exegetical part of his lectures, Bultmann stressed that the Pauline formulation of the problem is a provisional, and thus fundamentally unstable, one that is later transformed into a much more dogmatic teaching of the church. Thus the balance of history and eschatology quickly shifts and dissolves: “The longer the Parousia failed to come and the end of the world was removed to an indefinite distance, the longer the Church had a history in this world and the more an interest in history developed.”38 The church began to conceive itself in historical terms and transform the apocalyptic scheme into the scheme of a history of salvation that led to an understanding of world history in which all events have their specific meaning. It is this conception of a history of salvation that in a second step can be transformed into the scheme of secular history: “A teleological view of history appears and it only requires the secularizing of the concept of providence for the meaning in history to be thought of as immanent.”39 Strongly relying on Karl Löwith, Bultmann then refers to Augustine, to the medieval concept of history, to modern thinkers such as Vico or Herder and, eventually, Hegel: “The secularizing of Christian faith is carried out by him consciously and consistently. The history of salvation is projected on to the level of world-history.”40 In effect, these transformations lead to the belief in progress that still “retains” the decisive qualities of eschatology, most importantly the “idea of the unity of history” and “the idea of the teleological course of it,” whereas the concept of providence is “replaced” by the idea of progress and “the idea of eschatological perfection is transformed into that of the ever-increasing welfare of humanity.”41 Thus the afterlife of Christianity is determined by the very same processes of eschatologization and de-eschatologization, historization, and dehistorization that were operative in early Christianity. What is transformed, however, is not so much the historicity of man but the idea of providence that is, in Bultmann’s terms, rather concerned with the meaning than with the essence of history. Thus he seems to agree with Löwith that the modern philosophy of history up to idealism is driven by an idea that evolved in the Christian context but is not authentically Christian.

It is only in modern times that the problem of historicity is addressed again, precisely because the great constructions of history have fallen into decay: “Today we cannot claim to know the end and the goal of history. Therefore, the question of meaning in history has become meaningless.”42 All the more pressing is the question of the essence of history. Bultmann discusses different modern theories of history at great length, and here again he uses the difficult balance of history and eschatology as a criterion. Dilthey’s emphasis on the perspectival nature of all historical knowledge is described as an “aesthetization of eschatology”; Croce’s affirmation of constant change “identifies history and eschatology because he ascribes to every present moment in the historical process the fullness of the whole of history.”43 And whereas Jaspers seems to revive the stoic concept of history, highlighting that the individual can transcend history, Collingwood is aware that “every

38 Bultmann, History and Eschatology, 56.
39 Ibid., 59.
40 Ibid., 67.
41 Ibid., 66.
42 Ibid., 120.
43 Ibid., 127.
present moment is an eschatological moment and that history and eschatology are identified.”

Here the Paulinian anthropologization of eschatology which transforms the cosmic end into the individual’s need to decide at every moment is reflected.

However, it is not only the theory of history in which this historicity is conceived. In a remarkable move, Bultmann turns to literature, namely to modern literary realism, as read through the eyes of his former colleague Erich Auerbach. Although the nineteenth century was defined by a firm belief in progress, it was literature which, at the time, displayed a more “realistic view of human life and its problematic and tragic character” than idealist philosophy did. Similarly, it is the literature of Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf today that is able to reveal the depth of existence in any given moment and thus also the true historicity of man:

The analysis of the occasional moment unveils something totally new and elementary, the fullness of reality and the depth of life contained in every moment. In this moment a deeper reality, so to speak, a more real reality appears which is relatively independent of the disputed and wavering orders within which men are struggling and despairing. It lies below all this as our everyday life. It is difficult to describe this reality. It is not a metaphysical substance but it is the ever-increasing result of the whole of our experiences and hopes, of all our aims in interpreting our life and our encounters. It forms itself apart from our purpose and consciousness but it comes into consciousness in moments of reflection.

