2009

Geschichte und Historie: The problem of Faith and History

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Faith at the Intersection of History and Experience

theologians" to join the conversation, to ask whether he, too, has anything to say to us today.

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Geschichte und Historie
The Problem of Faith and History

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN GESCHICHTE AND HISTORIE

The historical consciousness of the nineteenth century created new problems for Protestant theology: how may the new historical science be applied to the Bible? How is faith to maintain its assurance in the midst of historical uncertainty? These questions only intensified when posed with regard to the biblical witness to Jesus Christ and to Christian faith in him. Already in the late nineteenth century, Martin Kähler had attempted to circumscribe a sturmfreies Gebiet (literally a "storm-free area") for Christian faith, an area into which the ambiguity and uncertainty of historical criticism could not and should not penetrate. Kähler attempted to secure this area by distinguishing between the historical Jesus and the historic Christ, between the biblical picture of Christ and the portrait provided by historical research. Others (e.g. Wilhelm Herrmann and Wilhelm Bousset) sought to answer these same questions by other means. Their conclusions initiated a spirited discussion of the relationship between faith and history, between the Protestant principle of justification by faith alone and the modern science of historical research.

In a 1911 essay entitled Geschichte und Historie in der Religionswissenschaft, Georg Wobbermin revisited some of these ear-

1. For some general discussions of the problem of faith and history in the nineteenth-century, see Paulus, Gott in der Geschichte? Brachmann, Glaube und Geschichte, Rohls, Protestantische Theologie der Neuzeit, vol. 1; Welch, Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century, and Howard, Religion and the Rise of Historicism. For a more general study, see Harvey, The Historian and the Believer.

2. Wobbermin, Geschichte und Historie in der Religionswissenschaft.
lier attempts and argued for the use of a stricter, conceptual distinction between Geschichte and Historie in order to clarify faith's relationship to Jesus Christ in light of modern historical consciousness. This essay was prompted in part by the recent publication of Arthur Drews's Die Christusmythe,1 in which Drews provocatively suggested that a "historical" Jesus of Nazareth never existed. Drews's radical conclusions sparked intense debate in German theological circles and pointedly raised the question of the relationship between faith and historical knowledge as a question of central significance for Protestant theology.

B. A. Gerrish sketches the contours of the Christ-Myth debate sparked by Drews's book in an article on Ernst Troeltsch's stand in the call "Jesus or Myth? Drews's radical conclusions sparked Christology and invited theologians to question or unify significance for Protestant theology. Gerrish suggests that Drews's thesis was provocative, perhaps of ignoring the real and necessary distinction between the active and efficacious picture of Jesus Christ in light of modern historical consciousness. This essay between significant to German theological circles and pointedly raised the question of faith and history, to ask the specific question of the relevance of the historical Jesus for faith.4

In his study of Geschichte and Historie, Wobbermin accuses Drews of ignoring the real and necessary distinction between the active and efficacious picture of Christ within the Christian tradition on the one hand and the results of historical criticism of that same tradition on the other. Drews failed to distinguish, in Wobbermin's terms, between the merely historical [bloß historisch] and the immediately historic [unmittelbar geschichtlich]. By failing to make this important distinction, Drews did not take account of the distinction between the historical Jesus behind the New Testament, of whom very little can be known, and the picture of Christ found in the New Testament and in the Christian tradition through to the present day.

7. The arbitrariness of the distinction between Geschichte and Historie was not lost on many contemporary commentators, most notably Albert Schweitzer, who warned that Wobbermin had ventured onto "dangerous ground" with his insistence on a stricter distinction between the two terms: "He forfeits everything by executing his idea with a play of artful distinctions. Nothing is helped by this. What is essential above all things is that theology employ clear language. Let your speech be yes, yes, no, no. Anything more is of the Evil One." Schweitzer, Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung, 521 [ET: The Quest of the Historical Jesus, 408].
8. Wobbermin, Geschichte und Historie, 4.
It is important to note here that Wobbermin did not invent the distinction between Geschichte and Historie. Martin Kähler employed a similar distinction in his critique of the nineteenth-century "Lives of Jesus." Kähler, however, did not attempt to arrive at a systematic or conceptual understanding of the distinction between these terms. The distinction remained for him an auxiliary conceptual aid, but it is Wobbermin who elevates the distinction to the status of a systematic principle, and Wobbermin uses the distinction to clarify the most basic questions addressed in his work.

Despite the arbitrariness of the distinction between Geschichte and Historie, Wobbermin attempts to provide precise definitions of both terms for the purpose of conceptual clarity. Because he intends to employ the distinction as a systematic principle and not merely as an auxiliary tool, he must be as precise as possible in clarifying the meaning of his terms and their interrelation.

Throughout his essay, Wobbermin continues to refine his definition of Geschichte, so that there are finally three distinct yet interrelated definitions, namely, Geschichte as what has happened in the past, Geschichte as the realm of efficacy or influence, and Geschichie as the interrelation of human beings as spiritual-moral beings in their development.

The most basic definition of Geschichte is simply "what has happened" (was ist geschahen or was geschah). Any event that has happened in the past or any figure who has existed in the past belongs to Geschichte and is a geschichtliche Ereignis or a geschichtliche Größe. Historie, by contrast, is a narrower, more precise concept, which Wobbermin defines as "investigated Geschichte" (erforschte Geschichte), meaning Geschichte investigated with the scientific historical method according to the canons of academic historical research. Geschichte is simply given; Historie must be acquired by scientific investigation.

The geschichtlich can potentially confront anyone who stands within history as a historic subject; Historie is accessible only to those with the necessary scientific and intellectual tools to discover it. Geschichte is prior to Historie and is a broader category. Many events and figures of

Wobbermin further defines Geschichte, however, in terms of influence and significance, or what he often calls effect or efficacy (Wirkung or Wirksamkeit). Past events or personalities are capable of influencing the future beyond their mere historicity, even if their historicity is questionable on purely historical-scientific grounds. This is especially important in terms of the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who on purely historical grounds is a shadowy figure but who is also clearly a figure of profound historic significance, influence, and efficacy beyond his mere historicity. To put it more precisely, the efficacy of Jesus of Nazareth transcends the mere fact of his historical existence. It is precisely this distinction between mere historicity and profound historic efficacy and significance that a strict distinction between Geschichte and Historie is meant to clarify.

The realm of Historie is the realm of probability. Historians can determine the probability of their research achieving an accurate picture of the past with relative certainty, but the results of scientific historical research always remain relative and hypothetical. Whatever certainty is gained by historical research is never absolute, but approaches only a higher or lower degree of probability. This is not to say, however, that
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Geschichte offers absolute certainty, or even necessarily a higher degree of probability than Historie. If this were so, Wobbermin suggests, Historie would be an unnecessary nuisance and could be safely abandoned. In that case, the goal would be a total separation of Geschichte from Historie.\(^\text{12}\)

But this is not the case. Historie serves the vital purpose of removing, as far as possible, the uncertainty of the historic tradition and replacing uncertainty with scientifically ensured results. Historie, as Wobbermin defines it, erects well-defined boundaries around Geschichte and enables graduated acceptance of probability for the various data of the historic tradition. This leads him to define Historie more precisely as "scientifically clarified and refined Geschichte."\(^\text{13}\) According to this definition, Historie serves as a limiting and ordering principle, investigating the historic tradition and presenting the results of its research as the highest possible level of probability. As such, Historie is a vital theological tool and plays a necessary role within the Christian religion, precisely because Christianity is a historic religion.

Christianity is a historic religion in at least three important respects. First, Christianity is a historic religion because it is based on the life and teachings of a historic figure, Jesus Christ, in whom it apprehends the revelation of God. Second, Christianity is a historic religion because it refers to a historic document, the New Testament, as the source and norm for its theological reflection. Third, Christianity is a historic religion because it refers to its own history (biblical, liturgical, theological, etc.) for guidance and for resources for its continued development. In order to isolate the truly historic elements within this long tradition, Wobbermin defends a rigorous application of the historical method to the Christian tradition.

Here Wobbermin wants to draw a further distinction between the historic tradition of Christianity [geschichtliche Überlieferung] and the effects or significance of that history in the present. Wobbermin insists that the entire historic tradition of Christianity must be subjected to the most rigorous historical research both in order to strip away false supports for faith and to uncover or reveal the truly historic elements from that tradition. Geschichte in the sense of the historic tradition must be subjected to rigorous historical research in order to uncover or reveal those essential elements. But that research will never provide the effects of those historic elements; it will only uncover or reveal the essential elements. The effects of those elements are always prior to historical research of the tradition that carries them and independent of the results of that research.\(^\text{14}\)

Christian faith, for Wobbermin, requires immediately available historic effects rather than the secondary, provisional results of historical research into the tradition. The historic tradition alone cannot serve as the basis of Christian faith because it always remains past. It is the effects of that history, immediately present and efficacious in the present, that serve as the basis of faith.\(^\text{15}\)

Wobbermin also provides a third definition of Geschichte based on the philosophy of history of Heinrich Rickert, of which Wobbermin offers only a brief and cursory analysis in his essay. According to Guy Oakes, Rickert's project was largely an attempt to solve the hiatus irrationalis be-


13. "Die historische Forschung dient ja gerade dem Zweck, die Unsicherheit der geschichtlichen Überlieferung nach Möglichkeit zu beseitigen und durch wissenschaftlich geprüfte Resultate zu ersetzen. Wenn es also die historische Forschung doch immer nur in Wahrcheinlichkeits-Urteilen zu bringen vermöge, so kann sich die Geschichte als solche, d.h. nach dem Vortragen der geschichtlichen Überlieferung, nicht über das Niveau der historischen Wahrscheinlichkeitsbetrachtung und Wahrcheinlichkeitsgefühl erheben, sondern sie muß noch unter diesem Niveau verbleiben. Erst die Historie erhebt bestimmte Bezirke und Gebiete der Geschichte ... auf die Höhe wissenschaftlicher Wahrscheinlichkeitsbetrachtung und ermöglicht damit für die einzelnen Datien und Bestandteile des betreffenden Überlieferung eine manngültig abgestufte Wahrscheinlichkeitseinteilung. Die Historie ist also insoweit die wissenschaftlich gekürte und gereinigte Geschichte – Geschichte nämlich im Sinne der Geschichtsurüberlieferung." Ibid.

14. Ibid., 6-7. This is Wobbermin's opinion, but he does not address the possibility that a rigorous historical criticism of these historic elements will perhaps call them into question rather than confirm them. This is one of the major weaknesses of Wobbermin's position, as it also is for Kahler's and for Herrmann's.

15. This further distinction between Geschichte and its Wirkung oder Wirkungkeiten is a distinction that Wobbermin himself does not make explicit, but he does indicate such a distinction, ever so briefly, when he attempts to distinguish between Geschichte as Überlieferung and the effect or efficacy of Geschichte, its Wirkung oder Wirkungkeiten: "The essence of 'history' namely is not exhausted in the fact that it offers the historic tradition – tradition that belongs to the past and that only has value for the present in its recollecting what is past. No, history extends into the present and works itself out in the present – and certainly not merely through individual traditions, but rather through the fact of history itself. ["Das Wesen der 'Geschichte' ist nämlich nicht damit und darin erschöpft, daß sie geschichtliche Überlieferung bietet – Überlieferung, die der Vergangenheit angehört und für die Gegenwart nur den Wert der Erinnerung an Vergangenes hat. Nein die Geschichte reicht in die Gegenwart hinein und wirkt sich in der Gegenwart aus – und zwar nicht bloß durch einzelne Überlieferungen, sondern durch den Tälibstand der Geschichte selbst"] Ibid., 7. This distinction between Geschichte as what remains past and the effect or efficacy of Geschichte will be discussed in more detail below.
between concept and reality by means of a chain of reasoning with five links. These five links are a theory of the phenomenology of reality, a critique of epistemological realism, a theory of cognitive interests and a theory of concepts, an analysis of the limits of concept formation in natural science, and a demarcation criterion for distinguishing natural science from historical or cultural science.¹⁶ It is to one part of this final “link” in Rickert’s chain of reasoning that Wobbermin appears to turn for support of his final definition of Geschichte as the realm of value and as the interrelation of human beings as moral-spiritual beings in their development, and the key to this definition lies in Rickert’s understanding of value.

According to Rickert, the theoretical interest of historical science is rooted in the value historians ascribe to the individual as a unique historic entity. The concept of value enables historians to distinguish between important or valuable historic figures and the great mass of all other historic figures. Without such a distinction historical knowledge would be impossible, because of what Rickert called the “extensive and intensive infinity of reality.”¹⁷ This is one of the important distinctions between the natural sciences [Naturwissenschaften] and the cultural sciences [Geisteswissenschaften]. The natural sciences, according to Rickert, are concerned with the general and the universal, while the cultural sciences (including historical science) are concerned with the unique and the individual. Historical science is not ultimately concerned with the past for the sake of the past, but for the sake of the present, namely in terms of a value-relation [Wertbeziehung] between the past and the present and in terms of history’s essential characteristic of development.¹⁸

¹⁷. The extensive infinity of reality concerns the endless [unendlich] and the un-surveyable [unübersehbar] character of reality. Reality is unendlich inssofar as it cannot be exhaustively incorporated into our experience, and it is unübersehbar inssofar as it is impossible to survey the whole of reality. The intensive infinity of reality, on the other hand, concerns the individual. The composite elements of each individual event or figure are unlimited in principle, and every event or figure can possess an infinite number of aspects. Rickert summarizes these claims by defining reality as fundamentally irrational, meaning that there is no criterion for deciding what would qualify as complete knowledge of the whole or of the individual aspects. But Rickert claims that this description of reality as irrational is a phenomenological rather than an ontological claim. It concerns our experience of reality rather than reality in se. Rickert, Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung, 31–45. See also Oakes, “Rickert’s Theory of Historical Knowledge,” xvii.
¹⁸. Rickert describes the concept of development [Entwicklungs begriff] as the concept science, for Rickert, is about value and about reality as it is experienced rather than about reality in se. In other words, historical science has a phenomenological rather than an ontological basis.¹⁹

Rickert does not distinguish between Geschichte and Historie as Wobbermin uses those terms, but Wobbermin nevertheless believes that his distinction finds support in Rickert’s work. While there may be a plausible connection between Wobbermin’s understanding of Geschichte and Rickert’s understanding of the uniqueness of historic individuals and of the importance of development and the interrelation of past figures and present individuals in terms of the value of past figures for the present, it is a very tenuous connection, and Wobbermin does not give an adequate defense of his claim to have found support in Rickert’s work.²⁰

Wobbermin claims to have arrived at a third definition of Geschichte on the basis of his reading of Rickert, but his justification for a Rickertian basis never achieves the clarity necessary to make a judgment on its merits as a faithful interpretation and application of Rickert’s philosophy of history. Nevertheless, he claims to have achieved a third definition of Geschichte on the basis of Rickert’s work, namely Geschichte as “the interrelation of human beings as spiritual-moral beings in their development.” And again, “the interrelation of spiritual-moral individuals constitutes Geschichte – their interrelation, however, in its development. For the element of development also belongs to the essence of Geschichte.”²¹

That “brings to expression the logical essence of historical science” and one that further develops the principle of value-relation. Rickert, Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung, 396.

²⁰. In fact, Wobbermin’s treatment barely scratches the surface of Rickert’s work, and he appears to draw only one substantial conclusion from his reading of Rickert, namely that cultural value is intimately related to the spiritual-moral life. Unfortunately, Wobbermin fails to provide a sufficient justification for this conclusion, and he does not refer to any of Rickert’s own texts to support that specific claim. He does claim that his third and final definition of Geschichte is based on Rickert’s work, but he fails to give any evidence that this is the case. It is difficult to determine why, then, Wobbermin finds it necessary to engage Rickert’s work at all. See Wobbermin, Geschichte und Historie, 7–14.
²¹. “Geschichte ist doch letztlich der Zusammenhang der Menschen als geistig-statlicher Wesen in seiner Entwicklung … Der Zusammenhang geistig-statlicher Wesen also stellt die Geschichte dar der Zusammenhang aber in seiner Entwicklung. Denn auch das Moment der Entwicklung gehört zum Wesen der Geschichte.” Ibid., 14. Wobbermin’s definition does have a Rickertian basis insofar as it appropriates Rickertian terminology, but beyond this semantic or conceptual similarity there is little substantial engagement with Rickert’s philosophy of history.
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_Geschichte_, then, is not merely what is past and static. Rather, it is the realm of interrelation and development, of continuing efficacy and value, which persists and extends into the present. _Geschichte_ is not a closed system but a living process and a present relation of individuals to one another and to the past. The embodiment of spiritual-moral relation, Wobbermin suggests, "is the constitutive essential feature of _Geschichte_."

Ultimately it is the concepts of relation and value that serve as the most important aspects of this third definition of _Geschichte_. Value, especially the value of the historic picture of Christ, is an important concept for Wobbermin; however, it is often simply collapsed into the concept of the effects or efficacy of that picture. The concept of relation will become more important in Wobbermin’s "religio-psychological circle," which forms the basis of his religio-psychological theological method and which he constructs on the basis of his distinction between _Geschichte_ and _Historie_.

Having arrived at three definitions of _Geschichte_, it is now necessary to review these definitions of _Geschichte_ and _Historie_ and the distinctions and relationships between them. In his opening section Wobbermin begins by offering a basic definition of _Geschichte_ as simply what has happened, or what is past. He then refines that definition to emphasize the effects or efficacy of historic events and figures, and finally he expands the definition of _Geschichte_ to emphasize the concepts of interrelation, development, and value. All of this, then, is opposed to _Historie_, which is defined as the scientific investigation of development, and value. All of this, then, is opposed to _Historie_, which serves the purpose of erecting boundaries around _Geschichte_, to separate what is historic from what is not historic.22 What

is historic, though, is not limited by or confined to _Historie_. The historic will persist beyond and sometimes even in spite of the results of historical research both by virtue of its primary – _Historie_, Wobbermin maintains, always retains a secondary character to the primary of _Geschichte_ – and by virtue of its significance.

Here it is necessary to introduce a further distinction, one that Wobbermin himself did not consciously or explicitly make. It is necessary to distinguish between _Historie_, _Geschichte_, and the effect or efficacy [Wirkung oder Wirksamkeit] of _Geschichte_.24 _Geschichte_ is subject to historical research, to _Historie_, which produces scientifically ensured results. These results, however, can never serve as the foundation of Christian faith because they always remain secondary qua results. What is primary, for Wobbermin, is the effect or efficacy [Wirkung oder Wirksamkeit] of _Geschichte_, of an historic figure or event that always precedes and transcends historical investigation.25 That effect or efficacy cannot be provided by historical research and cannot rest on _Historie_, however vigorously prosecuted. It confronts individuals directly in and through _Geschichte_ and is immediately available to religious experience. In this sense, then, the historicity or the historical verifiability of a past event or figure is ultimately irrelevant, or at least secondary; the effect of that historic event or figure is primary.

One passage in particular provides support for this further distinction. Wobbermin suggests that the "historic fact" of Christ exists apart from and prior to faith, but that it also includes within it a presupposition of faith and therefore can only be effective or efficacious for faith:

22. "Der Inbegriff dieser geistig-sittlichen Beziehungen, die den Zusammenhang der Menschheit als ganzer gewährleisten, ist die konstituierende Wesensmerkmal der Geschichte." Ib., 15. This concept of relation will become much more important in the context of Wobbermin’s religio-psychological circle between present individual religious experience and historic fact. The religio-psychological circle will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

23. Here it does appear that Wobbermin is granting a more positive role to _Historie_ than perhaps he is willing to admit. If _Historie_ is capable of separating the truly historic from the broader tradition of Christianity, it is performing a necessary positive function. Wobbermin does grant a positive relationship of _Historie_ to _Geschichte_ at other points in this essay, but he always qualifies his determination of this role with an insistence that faith in no way depends on the results of historical research. But _Historie_ can play a necessary and even positive role in establishing the foundation for faith without thereby becoming that foundation. It is, as Wobbermin puts it, second-order reflection on a prior, primary reality. That prior, primary reality (i.e., _Geschichte_, and more specifically the effects or efficacy of _Geschichte_) is the foundation of faith.

24. Wobbermin does refer to effect or efficacy in his second definition of _Geschichte_, but in the remainder of his essay effect or efficacy functions as a third category, distinct from both _Historie_ and _Geschichte_.

25. It is tempting to label this third element as "Wirkungsgeschichte," or "history of effects" (generally of a text or work of art). Hans-Georg Gadamer, for example, considers the concept of Wirkungsgeschichte to be essential for hermeneutics, and it is in the context of Wirkungsgeschichte that he develops his concept of a "fusion of horizons" (Horizontvermischung). See Gadamer, Truth and Method, 300–7. The original German is available as Wahrheit und Methode. In Wobbermin’s understanding of the relationship between _Geschichte_ and its effects or efficacy, however, this purely hermeneutical sense is missing. In this case "geschichtliche Wirkung" or "die Wirkung der Geschicht" reflects his intentions more precisely than "Wirkungsgeschichte" in Gadamer’s sense, particularly in light of the lack of any attention to hermeneutics as such in Wobbermin’s essay.
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The historic fact also exists completely apart from faith. But the historic fact as such also includes within it a reference to a presupposition of faith that is efficacious in it, and it can therefore become efficacious only for faith. 26

In terms of the relationship between faith and history, it is the immediately available effect or the efficacy of the historic picture of Christ, uncovered or revealed by historical research but not dependent on the results of that research qua results or product of that research, that awakens faith in Christ. The person of Christ is a fact of Geschichte, and as such is open to the full range of historical research. But it is always prior to Historie and in that sense remains independent of it. By distinguishing between Geschichte and its effects or efficacy, and by further distinguishing those effects from historical investigation of Geschichte, Wobbermin believes it possible to maintain a necessary role for historical research without thereby making faith dependent on its resulting portrait of Jesus Christ. Wobbermin himself did not explicitly draw this distinction between Geschichte and its Wirkung or Wirksamkeit, but if such a distinction proves helpful in clarifying Wobbermin’s position it will have proved its usefulness.