Thus the Christian understanding of history is not only transformed into the idealist philosophies of history and the belief in progress. Rather, there is a more indirect, but also more authentic, relation between the precarious balance between time and eternity, freedom and faith that does not have to conform with metaphysical concepts. Instead, it consists much rather in a specific cultural representation, namely literary realism.

Apart from his reference to Auerbach, Bultmann’s reflections on the modern concept of history are not particularly original, neither do they claim to be so. Rather, they reveal the typical characteristics of a discourse of secularization according to which modern conceptions of history still have religious roots, a discourse that not only works with a series of similarities and differences but is energized by the complex tension of the worldly and the unworldly as it is developed in the exegetical part. Referring to this essentially theological distinction, but also being essentially a narrative, this discourse and its many variations are themselves a perfect example of history’s religion from which different notions evolve as the “faith in history” or “belief in progress” that we still use as well as the concept of historicity which acts as a sort of

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44Ibid., 135–6.
46Bultmann, History and Eschatology, 108.
a double-edged sword that both legitimizes history as a realm of meaning and relativizes it by relating history to a somewhat “deeper” realm.

V

Even though the approaches which Troeltsch and Bultmann took are obviously quite different from each other, they share a discursive field, namely the field of history of religion and the relation of history and eschatology in particular. It is only this field with its complexities and its different implications that allows us to shift our attention from different concepts of history’s religion to a more complex discursive practice that implies methodological questions as well as very material questions of how to interpret the texts of the New Testament and how to represent the development of early Christianity and its relation to the historically surrounding religions. Only when we consider the close interrelation of these questions will we be able to understand what actually drives the conceptual debates up to the very concepts of “secularization” or “religion of history” which we still use today.

Facing this discursive substructure, we might also understand why it is so difficult to disentangle history and religion: because their relation is not accidental; rather, they are always already being entangled. For the formation discussed here, that of historicism and Religionsgeschichte (history of religion), it became evident that a certain way of narrating the history of religion is decisive for our understanding of what religion actually is—and vice versa: a certain understanding of religion determines the way to narrate its history. Moreover, this entanglement contributes to the academic reputation of history in ways that can hardly be overestimated. Of course, the recognition of history as a model and a leading discipline for the humanities in the long nineteenth century mostly rests on history’s real or imagined contribution in forging new “national” ways of belonging. However, the claimed ability to appropriate and reformulate religious traditions in ways that are compatible with modernity does play a major part, too: the fame of “liberal” or “modern” theology was probably decisive for the international attraction of the German university.

As I have tried to show, the relation of history and religion is not only a question of narrative or of academic reputation but also deeply embedded in the various levels of method, of hermeneutics, of the way that history itself is configured, be it as an academic discipline or as a feature of human understanding. Moreover, these figurations and entanglement are essentially rhetorical: they might manifest themselves conceptually, as in the broad discussion on the “crisis of historicism,” which, however, sounds somewhat sterile to our ears. But they are driven rather by a substructure of different figures of thought that operate precisely by their vagueness and overdetermination. Thus “eschatology,” our main example, can function both integratively, addressing the “entirety” of history, and disruptively, evoking something sub- or supra-historical. Such terms not only allow us to structure the complexity of the religious tradition and its different elements: Jewish–Christian, old–new, Pauline–Johannite etc. They also orient and reorient the place of the historian proper in most fruitful ways.

By describing these entanglements, I hope to suggest that this problem is not merely a particular problem of the history of religion, but something that concerns
history more generally, namely when history faces problems such as the relation between historical phenomena and their essence, questions about the meaning of history or the relation between values and metahistorical truth claims on the one hand, and modern historical method and the contingency of historical phenomena on the other. Some of these problems are closely related to the formation of historicism, others seem to have a more general significance or even actuality, given the widespread feeling of a crisis of the humanities. Addressing history’s religion is one way not only to celebrate, defend, or bemoan the humanities and their long history, but also to develop a critical genealogy that might help us to understand both our history and the present moment.