Having established his definitions of Geschichte and Historie, in the second section of his essay Wobbermin turns to earlier efforts to solve the problem of faith and history. Each of these attempts, Wobbermin suggests, shares much in common with his own attempt to solve the problem. But he contends that his distinction between Geschichte and Historie moves him closer to a solution than these previous attempts by more clearly identifying the problem and by providing a more defensible solution.

Wobbermin’s Appraisal and Critique of Previous Positions

Wobbermin did not invent the distinction between Geschichte and Historie. The explicit distinction had already been made by Martin Kähler in 1892, and others were making similar distinctions between history as what is past and history as modern scientific historical research before

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Wobbermin’s appeal for a stricter conceptual distinction. 27 In this essay Wobbermin offers appraisals and critiques of four significant attempts to solve the problem of faith and history, those of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Martin Kähler, Wilhelm Herrmann, and Wilhelm Bousset. By interpreting what he considers to be the seminal texts on the problem of faith and history as it relates to a distinction between Geschichte and Historie, Wobbermin hopes to discover where he can build on the strengths and perhaps improve upon some of the weaknesses of these earlier efforts. An analysis of Wobbermin’s own critique of these previous positions will show where Wobbermin was able to move the discussion forward and where he became ensnared in similar or unique difficulties.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

In his study of Lessing, Gordon Michalson, Jr., describes the impact of Lessing’s famous “ditch” on the centuries that followed:

An image or a metaphor, although introduced almost casually, sometimes takes on a life of its own, insuring a measure of immortality for its inventor. . . . Lessing’s “ugly ditch,” if not the most frequently cited nonbiblical image within Protestant theology during the past two centuries, is certainly in the running for that dubious title. 28

Despite the near ubiquity of “Lessing’s ditch” in subsequent Protestant theology and the myriad efforts to leap it, Michalson detects a persistent misunderstanding or simplification of Lessing’s own presentation in his brief polemical letter, On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power. In that text, Michalson argues, Lessing does not present one “ditch,” but three.

The first ditch in Lessing’s letter is what Michalson calls the “temporal-factual ditch,” the great historical distance between, for example, miraculous events occurring in the first century CE and the present.


27. See, e.g., Reischle, “Der Streit über die Begründung des Glaubens auf den ‘geschichtlichen’ Jesus Christus.” See also Fresenius, “Die Bedeutung der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu für den Glauben” for a use of this distinction by one of Wobbermin’s contemporaries. Fresenius, for example, makes explicit what remains merely implicit in Wobbermin’s essay, namely the distinction between Geschichte and its Wirkung or Wirksamkeit. Fresenius, “Die Bedeutung der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu,” 258. Gordon Rupp briefly sketches the contours of the debate concerning the distinction between Geschichte and Historie in the 1910s in a chapter entitled “Christ and Cult.” See Rupp, Culture-Protestantism, 25–32.

Lessing makes a distinction between first-hand experience of an event and second-hand knowledge of that event based on testimony: “Miracles that I see with my own eyes, and have an opportunity to test, are one thing; miracles of which I know only historically [historisch] that others claim to have seen and tested them are another.” The historical distance between the past event and the present invariably weakens that event’s power to convince because it is now being mediated through any number of persons or institutions. Lessing asks, “Is what I read in credible historians invariably just as certain for me as what I experience myself? I am not aware that anyone has ever made such a claim.”

However, as Michalson suggests, Lessing’s first, “temporal-factual ditch” is in fact a “red herring” because the issue for Lessing is not primarily factual but logical. Historical reports are unreliable, not for any factual reason, but because they cannot be demonstrated logically. As Lessing puts it, “If no historical truth [historische Wahrheit] can be demonstrated, then nothing can be demonstrated by means of historical truths. That is, accidental truths of history [Geschichtswahrheiten] can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.” This Leibnizian distinction between contingency and necessity (what Lessing actually calls the “broad, ugly ditch”) is what Michalson calls the “metaphysical ditch,” the problem of two classes of truth (i.e., historical truth and religious or metaphysical truth). And it is this shift from the temporal-factual to the metaphysical that marks the transition to the heart of Lessing’s argument. In this section, Lessing asks how he is to accept as true the claim that Christ is the Son of God on the basis of his resurrection from the dead. Lessing is willing to accept as true the fact that Jesus proclaimed himself to be the Son of God and that his disciples also claimed this on the basis of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, because, Lessing admits, he has no serious historical objections to the resurrection. These claims concern the same, historical class of truth.

The “metaphysical ditch” is encountered when these historical, contingent truths are made the basis of religious or rational necessary truth. Lessing continues:

But to make the leap from this historical truth [historischen Wahrheit] into a quite different class of truths, and to require me to revise all my metaphysical and moral concepts accordingly; to expect me to change all my basic ideas on the nature of the deity because I cannot offer any credible evidence against the resurrection of Christ – if this is not a μεταβοσίς εἰς ἄλλο γένος [transformation into another category], I do not know what Aristotle meant by that phrase.

This distance between two classes of truths is the “broad, ugly ditch” that Lessing claims to be unable to leap. By surveying this ditch and by mapping its terrain, its breadth and its depth, Lessing introduced something novel into Western religious thought. According to Henry Allison, “Lessing was the first thinker to separate the question of the truth of the Christian religion from the question of its historical foundation.” Or, to put it even more boldly, Lessing’s argument constitutes “the complete elimination of the historical from religion.”

As Michalson suggests, however, Lessing is perfectly comfortable making his home on the “necessary” side of this ditch, because for Lessing the truth of Christianity is rational and, if not antihistorical, at least unhistorical in nature. The first ditch, the temporal-factual ditch, becomes irrelevant for Lessing precisely because the truth of Christianity finally has nothing to do with history at all. Or, as Michalson notes, for Lessing Christianity is true because of its rational, “inner” truth and not because of its historical facticity. For Lessing then, only the meaning of Christianity can be conveyed by history, never its truth. Its truth is

30. Ibid., 5 [ET, 85].
31. Ibid. Emphasis in original.
32. Toshinasa Yasukata notes that Lessing borrowed this distinction between truths of history and truths of reason from a similar distinction drawn by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz between truths of reason [vériés de raisonnement ou Véracités de raisonnements] and factual truths [vérités de fait ou Tatsachenwahrheiten]. The distinction, for Leibniz, rested on the distinction between impossibility and possibility. “Truths of reason are necessary and their opposite is impossible; factual truths are contingent and their opposite is possible.” Leibniz, cited in Yasukata, Lessing’s Philosophy of Religion, 60.
34. Ibid., 7 [ET, 87].
35. Allison, Lessing and the Enlightenment, viii.
36. This is the judgment of Gottfried Fittbogen, cited in Allison, Lessing and the Enlightenment, 103.
38. Ibid., 32.
necessary and rational rather than contingent and historical. Michalson summarizes Lessing's position in terms of the illustrative power of history and the rational essence of Christian faith:

Ultimately, then, Lessing's position on faith and historical knowledge is derived from more fundamental commitments concerning faith and reason on the one hand, and reason and revelation on the other: authentic faith is rational and potentially universalizable, meaning that it does not hang on the acceptance of any historical facts; and historical revelations do not introduce new and indispensable religious information but simply illustrate, or bring into our field of vision, what we are capable of knowing all along.\(^39\)

There is, however, yet another "ditch" in Lessing's letter. This third and final ditch is what Michalson calls the "existential ditch" or the problem of religious appropriation, and he suggests that this ditch is the common theme running through the entire letter. It is the problem of a modern person appropriating and believing a message that is strange, incredible, and perhaps even scandalous. In this context Lessing is particularly concerned with the autonomy of the rational human being, and he is unwilling to sacrifice that autonomy in order to believe a message solely on the basis of the authority of Scripture, church, or tradition. For Lessing it is ultimately a matter of distinguishing between the "outer" (e.g., historical events) and the "inner" (the autonomous, moral-religious self).\(^40\)

Lessing's preference for the "inner truth" of Christianity over against its "outer" truth is what Michalson calls the "existential ditch" or the "existential ditch" in Lessing's letter. This third and final ditch is what Michalson calls the "existential ditch" or the problem of religious appropriation, and he suggests that this ditch is the common theme running through the entire letter. It is the problem of a modern person appropriating and believing a message that is strange, incredible, and perhaps even scandalous. In this context Lessing is particularly concerned with the autonomy of the rational human being, and he is unwilling to sacrifice that autonomy in order to believe a message solely on the basis of the authority of Scripture, church, or tradition. For Lessing it is ultimately a matter of distinguishing between the "outer" (e.g., historical events) and the "inner" (the autonomous, moral-religious self).\(^40\)

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Lessing's famous "ditch" plays an important role in subsequent discussions of the relationship between Christian faith and history, and Wobbermin suggests that Lessing's "ditch" suffers from certain conceptual ambiguities, most importantly in terms of the relationship between truth and history. Such conceptual ambiguity can be eliminated, Wobbermin offers, by reframing Lessing's statement with specific reference to the distinction between Geschichte and Historie. Thus Wobbermin would restate the proposition to read: "Individual historical cognitions can never become proof of eternal truths of Geschichte."\(^42\)

Wobbermin's Appraisal and Critique of Lessing's Position

In introducing the section in which he appraises previous positions on the problem of faith and history, Wobbermin notes that he is purposely selecting positions with which he finds some level of agreement.\(^41\) He also admits that Lessing does not belong directly to the group that follows, primarily because Lessing is not, strictly speaking, a Protestant theologian. Wobbermin's critique of Lessing will therefore be of a more general character than those that follow.

Lessing's famous "ditch" plays an important role in subsequent discussions of the relationship between Christian faith and history, and Wobbermin suggests that Lessing's "ditch" suffers from certain conceptual ambiguities, most importantly in terms of the relationship between truth and history. Such conceptual ambiguity can be eliminated, Wobbermin offers, by reframing Lessing's statement with specific reference to the distinction between Geschichte and Historie. Thus Wobbermin would restate the proposition to read: "Individual historical cognitions can never become proof of eternal truths of Geschichte."\(^42\)

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39. Ibid., 39. Lessing's references to the illustrative power of history will be adopted by Kant and later reworked by Wobbermin, who, surprisingly, does not refer to this element of Lessing's thought.
40. Ibid., 48-49.
41. Allison, Lessing and the Enlightenment, 96.
42. Lessing, cited in Allison, Lessing and the Enlightenment, 95-96.
44. Wobbermin, Geschichte und Historie, 16.
46. "Historische Einzelerkenntnisse können der Beweis von ewigen Geschichtswahrheiten
Toshimasa Yasukata notes that Lessing uses the terms *historische Wahrheiten* (historical truths) and *Geschichtswahrheiten* (truths of history or historic truths) interchangeably, and he argues, similarly to Wobbermin (but without mention of Wobbermin's criticisms of Lessing), that Lessing's position would be strengthened by a distinction between the two terms. Lessing proposes that "if no historical truth [historische Wahrheit] can be demonstrated, then nothing can be demonstrated by means of historical truths. That is, accidental truths of history [Geschichtswahrheiten] can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason." 47 Yasukata suggests that Lessing's argument lacks conceptual clarity precisely at this point. 48 Wobbermin shares this concern, and he reworks Lessing's "ditch" to distinguish between *Geschichte* and *Historie*, thereby attempting to redirect attention to what he considers to be the more difficult problem of faith and history.

According to Wobbermin, Lessing's ditch suffers from a metaphysical deficit, which is especially ironic given Michalson's conclusion that this particular statement concerns precisely the "metaphysical" problem of relating two different classes of truth. But Wobbermin does not share Michalson's definition of the problem. The problem, as Wobbermin sees it, is not between two classes of truth; the problem is the assumption that there can be two classes of truth at all. For Wobbermin, unlike Lessing, there is only one class of truth: eternal truths of *Geschichte*. There is no such thing, therefore, as "accidental" or "contingent" truths. What Lessing calls accidental truths of history, Wobbermin calls individual historical cognitions. All truths are truths of *Geschichte* because only in and through *Geschichte* can truth be represented to thinking subjects who themselves stand within *Geschichte.*

Here Wobbermin parts company with Lessing on the nature of truth. While Lessing wants to define truth in purely rational terms, Wobbermin prefers to speak of truths operative in and through *Geschichte*. Wobbermin hopes to avoid Lessing's rejection of historical demonstrations of truth by distinguishing between *Historie* and *Geschichte*. Historical research (or, to use Wobbermin's term here, "individual historical cognitions") will never provide eternal, historic truths precisely because historical research yields results that are always provisional, relative, and probable. But *Geschichte*, being the realm of value and of efficacy, withstands historical inquiry and serves as the vehicle of absolute, eternal truths.

Wobbermin's reasoning is not clear at this point, as he does not take the further step of defining precisely how eternal truth is present within and through *Geschichte.* 50 Only later does he address the role of Scripture (as divine revelation and the early church's testimony) as the vehicle of eternal truth, but that further step is missing in this early essay.

Wobbermin is content to define eternal truths specifically as religious truths: "The label 'eternal' should be understood in the specific sense of religious faith - truths belonging to the world of eternity, established in it, and originating in it." 51 Because, according to Wobbermin, "eternal truths" are supramundane, they cannot be proved by historical research. Such truths defy proof and confront historic subjects only in and through *Geschichte*. As such they are accessible only to faith.

To put it in Michalson's terms, here Wobbermin is attempting to solve the problem of religious appropriation, to leap across what Michalson calls Lessing's "existential ditch." But whereas Lessing turns to the "inner self" to discover a truth already present in reason, Wobbermin turns to *Geschichte* as the vehicle of eternal truth. Lessing has no need at all of *Historie* or *Geschichte* in any but an illustrative capacity; Wobbermin, on the other hand, bases everything here on a distinction between truth provided by historical science and religious truth becoming immediately present to believers in and through *Geschichte*, independent of any historical inquiry into past facts, figures, or events. It is enough for Wobbermin
that these eternal truths of Geschichte cannot be proved or disproved by historical research:

Eternal truths of this type, as our statement says, cannot be proved through individual historical cognitions. Because all historical research continues in the form of individual historical cognitions, these eternal truths cannot be proved through historical research. And therefore truths of this type belong to Geschichte; they are to be described as truths of Geschichte. Indeed, in no other way than in Geschichte and through Geschichte do such truths come to human beings.35

Wobbermin does not offer an analysis of Lessing's entire argument in On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power. Had he done so, he might have realized how close his position finally is to Lessing's in many important respects. Most significantly for the purposes of this study, Wobbermin, perhaps without realizing it, wants to avoid the same dangers as Lessing. Lessing's primary concern is to make the religious message available to modern men and women without requiring them first to make an intellectual sacrifice by believing secondary historical accounts of dubious identification of the problem itself.36

Martin Kähler

Paul Tillich, one of Kähler's last surviving students, reflected on Kähler's theological legacy in his foreword to the English translation of Kähler's The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ. Tillich remembers Kähler as a "strictly systematic thinker who developed his ideas under the principle of the Reformers - 'justification through faith by grace,' and as a scholar with a "profound insight into the problem of the historical Jesus in the light of the scholarly research into the sources." Bearing in mind the intention to think systematically under the guidance of the doctrine of justification through faith by grace, Kähler's primary concern in these essays on the historical Jesus and the historic, biblical Christ is to win an "invulnerable area" [sturmfreies Gebiet]37 for faith, kicking away the false supports for faith in order to give faith its proper object: Christ the Lord.

According to Carl Braaten, Kähler's quest for an invulnerable area for faith is defined by two interrelated questions: How can the Bible remain a trustworthy and normative document of revelation when historical criticism has shattered confidence in its historical reliability? And second, how can Jesus Christ be the basis and content of Christian faith when historical science can never provide indisputable, certain knowledge of the historical Jesus?38

Kähler sets out to answer these questions by means of a two-fold argument. First, he attempts to secure Jesus Christ as the basis and content of Christian faith in face of historical doubt by drawing a distinction between the historical Jesus [der historische Jesus] and the historic Christ [der geschichtliche Christus]. Second, on the basis of this distinction between the historical Jesus and the historic Christ, he attempts to maintain confidence in the authority of Scripture by equating this historic Christ with the biblical Christ rather than with the historical Jesus lying somewhere "behind" the texts of the New Testament.

At work behind these arguments is a profound pastoral sensitivity to the situation of lay Christians, the great mass of those who do not possess the capacity or the training to engage in complex historical-critical investigations of the New Testament in order to discover the "real" Jesus in whom they should believe.39 Were this erudition necessary for Christian

54. Tillich, foreword to The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ, by Martin Kähler, vii.
55. This catchword, "invulnerable area," has become synonymous with Kähler's entire theological project, especially in terms of the problem of faith and history. See, e.g., Brachmann, whose chapter on Kähler is entitled 'Das sturmfreie Gebiet des Glaubens bei Martin Kähler'. Brachmann, Glaube und Geschichte, 22–26.
56. Braaten, introduction to The So-called Historical Jesus, 10.
57. This pastoral sensitivity is often more formally expressed in the desire for certai-
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faith, Kähler notes, there would have been no true Christians for almost seventeen centuries, and there would be very few true Christians even in his own day:

If [Christians living before the advent of historical-critical scholarship] contemplated and worshipped the Jesus of the Gospels in just this obscurity which [historians] profess to find in these texts and feel bound to remove, then indeed they would not have known their Savior. And so it would be for all Christians after them, right up to us. ⁵⁸

The situation is not as dire as this, of course, as Kähler insists that the Jesus of the historians is not the "real Christ" at all, but a figment of the historians' imaginations. ⁵⁹ The entire Life of Jesus movement,⁶⁰ Kähler contends, "conceals from us the living Christ." It is a real and present danger to the faith of Christians and must be rejected. It is, Kähler argues, a "blind alley." ⁶¹ But a blind alley very often appears to be the correct route; otherwise no one would travel it at all. There is something legitimate about the "quest for the historical Jesus," and Kähler finds its legitimacy in the critique of an abstract dogmatism that threatens to conceal or obliterate the humanity of Jesus. The quest becomes illegitimate as soon as it falls into the error of regarding Jesus as nothing more than a mere

...[Gewißheit] that permeates Kähler's work. For an analysis of the problem of certainty in Kähler's work, see Menke, Erfahrung und Gewißheit des Glüttber.

⁵⁸ Kähler, Der sogenannte historische Jesus, 61 [ET: The So-called Historical Jesus, 1].
⁵⁹ Ibid., 55 [ET, 55].
⁶⁰ These attempts at a historical biography of Jesus are chronicled in Schweitzer's Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Jesus [ET: The Quest of the Historical Jesus]. The Quest for the Historical Jesus reemerged in the middle of the twentieth century in the so-called "Second Quest" inaugurated by Ernst Käsemann and others. See Robinson, A New Quest of the Historical Jesus; and Harvey and Ogden, "Wie neu ist die 'Neue Frage nach dem historischen Jesus?'" [ET: How New is the 'New Quest for the Historical Jesus?'].
⁶¹ Kähler, Der sogenannte historische Jesus, 44 [ET: The So-called Historical Jesus, 43].
⁶² Ibid., 47 [ET, 46]. The term Kähler uses here is "Holzweg," which is literally a "logging road" or "logger's path," a rough path in the forest that is difficult to travel and often simply ends, leading nowhere. In German it can refer to anything that leads to confusion or to anything that is misleading. It can be expressed in a variety of English idioms, including "barking up the wrong tree," "being on the wrong track," or "leading someone up the garden path." Braxton translates it as "blind alley," which is a meaning closer to the original, literal meaning of the German.

In other words, in reacting against the perceived Docetism of an abstract dogmatism, the Life of Jesus movement falls prey to a subtle (or, in some cases, not so subtle) Ebionitism.

The fatal flaw of the Life of Jesus movement, according to Kähler, is its failure to recognize the unique character of the biblical texts. The modern biographers of Jesus approach the gospels as historical documents of an equal value as all other historical documents and expect to find objective, unbiased sources for reconstructing the personality and life of Jesus of Nazareth. Kähler rejects this presupposition and argues that no such objective, unbiased sources are available in the New Testament, and that there are therefore no sources in the New Testament adequate to the task of constructing a reliable historical biography of Jesus. Or as Kähler puts it:

We have no sources for a "Life of Jesus" that a historian can accept as authentic and sufficient. I stress: for a biography of Jesus of Nazareth according to the currently accepted standards of historical scholarship. A credible picture of the Savior for believers is a completely different thing. ⁶²

It is the method of historical research itself that leads Kähler to this conclusion. The gospels exist in almost total isolation, so that nothing else is known of Jesus of Nazareth except what is contained in them. The gospels cannot with any certainty be traced to eyewitnesses. The gospels themselves only tell us about select periods of Jesus' life. Finally, even within the New Testament itself there are two radically different types of gospels (synoptic and Johannine), and these often contradict one another (to say nothing of the contradictions within the synoptic tradition itself). ⁶³

Any hope of producing a comprehensive and accurate historical biography of Jesus of Nazareth from these sources alone is a slim hope indeed. What one finds, instead, is a "vast expanse of the ruins [Trümmerfeld] of individual traditions." ⁶⁴

Alongside the problem of adequate sources, another problem faces historians who wish to compose a reliable, accurate biography of Jesus of Nazareth. One of the hallmarks of the historical method is the use of

⁶² Ibid., 47–48 [ET, 46–47].
⁶³ Ibid., 49 [ET, 48].
⁶⁴ Ibid. [ET, 48–49].
⁶⁵ Ibid., 49–50 [ET, 49].
the principle of analogy. The historian must find an analogy in current human events or experience in order to explain what is difficult or obscure in the past, and here the biographical task breaks down. Faced with so many gaps in the supposedly historical record of the life of Jesus, the modern historian is forced to find an analogy in his own life or in human life in general, so that "it is mostly Jesus being refracted through the spirit of these gentlemen themselves."67 What is typically produced is a Jesus in the image of the historian, the Jesus he has hoped to find from the outset of his research. This Jesus, then, is supposed to be the object of Christian faith. Braaten suggests that this use of the historical-critical method to secure the object of faith is finally a subtle form of works righteousness:

In terms of the reformation [sic] doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in the Word alone, the actuality of salvation is not dependent upon the preparatory works of man, whether moral, religious, or intellectual, whether philosophical or historical.68

There is a further flaw inherent in the application of the principle of analogy to the biblical sources concerning Jesus. According to Kähler, modern historians (whether they are conscious of it or not) are looking for a Jesus who resembles them, their moral and religious sensibilities, and their Zeitgeist. This bias requires them to search for a Jesus who is fundamentally like all other human beings. While Jesus is like all other human beings by virtue of the humanity he shares with them, he is, more importantly, utterly unique in human history: he is the sinless Son of God, unlike all other human beings in kind and not only in degree.69 Those who seek Jesus in order to see the Father through him (John 14:9) do not seek him because he is like them, but because he is radically unlike them. Or as Kähler puts it, "I am not seeking someone like myself, but rather my counterpart [Gegenstück], my completion [Ergänzung], my Savior."70

This Jesus is not the historical Jesus of modern biography, but the historic Christ, the revelation of God.

Historical science, no matter how faithfully and thoroughly employed, cannot provide this historic Christ for faith. The historic Christ, the Christ of the Bible, comes to people not through the "midwifery [Hebammenkünste] of historical research,"71 but through the preaching of the church. The real Christ is the Christ who is preached, and this Christ is the Christ of faith.72

Here the distinction between the historical [historisch] and the historic [geschichtlich] is crucial. For Kähler, the historical Jesus is Jesus as he is known by historical research. The historic Christ, however, is the earthly Jesus in his significance, as he is the object of faith.73 Kähler is so unwilling to "go behind" the texts of the New Testament that he is unwilling to make any distinction at all between the historic and the biblical Christ; the historic Christ is the Christ of the Bible.74 This Christ is the Christ of apostolic preaching, the Christ who awakened faith in the disciples and who is therefore confessed as Lord. He is, according to Kähler, the originator of the biblical picture of Christ, the basis and the content of faith.

The identification of the historic Christ with the biblical Christ raises serious difficulties for Kähler's position. Most importantly, Kähler seems ultimately to be unwilling to grant historical criticism any significant role, even though he repeatedly denies this charge.75 If the historic Christ is the Christ of the whole Bible, then it is difficult to determine how and where historical criticism might gain a foothold for its work. New Testament scholar Georg Strecker makes a similar observation in an essay on the historic and theological problem of the "Jesus question":

71. Ibid., 18 [ET, 121].
72. Ibid., 66 [ET, 66].
73. Given the importance of this distinction for his argument, it is surprising that Kähler nowhere offers a clear definition of these terms beyond their immediate relevance to the topic at hand. It is especially interesting to note, too, that Kähler rarely distinguishes between the nominal forms Historie and Geschichte. The distinction exists for him almost solely in the adjectival forms historisch and geschichtlich, and only with reference to Jesus Christ.
74. Ibid., 86 [ET, 86].
75. Kähler claims to have accepted historical inquiry into the New Testament texts "for certain purposes," and accuses those who deny that he has any positive use for historical criticism to have misunderstood him. Ibid., 20 [ET, 124].
Nevertheless, Kähler is more concerned to allow the historic, biblical Christ to confront readers and hearers of Scripture directly than he is to maintain any independence or validity for historical criticism.

The historical Jesus is of no interest to faith; this much Kähler makes absolutely clear. The historic Christ, the Christ of the Bible, is the object of Christian faith, available to every person in every time and place through the church's proclamation of Christ as Lord. But there is a third category operative in Kähler's treatment, namely, the superhistoric [übergeschichtlich]. The superhistoric, according to Kähler, designates that which would not exist apart from history but whose significance is not exhausted within the confines of the historical nexus. In the superhistoric, then, "what is universally valid is joined to the historic to become an effective presence [Wirkam-Gegenwärtigen]." The superhistoric Christ is Christ in his immediate significance and presence for humanity, who is always related to the historic Christ but never limited to his historicity. Kähler contends that historical research is incapable of producing this superhis-

77. Braaten translates "übergeschichtlich" as "suprahistorical" rather than "superhistoric," which fails to convey the meaning Kähler intended. The superhistoric, for Kähler, is related to the historic and not to the historical at all. To translate "übergeschichtlich" as "suprahistorical" simply adds unnecessary confusion to the issue.
78. Kähler, Der sogenannte historische Jesus, 48, n. 1 [ET: The So-called Historical Jesus, 94]. For more on the superhistoric in Kähler, see Hägglund, "Martin Kählers theologisch ideologischen Anschauungen" and Leipold, Offenbarung und Geschichte als Problem des Verstehens, especially Chapter 4, "Der Begriff des Übergeschichtlichen." For a slightly different approach than Kähler's, see Dibelius, Geschichte und Übergeschichtliche Religion und Kultur, the English translation of which also adds to the confusion by translating geschichtlich as "historical.

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Geschichte und Historie

To the superhistoric Christ because the superhistoric Christ transcends history and is not limited to the chain of cause and effect determinative of normal historical development. Christ's "historic-suprahistoric effect" is present and effective within the church, in its confession of faith, and in the living faith of Christians themselves. In other words, the superhistoric Christ is only present to faith and therefore cannot be provided by historical research. Braaten also notes the impossibility of direct historical knowledge of the superhistoric:

Faith which lives only in history can be related to the superhistoric revelational reality because this reality has entered into history and is now knowable exclusively through history... General science can deal with the superhistoric only indirectly, namely, by analyzing the words and statements that have been transmitted in the documents of redemptive history, and by taking account of the historical effects of these statements in history:

Despite the wide-ranging implications of a further distinction between the historic and the superhistoric, Kähler does not explore those implications in his essays on the distinction between the historical Jesus and the historic Christ. Had he done so, he might have avoided or at least more successfully defended his position against the charge of failure to grant historical criticism access to the biblical picture of Jesus Christ. He clearly moves in this direction by defining the biblical texts variously as sermons, confessions, or testimonies rather than mere historical documents, as such ultimately remaining unaffected by historical inquiry, but his failure to make a stricter distinction between the historic Christ of the Bible and the superhistoric Christ as the immediately present and efficacious Lord keeps his position open to charges of biblicalism, however unfair those charges ultimately may be.

79. Kähler, Der sogenannte historische Jesus, 94 [ET: The So-called Historical Jesus, 95].
80. This is so, Leipold suggests, because for Kähler the superhistoric originates in and is available through revelation alone. Christ, in his significance for faith (i.e., as the revelation of God in history), represents the actual content of the concept of the superhistoric. It is utterly unique as Christ is utterly unique, and its use, especially in Kähler's dogmatics, is limited to descriptions of the content of salvation, the reconciliation of the world to God and the justification of sinners. Leipold, Offenbarung und Geschichte, 98–107. Kähler refers readers to his dogmatics for more on the concept of the superhistoric. See Kähler, Die Wissenschaft der christlichen Lehre, §13, 13–15. Kähler gives the same definition there as he does above.
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As it stands, Kähler is content to equate the historic Christ with the biblical picture of him and to locate the efficacy and the presence of Christ in the church's proclamation of him as its Lord. By removing the biblical picture of the historic Christ from the realm of critical historical investigation, and by laying bare the revelatory character of this picture and its continuing presence in the proclamation of the church, Kähler hopes to have secured an invulnerable area for faith in Christ.

But has he succeeded in establishing and protecting this invulnerable area for faith? Is his position finally impervious to a thoroughgoing historical criticism of the sources? Wilhelm Brachmann, for example, concludes that Kähler was unsuccessful in his attempt to establish this invulnerable area. Brachmann suggests that the weakness of Kähler's position is his reliance on the Easter experience of the disciples as the origin of testimony about the risen Christ, an experience that Kähler suggests is finally of a suprahistoric reality. Despite Kähler's insistence that this event is suprahistoric rather than historic, the experience itself nevertheless occurs within history. According to Brachmann, then, one must reckon with the possibility that a historical explanation will be found for what Kähler insists is a suprahistoric reality. Or as Brachmann puts it, "a mortal danger threatens Kähler's thesis of an invulnerable area for faith from the side of history."

Perhaps Kähler's shortcomings can be attributed, at least in part, to two related characteristic features of his theological work: his suspicion of historical criticism as it is applied to theological work and his flirtation with an uncritical biblicism. His suspicion of historical criticism and its role in theological work hinders its important negative function in a theological analysis of the New Testament. Kähler fears stumbling onto a slippery slope if historical criticism is permitted free and unrestrained access to the biblical tradition, and he constructs his invulnerable area for faith in order to protect both faith and the Bible from any unnecessary incursions by historical criticism.

Wobbermin's Appraisal and Critique of Kähler's Position

Wobbermin's position would appear to be quite close to Kähler's, especially in terms of the importance of a distinction between Geschichte and Historie. Wobbermin praises Kähler for so effectively exposing the "blind alley" of the Life of Jesus movement, both in terms of the limits of historical knowledge in general and of historical inquiry into the gospels in particular. Wobbermin agrees that the entire Life of Jesus movement is a blind alley, insofar as it attempts to provide an enduring foundation for Christian faith in the results of its research.

On the surface, even Kähler's and Wobbermin's distinctions between Geschichte and Historie appear to be identical. For both, the historical Jesus is the Jesus of modern historical biography, the product of historical investigation of the biblical texts. The historic Christ, on the other hand, is the Savior who confronts readers and hearers of the New Testament directly, without what Kähler called "the midwifery of historical research." To base faith on a product of historical scholarship is to require a false foundation for faith, to make faith dependent on the relative and probable results of historical scholarship and on the authority of historians rather than the living Christ.

Wobbermin parts company with Kähler, however, on the definition of the historic Christ. Kähler insists that there is no distinction at all between the historic Christ and the Christ of the Bible; he is der gesellschaftliche, biblische Christus. Wobbermin is unwilling to equate the historic Christ with the biblical Christ, instead insisting that the historic Christ is a narrower figure than the biblical picture of him. Wobbermin does not object to the fact "that' Kähler identifies the historic with the biblical Christ, but to 'how' he does this." The historic Christ is the biblical Christ for Wobbermin as well as for Kähler. But the biblical Christ, Wobbermin argues, cannot simply be equated with the historic Christ as if there were no distinction between the two.

A thoroughgoing historical criticism will clarify the picture of the historic, biblical Christ so that only those elements that are "truly" historic will remain. Kähler, Wobbermin argues, was unable or unwilling to carry his distinction between Geschichte and Historie to its logical conclu-
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The isolation of these three essential elements of the picture of Jesus Christ places Wobbermin on rather shaky ground in strictly historical terms. He fails to account for the limited historical perspective of the reader of the New Testament and appears to affirm the possibility of what Rudolf Bultmann would later call a "presuppositionless exegesis" (or what might also be called "purely objective exegesis"). This limitation of perspective — or, to put it another way, the dependence on the reader's own historical, philosophical, and cultural context — is especially clear in terms of Wobbermin's first essential element. In emphasizing Jesus' ethical disposition toward love, Wobbermin is dependent on the moral and ethical emphasis of nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism, which was later critiqued by Karl Barth and others as being rooted in bourgeois sentiments or a so-called Kulturnationalismus rather than a purely historical reading of the "strange world" of the New Testament.

But the selection of these three "essential elements" also raises the question of both the freedom of historical-critical inquiry and the transparency of its use. Wobbermin consistently affirms his openness to a free and unrestrained historical investigation of the New Testament, both in order to strip away any false supports for faith and to allow the truly efficacious historic elements to remain, independent of historical research. Here Wobbermin's method breaks down, precisely because he insists both that he has granted historical criticism free and unrestrained access to the biblical picture of Christ and that these three essential elements of the biblical picture of Christ remain unaffected by historical criticism. These three elements, he suggests, are historic because they have remained active and efficacious throughout the history of the Christian tradition.

86. Ibid., 20-21.
87. "Seine ethische Liebe als Grundsetzung in ihrer Reinheit und Kraft, seine Wille und Kraft, mit dem heimatlichen Vater und der heimatlichen Seele zusammenhängend, seine Erhebung zum Vater nach erlittenem Kreuzestod, das sind die Momente, die im letzten Grunde das Bild des historischen Christus ausmachen." (Ibid., 23.)
of one or more of these three essential elements of the historic picture of Christ, a possibility that is inherent in the nature of historical investigation itself. Wobbermin is confident that these three elements will remain unaffected by historical investigation, but in this case such confidence is almost certainly unwarranted.

Furthermore, it is ironic that Wobbermin insists that these three elements are unaffected by historical criticism while also suggesting that they are provided by historical investigation. Here Wobbermin fails to abide by his own requirement that the historic picture of Christ not be provided by historical research. Also, it might be true that these three essential elements of the biblical picture of the historic Christ have remained active and efficacious throughout the history of Christianity, but it might also be true that they will cease to be so at some point in the future, and that new "essential elements" will emerge on the basis of the continuing development of the church as a historic institution and its continuing use and proclamation of Scripture. This alone is not sufficient reason to abandon these elements, but it is perhaps grounds for a more restrained confidence in their permanent and enduring value and their imperviousness to free historical inquiry.

Wobbermin insists that what is historic is ultimately what is active and efficacious in history, beyond mere historicity. The key to this insistence is the concept of efficacy or effect [Wirk samkeit or Wirkung]. What is historical is of interest primarily to historians and is the product of their research, while what is historic is efficacious beyond its mere historicity and continues to affect and influence the present from the past. In this case, his selection of these three essential elements can be justified. Wobbermin moves beyond Kahler by attempting to distinguish between the biblical Christ and the historic Christ both by means of historical investigation of the New Testament and by means of a preference for the historic over the historical, the presently efficacious over what remains in the past. His position remains open to critique on purely historical grounds, however, which in this case might be inevitable given the nature of the matter itself, namely, basing the historic effects of Christ in some sense on a figure of history, Jesus of Nazareth.

**Wilhelm Herrmann**

Herrmann did not make a consistent distinction between *Geschichte* and *Historie*, yet his work is permeated with the question of faith and historical knowledge. Like Kahler and Wobbermin, Herrmann operates with a strong suspicion of the ability of historical research to provide certainty for faith:

> The decision reached [by historical criticism] makes a claim at the outset to nothing more than probability. We are always prepared for the possibility that our results can be modified by a more precise consideration or through the discovery of new accounts. It is obvious that such a decision cannot provide us with facts on which religious faith could be based.44

Historical judgments are always judgments of probability, and even the highest possible probability is insufficient as a foundation for faith. He asks, "What kind of a religion would that be which would want to accept the basis for its conviction with the consciousness that it was only probably safe?"45 According to Herrmann, then, the value of historical research in the theological task is its shattering of false supports for faith and its continuing comparison of faith's picture of Jesus Christ with the results of historical investigation of the New Testament:

> Historical work on the New Testament is not without value for faith. In the first place, it shows us how little the New Testament texts provide for a historical account undertaking to set forth, as a result of scientific evidence, what the person of Jesus means for the Christian. As earnest historical work on the New Testament 93. See, e.g., Herrmann, "Der geschichtliche Christus der Grund unseres Glaubens": "Soll es eine besondere theologische Geschichtsforschung geben?"; "Warun bedarf unser Glaube geschichtlicher Tatsachen?"; and "Grund und Inhalt des Glaubens". For more on Herrmann's Christology, see Sockness, "The Ideal and the Historical in the Christology of Wilhelm Herrmann" and Greve, *Der Grund des Glaubens*.


95. Ibid., 59 [ET, 72].
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destroys such claims, it shatters false supports for faith, and that is a great gain. The Christian who imagines that the reliability of the tradition as historical documents gives certainty to faith should be startled from rest by historical work. This ought to make it clear that Christianity cannot be had as cheaply as one thinks. Secondly, historical work is constantly yielding new and modified results obtained from the tradition. By this means the Christian faith is constantly called upon to compare the picture of Jesus that it holds as absolute truth with the relative truth of historical knowledge [historische Erkenntnis]. And this helps us not to forget that the most important fact of our life cannot be given to us once for all, but must be continually grasped with all our soul.90

When the false supports are eliminated, presumably faith has clear and immediate access to its proper object. According to Herrmann, the basis of Christian faith is the fact of Jesus Christ's appearance in history,97 God's revelation, through whom and through which Christians are assured that they commune with God. Historical research is incapable of providing this "indubitable fact" [zweifellose Tatsache] of Jesus Christ because historical research can only attain higher or lower degrees of probability. If historical research cannot provide the fact of Jesus Christ as the basis of faith to modern men and women, this fact must be appropriated by other means:

If the person of Jesus is so certain to us Christians that we see in him the basis of our faith and the present revelation of God to us, this conviction is not established by a historical judgment [historisches Urteil]. . . . It is something else entirely that banishes all doubt from the picture of Jesus. If we have that picture at all, we have it as the result, not of our own efforts, but as an effect of the power of Jesus himself.90

90. Ibid., 63-64 [ET, 76-77].
97. "Whenever we are actually able to see the person of Jesus, then, under the impression of this inner life that breaks through all the veils of the tradition, we ask no more questions about the credibility of the narrators. The question of whether the person of Jesus belongs to history or fiction is silenced in everyone who learns to see it at all, because through it one first experiences what the true reality of personal life is." Ibid., 62 [ET, 75]. For a study of Herrmann's theology with an emphasis on the experience of God and the inner life of Jesus, see de Boor's article, published in two parts as "Der letzte Grund unseres Glaubens an Gott."
reconstruction of the past, but to the certainty of this presently given faith itself.101

In order to bolster this appeal to the certainty of presently given faith, Herrmann makes a distinction between Jesus Christ as the basis of faith (faith's Grund) and Jesus Christ as the content of faith (faith's Inhalt). He understands this distinction to be a crucial one, because any confusion in this matter can have profoundly negative implications for the doctrine of justification by faith alone. In his essay "Grund und Inhalt des Glaubens," he defines the basis of faith as "the man Jesus Christ."102 The content of faith, on the other hand, is the New Testament picture of the historic Christ, which is kept alive and transmitted through the preaching of the church. The content of faith is, to use another term, composed of Glaubensgedanken (ideas or thoughts of faith) about Christ. The basis is always prior to the content, and the content always presupposes and represents the basis. The basis itself is the sole fact of the appearance of Christ in history and the continuing effect of the power of his inner life. All else is secondary and is ultimately unnecessary for the faith of one who has already been touched by this power. If one were to be brought to faith by the content of faith, by the Glaubensgedanken about Christ rather than the power of Christ himself, then faith would essentially be thrown back upon itself and would become a human work rather than a free gift of the gracious God. Herrmann argues that his distinction between the basis of faith and the content of faith places him firmly within the Reformation tradition and protects his position from charges of works righteousness.103

This distinction marks a significant departure from Kähler's position, for example.104 Kähler, who was unwilling to distinguish at all between the historic Christ and the biblical picture of Christ, was even less willing to make a further distinction between Christ as the basis of faith and Christ as the content of faith. For him, Christ is both the basis and the content of faith in exactly the same way: as the total historic, biblical Christ.

Herrmann, on the other hand, introduces a further distinction between the inner life of Jesus, which serves as the basis of faith, and the biblical picture of the historic Christ, which serves as the content of that faith.105 One of the keys to Herrmann's position is the concept of the power of the inner life of Jesus and how this power is rooted in a historic figure while simultaneously transcending its historicity (thus making it, according to Herrmann, impervious to historical skepticism). For Herrmann, the question of the reliability or the accuracy of the historical records about Jesus Christ is rendered moot once an individual has been gripped by the power of the inner life of Jesus. As Claude Welch puts it, "The question, then, is not what we make of the story (by historisch study), but what the contents of the story make of us."106 Herrmann discusses this at length in Der Verkehr des Christen mit Gott, and one passage in particular places his position in a clearer light:

It is precisely the most difficult thing to comprehend in the historic reality of Jesus that sets us free from the tradition, because it finally imposes itself on us as something presently effective on us. Those who have found the inner life of Jesus through the mediation of others, insofar as that has happened, have become free even of that mediation. They are set free by the significance that the inner life of Jesus has obtained for those who have seen it. If we have experienced his power over us, we need no longer look to the testimony of others to hold fast to his life as something real. We start, indeed, from the tradition; but we first grasp the fact that the tradition presents us when we have become aware of the enrichment of our

in Kähler, Der sogenannte historische Jesus, 149-206. This essay provides much material for a comparison of Kähler and Herrmann, but that particular line of inquiry lies beyond the scope of this study.

105. There is some indication in Der Verkehr that Herrmann also attempts to differentiate between the basis and the content of faith on the basis of the classical distinction between the fides qua creditur and the fides qua creditur. "The subjective experience of the Christian religion cannot be severed from the thoughts that in Christian doctrine one seeks to formulate as the contents of faith. That experience does not end in mere feeling, but comes to its perfection in those thoughts." Herrmann, Der Verkehr, 38 [ET: Communion, 47].

106. Welch, Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century, 2:52.
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own inner life by contact with the Living One... The appearance of a personality that becomes visible to us in this way absolutely cannot be handed over to us through the communication of others. It arises in us as the free revelation of the living to the living. Thus also the inner life of Jesus becomes part of our own reality. Those who have experienced this will certainly no longer say that, strictly speaking, they can comprehend only the tradition of Jesus as something real. Jesus himself becomes a real power to us when he discloses his inner life to us, a power that we perceive as the best thing our life contains.107

The fact of the appearance of Jesus in history is, according to Herrmann, nothing other than the revelation of God.108 The fact of the historic Jesus Christ, impressing himself upon men and women and becoming part of their own reality, is the basis of Christian faith and, according to Herrmann, is impervious to historical criticism. It is based in the historic tradition of the New Testament, but it finally transcends the mediation of history by means of a direct, indeed miraculous effect of Christ on the individual.109 The certainty of faith is thus found in the experience of this effect within the individual rather than in any external "prop."

With this distinction between the basis of faith and the content of faith and with this emphasis on the immediate effect of the historic Christ on the individual, Herrmann hopes to have described a faith that is ultimately untroubled by any historical inquiry into its basis. The question still remains, however, of how successful Herrmann was in his attempt to remove faith from the vicissitudes of history.

Unlike Kähler, Herrmann is willing to grant historical criticism free access to the biblical texts. He is free to do this because he does not ultimately base faith on the reliability of the biblical accounts of Jesus Christ, but rather on the power of the inner life of Jesus that lies behind those narratives. Or as Herrmann puts it, "It is thus perfectly clear that we are in a very good position to detach the content of a narrative both from the narrative itself and from its author and to regard it as an element of that reality with which we have to come to terms."110 To confuse the power of the inner life of Jesus with the narratives about that life and that power is to confuse the content of faith for the basis of faith.

By detaching the content of the narratives from the narratives themselves, Herrmann does make great strides toward removing the basis of faith from the fluctuations of historical research into those narratives. But how is that content gained if not by means of the narrative? Herrmann admits that this must be the case because one first learns of Jesus and the power of his life through Scripture, testimony, or preaching. One finds in and through that testimony the basis of faith, the inner life of Jesus and its power as the revelation of God in history. Christians can rest assured that the picture of Christ mediated by the church faithfully reflects the essence of Jesus of Nazareth, even if Herrmann is unwilling to base that assurance on any historical judgment. He is convinced that the picture of Jesus Christ possessed and handed down by the church is historically accurate in its essentials, but he claims that this is a judgment of faith rather than a result of historical research.

If, as Herrmann argues, the narratives are necessary only at an intermediate stage to provide the original mediation for the power of the inner life of Jesus to shine through, after which time they are no longer necessary for the one who has been touched by the power of Jesus' inner life, the narratives still have an important role to play. These narratives might provide an accurate, reliable picture of Jesus Christ and the power of his inner life, or they might, in the end, prove to be unreliable. It is difficult to determine how Herrmann hopes to have made the narratives (and historical criticism of them) irrelevant for providing the basis of faith simply by declaring them to be unnecessary once one has been touched by the power of the inner life of Jesus through the mediation of those narratives themselves, while at the same time insisting that faith! nevertheless has an accurate picture of the historic Jesus Christ.

Herrmann's position rests on what Sockness has called a "pseudo-historical approach," in which Herrmann "blocks the path from historical judgments to faith, but leaves movement in the opposite direction
open." Sockness concludes that Herrmann finally suffers from a lack of both "historical nerve and theological imagination":

Theologically speaking, the insistence that the portrait of Jesus must faithfully reflect the actual man Jesus of Nazareth or else it is merely a fiction or a product of the poetical imagination, and therefore untrue, betrays Herrmann’s lack of appreciation for the poetical and representational character and function of the biblical texts.  

Wobbermin’s Appraisal and Critique of Herrmann’s Position

Wobbermin’s critique of Herrmann’s position is the most subtle of his treatments of the four theologians he has chosen to engage in his essay. Wobbermin’s position is actually quite close to Herrmann’s many significant respects, including the rejection of the capability of historical research to provide the basis of faith, the positive evaluation of historical research as a necessary means of destroying false supports for faith, and the insistence that there must be some distinction between the historic and the biblical Christ (contra Kähler).

These similarities correspond to some shared weaknesses as well. Both are ultimately unclear on the precise nature of the relationship between the positive and negative roles of historical-critical research, especially vis-à-vis the "inner life" of Jesus or the "essential elements" of the picture of Christ. Both intend to free faith from the vicissitudes of history by establishing the certainty of faith in the religious experience of the efficacy (Wobbermin) or power of the inner life (Herrmann) of the historic Christ, yet both maintain that this certainty will withstand rigorous historical scrutiny without any justification for that claim beyond the continuing existence of the Christian faith. Both succumb to what Sockness called in Herrmann’s case a “pseudo-historical approach” that fails to take seriously the possibility that rigorous historical criticism will undermine the essential elements of their respective pictures of Christ.

Wobbermin’s critique of Herrmann and the differences between their respective positions can be distilled into one main point with two lines of argument. It concerns the picture of the historic Christ, subdivided into a concern about the relationship between the basis of faith and the content of faith, and a concern about the place of the resurrection in that picture.

Unlike Kähler, Herrmann is not willing to equate the historic Christ with the total biblical picture of him. To do so, Herrmann suggests, is to confute Christ as the basis of faith (the power of his inner life) with Christ as the content of faith (the Glaubensgedanken about Christ). The inner life of Jesus shines through these ideas of faith and is expressed in them, but it must be kept distinct. Otherwise the resulting picture of Jesus would be vulnerable to historical criticism and would depend on the results of historical research, only ever attaining probable reliability rather than the certainty of the direct experience of the power of Jesus’ inner life itself.

Wobbermin rejects this separation of Christ as the basis of faith and Christ as the content of faith because, in his estimation, it divorces the historic Christ from the total historic context by which he becomes present to faith. He fears that this separation of the basis and the content threatens to throw the picture of Christ back into the realm of historical research and historical judgments, requiring historical verification of the accuracy of that picture before it can become the object of faith. He recognizes Herrmann’s intention to bypass historical judgments by emphasizing the immediate effects of the power of the inner life of Jesus, but he questions whether Herrmann succeeds in doing so:

To the extent that the person of Jesus Christ is taken out of the total historic context in which he stands, he now becomes, so to speak, a historical figure in a narrower sense, i.e., such a figure who is not already ensured by means of the total historic context in which he stands and to which he is included as an indispensable link, but rather one who invites historical research and first could be ensured by it.

For Wobbermin, the continuing efficacy of the picture of Christ within the Christian tradition (the "total historic context"), not historical research, is what ultimately authenticates the picture of Christ. Herrmann

111. Sockness, “The Ideal and the Historical,” 386.
112. Ibid., 387.
claims that the inner life of Jesus accomplishes this same objective by the
effect of its power, but Wobbermin claims that this is not possible if the
inner life of Jesus is not understood within the larger historic context in
which that picture continues to be present and effective. To separate the
inner life of Jesus from the larger historic context of its efficacy or effects is,
in Wobbermin's estimation, a sacrifice of the historic character of that
inner life.

Wobbermin contends that this danger is only latent in Herrmann's
treatment because Herrmann does not completely separate the basis from
the content of faith. The inner life of Jesus as the basis of faith is still
handed down through the Christian tradition and is therefore not
completely distinct from it. The "total historic context" is still a part of that
picture, even if it is secondary to it and derived from it.

However, Wobbermin argues that Herrmann's position succumbs to
difficulties because he has not carefully distinguished between Geschichte
and Historie. Such a distinction would require Herrmann to rethink the
distinction between Christ as the basis of faith and Christ as the content
of faith. Wobbermin argues that Herrmann, by distinguishing between
the basis of faith and the content of faith, requires a historical judgment
to determine that basis. Because Herrmann claims that this basis is the
inner life of Jesus as it lies behind the texts of the New Testament and as
it is distinct from what Wobbermin calls the "total historic context" in
which it continues to be present and efficacious, Wobbermin contends
that Herrmann is forced to rely on historical judgments to determine the
character of this inner life of Jesus:

Such an attempt, according to the nature of the matter at hand,
can only be carried out by means of historical research; where it
is undertaken, it thus leads to a historical approach in a narrower
sense, so to speak. Herrmann's position will not be able to elude
the force of this fact. In fact, at this point a "historically" oriented
series of thoughts crosses his position and destroys it. For along
with the "historical" series of thoughts, their relativity, their hypo­
thesical character, and their probability also enter into Herrmann's
picture of Christ.

114. Ibid., 44. This is obviously contrary to what Herrmann himself insisted.
115. "Ein solcher Versuch kann aber der Natur der Sache zufolge nur mit den Mitteln
historischer Forschung ausgeführt werden, wo er unternommen wird, führt er also zu einer
in engeren Sinn so zu nennenden historischen Betrachtungsweise. Dem Zweige dieses
Sachverhalts wird sich auch Herrmanns Position nicht entziehen können. Tatsächlich wird

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Nowhere does this difference between Herrmann and Wobbermin
come into clearer relief than it does in the question of the resurrection of
Jesus. The decisive question in terms of the resurrection is whether the ele­
ment that came to expression in resurrection faith can be separated from
the New Testament picture of Christ as a historic fact. While Herrmann
wants to make such a distinction, at least provisionally, Wobbermin argues
that such a distinction must unconditionally be rejected. For Wobbermin,
"as soon as such a separation is made, the historic picture of Christ ceases
to be, in our judgment, what it always has been according to its historic
existence and also what it is and means in the present." 116

In the case of the resurrection the question is not one of Historie (it
has been dismissed by the nature of the matter at hand) but is rather a
question of how Geschichtte is defined and understood. Because Herrmann
wants to distinguish between the inner life of Jesus lying behind the texts
of the New Testament and the narratives and tradition about the power
of his inner life, Wobbermin accuses Herrmann of failing to account for the
essential significance of the resurrection for the total historic picture of
Christ. The resurrection is significant precisely because it is presupposed
by the entire Christian tradition, from the New Testament itself through
to the present day. Any attempt to "go behind" the tradition to the histo­
ricity of the resurrection event itself necessarily requires an inappropriate
dependence on historical research and historical judgments, which can­
not provide any foundation for Christian faith. But whereas Herrmann
understands this to mean that the resurrection itself should not and
cannot constitute an essential element of the basis of faith, Wobbermin
insists that it must constitute an essential element of the historic picture
of Christ precisely because the resurrection is presupposed by the entire
Christian tradition as an event of decisive and enduring (i.e. historic) sig­
nificance and efficacy.

Again, the crux of this debate on the place of the resurrection
within the picture of Christ is the difference between Herrmann's and

116. "Sobald eine solche Trennung ernstlich vollzogen wird, hört jenes Bild u.E. auf,
das zu sein, was es seinem geschichtlichen Bestande nach immer gewesen ist, was es seinem
geschichtlichen Bestande nach auch gegenwärtig für uns ist und bedeutet." Ibid., 36.
Wobbemlin's definition of the picture of Christ as the basis of faith. Herrmann limits the essential elements to the "inner life" of Jesus, while Wobbemlin places these elements within a wider context, namely the picture of Christ present within the "total historic context" of the New Testament and the Christian tradition. For Herrmann, including the elements of the tradition in the picture of Christ moves away from the inner life of Jesus as the basis of faith and toward the Glaubensgedanken that are the content of faith, and therefore such a move must be rejected. For Wobbemlin, limiting the picture of Christ to the inner life of Jesus in (and behind) the New Testament picture requires historical and psychological judgments that are difficult if not impossible to make.

Herrmann does not argue for a wholesale rejection of the Christian tradition in its significance for the picture of Christ, and Wobbemlin rightly acknowledges this. Tradition plays an important role in Herrmann's discussion, for the picture of Christ is present and handed down in the proclamation of the gospel. But tradition always serves as the means by which the picture of Christ is represented and is never part of that picture itself; it is, once again, a matter of distinguishing between the basis of faith and the content of faith. Where Herrmann sees a clear distinction between the person of Jesus Christ and the tradition concerning him, Wobbemlin sees a unity. Wobbemlin prefers to speak of the picture of Christ as standing within a much broader historic context, and he accuses Herrmann of removing the person of Christ from this context. Wobbemlin believes it is necessary to include the resurrection in the historic picture of Christ as the object of faith precisely because the resurrection has always been included in the picture of Christ, from the New Testament to the present:

For us it is only a question of whether the element that found its expression in resurrection faith is to be separated from the picture of Christ that is given to us from the New Testament as a historic fact, of whether it is to be separated from it at least provisionally, as Herrmann wants to do. And this question, it appears to us, must be answered with an unconditional no. As soon as such a separation is seriously made, that picture, in our opinion, ceases to be what it always was according to its continued historic existence and also what it presently is and means for us according to its continued historic existence.

According to Wobbemlin, Herrmann's position finally succumbs to a dependence on the historisch thinking it seeks to avoid. By refusing to include the resurrection in the essential traits of the life of Jesus, Herrmann isolates the picture of the historic Christ from the wider historic context of that picture, which, Wobbemlin argues, must include the resurrection. By excluding the resurrection from the picture of the historic Christ, there is then the temptation of considering the person of Jesus as a historical rather than historic figure, insofar as that picture is then limited to the earthly life of Jesus.

Wobbemlin's criticisms of Herrmann remain subtle and limited essentially to the two points described above. Their respective positions are finally quite close. Both agree on the necessary negative role of historical criticism, both question the benefits and even the possibility of...
equating the historic Christ with the total biblical picture of him, and both attempts to find some certainty for faith independent of the fluctuating results of historical-critical research. They claim to have found this certainty in different places, but in the end their positions suffer from the same weaknesses. Both Herrmann and Wobbermin claim to have avoided making faith dependent on historical judgments, but both positions are more open to criticism than either is willing to admit. In Herrmann's case, by limiting the basis of faith to the earthly life of Jesus it is difficult to determine how he manages to claim that he has removed faith from the vicissitudes of historical research. And Wobbermin, by claiming to have guaranteed the picture of Christ by tracing its effects through the history of the Christian tradition, is ultimately making a historical judgment without admitting that it is, in fact, a historical judgment. How else but by historical inquiry could one hope to isolate the essential features of the picture of Christ as it is effective and efficacious throughout the history of the Christian tradition? Here again it is helpful to recognize the implicit distinction in Wobbermin's essay between Geschichte and its effects or efficacy, but this is a distinction Wobbermin never made explicit.

Similarly, both Herrmann and Wobbermin contend that faith can confidently assume that it has an accurate picture of the historic Jesus Christ, a confidence that is based either in the power of the inner life of Jesus (Herrmann) or the efficacy of the historic Christ within the Christian tradition (Wobbermin). This is anything but a foregone conclusion. The possibility will exist, in both cases, that faith's confidence in the historical reliability of its object is mistaken. But, as B. A. Gerrish notes, "Neither Herrmann nor Wobbermin, any more than Kähler before them, could resist the temptation to move back from the confidence of faith to confidence in the historicity of the Synoptic Jesus." 121

In fact, it is difficult to see how Wobbermin has made any significant advances beyond Herrmann's position. 122 There are differences, but ultimately their positions are open to the same criticisms, especially in terms of the role of historical criticism and the extent to which both have or have not avoided throwing faith back into the vicissitudes of history. Both attempts to locate the certainty of faith outside the realm of historical research by emphasizing the immediate presence and efficacy of the picture of Christ as mediated by the Christian tradition. But this in itself does not remove the picture of Christ from the realm of historical judgments.

Charles Carlston's criticism of Kähler actually applies to Herrmann and Wobbermin as well:

The principle [that genuinely historical figures are known in their effects] must not be extended so broadly as to justify all subsequent interpretation of all historical figures; it must leave room for a negative critical function, judging the concinnity between the historical personage and later interpretation. Neither the Protestant Principle nor serious historical study can survive otherwise.

The effects of a historical figure are, at least in theory, knowable by the same methods as the figure himself; a decision of faith is not called for in winnowing the Napoleon tradition in post-Napoleonic times. The apostolic understanding of Jesus in this sense is available through historical inquiry. 123

It is only later, with the development of the religio-psychological circle between personal religious experience and the historic efficacy of the picture of Christ, and with it the attempt to build on the distinction between Geschichte and Historie in a broader and more systematic context, that Wobbermin begins to distance himself from Herrmann's position.

Wilhelm Bousset

The fourth and final figure Wobbermin considers in his section of appraisals and critiques of previous positions is Wilhelm Bousset. Likely the least familiar of the four figures, Bousset taught at Göttingen and Gießen and was one of the founders of the religiösgeschichtliche Schule. 124 His

121. Gerrish, "Jesus, Myth, and History." 34.

122. One advance, which only becomes clear as an advance with some historical distance, is Wobbermin's insistence that the resurrection must belong to the basis of faith. The resurrection and its significance for faith will become a central theme in the theology of the mid-twentieth century, especially that of Herrmann's student, Rudolf Bultmann.

123. Carlston, "Biblicism or Historicism?" 35.

124. There is surprisingly little literature on Bousset, considering his role in founding the religiösgeschichtliche Schule. The only comprehensive study of Bousset is a dissertation by Anthony Frans Verheul entitled Wilhelm Bousset: Leben und Werk. Verheul also sketches the contours of the debate concerning the distinction between Geschichte and Historie from Kähler to Pannenberg in an article entitled "Historie en Geschichte." He briefly discusses Wobbermin's distinction as a precursor of Bultmann's and wonders why Wobbermin's work on the distinction has not played a larger role in the work of later generations of theologians.
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most significant works are historical studies of the origins of Christianity, of which Kyrios Christos is perhaps the best known.125

At the fifth World Congress for Free Christianity and Religious Progress, held in Berlin in 1910, Bousset delivered a paper entitled "Die Bedeutung der Person Jesu für den Glauben."126 In his paper Bousset attempts to maintain the significance of the person of Jesus for faith without throwing faith back into a dependence on the fluctuating results of historical research. He moves from a discussion of earlier attempts to solve this problem (from the "older rationalism" to Schleiermacher to Ritschl) to an analysis of the conflicting assumptions of science and religion, and finally to a constructive proposal for securing a faith that is not subject to the uncertainties of historical knowledge.

The problem, as Bousset understands it, is the problem of faith and history and their relationship to one another. As long as theologians attempt to base faith on historical particularities (e.g., the atoning death of Christ, his inner life, or his messianic self-consciousness), faith will continue to depend to a greater or lesser degree on the results of historical research into his person and work. Bousset is not willing seriously to entertain Drews's thesis that Jesus of Nazareth never existed, but, assuming that he did in fact exist, what can be known with any historical certainty about his person and his work? Not very much, finally:

What we know of the pragmatic context of his life would fit on a single sheet of paper. The preaching or the gospel of Jesus is an often insoluble web of community tradition and possibly authentic words of the master. What our gospels hand down concerning the unique self-consciousness of Jesus and its forms, and therefore of the inner life of his personality, is overshadowed by the dogma of the community.127

125. Bousset, Kyrios Christos [ET: Kyrios Christos].

126. Bousset, "The Bedeutung der Person Jesu für den Glauben." Wobbermin also delivered a paper at this congress, entitled "Aufgabe und Bedeutung der Religionspsychologie." Other presenters included Adolf Harnack, Hermann Gunkel, and Ernst Troeltsch. Wobbermin was in attendance and heard Bousset deliver his paper, and he recalls that he immediately took Bousset aside and remarked that their positions are ultimately quite close in many important respects, except for their respective judgments of the relationship between Geschichte and Historie. Wobbermin, Geschichte und Historie, 48.


The dubious character of the New Testament witness raises the question of how willing Christians should be to entrust the certainty of their faith to the fluctuating results of historical research into that witness. Bousset suggests that this question is most pressing for the liberal theology of his day, because, in his estimation, modern liberal theology is characterized by a "historically [geschichtlich] conditioned anti-rationalism" that contradicts both Lessing's insistence that accidental historical truths cannot serve as proof of necessary truths of reason and Kant's principle of the illustrative rather than the demonstrative character of history.128

By attempting to base faith in the historical person of Jesus, whether from the side of the teaching or gospel of Jesus or from the side of his person and the impulse that proceeds from him, liberal theology is forced to consider the question of historical accuracy and reliability. And this, Bousset suggests, means that "the looming possibility that perhaps we know very little about the personal life of Jesus, so little that it does not present an impressive, vivid picture, must seriously threaten that view."129

All of the attempts to base the certainty and content of faith in history are, as Bousset puts it, "oppressed by singular difficulties." In order to move beyond and perhaps overcome these difficulties, faith must seek another foundation, one that is outside of history. That foundation, Bousset proposes, is available in reason:

History [Historie], earnestly and vigorously prosecuted, points beyond itself and compels us to seek another foundation outside of history, and that foundation would be reason [Ratio]. . . . Religion is something innate in human beings, understood on the basis of the necessity of its rational capacity; religion is not borne to human beings from outside them, thrust upon them from above by revelation, and it does not rest on supernatural revelation in the specific sense of the word.130

Religion, then, is not based in history or in historic events at all. It is an "original capacity [ursprüngliches Vermögen] of the human being" that unfolds within history but is not based in history.131 By basing religion

128. Ibid., 293.
129. Ibid., 296.
130. Ibid., 298.
131. Ibid., 298-99.
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in reason rather than in history, Bousset has moved religion to the realm of ideas. Ideas, he suggests, do not need the authority of history; rather, ideas are the norm by which individual historic personalities and events are measured. This applies to all historic personalities and events, including the person of Jesus Christ.

Here, however, is where the “old” rationalism erred, according to Bousset. The old rationalism concludes from this series of arguments that history has no meaning for religion, that it is merely a crutch that is used to raise oneself up to the world of ideas and is then discarded. This would be true, Bousset suggests, in the realm of science and mathematics. But religious ideas are not propositions like those of science and mathematics, which are logically demonstrable. Religion, according to Bousset, concerns the idea of the meaning and value of existence [Sinn und Wert des Daseins], categories that are completely foreign to science.

Truths of science and truths of religion, then, are two fundamentally different classes of truth. Science is concerned with the tangible, meaning that the material, that which persists in space and time, is ultimate truth for science. Religion, on the other hand, is concerned with ideas. But religious faith does not live immediately from ideas, because, according to Bousset, ideas always remain incomprehensible and ungraspable on their own. They require symbolization to be grasped and comprehended: "the world of eternity can only become conceivable and objective [gegenständlich] when [these ideas] shimmer transparently through the world of finitude. The poet's words contain the deepest truth: 'All that is past is only a parable.'"

It is in this sense that history must be understood as significant for faith. In history, naked ideas are clothed in symbols that convey their truth to human beings. In terms of history, too, there is a fundamental difference between science and religion. For science, the past always recedes further and further into the distance. It is, to use Bousset's colorful tombstone (of the poet Klutl Tucholsky), "fertilizer for the future [Dünger für die Zukunft]." But in religion (as in art) the past remains alive for the present; the realm of the symbolic knows no linear progress; "here presides the unpredictability of the individual, of the genius and the hero."

In this sense it is possible to speak of a relationship between faith and history. The great religious personalities (of which Jesus is certainly one) continue to exert a powerful influence in the history of the communities that emerged and developed around them. But the significance of these personalities is not primarily historic. Their significance is rooted in their value as symbols. Bousset suggests that the great religious personalities not only create the symbols of faith; they themselves become that symbol for the community of faith. So in the case of Jesus, he not only created the symbolism of the gospel; he himself became the symbol of the gospel.

With this move to consider the symbolic character of religious personalities, Bousset hopes to have removed the person of Jesus from the vicissitudes of history and the fluctuations of historical research. When Jesus Christ is understood as a symbol rather than as a historical person, the question of history ceases to be the dominant and dominating question it has been in the history of modern liberal theology. There is no longer any need to delineate what might be historically accurate and demonstrable from the later additions of the early Christian community, and there is no longer any need to protect faith from the results of historical research:

It comes down to the symbol and the picture itself, not, at this point, to ultimate truth and reality. That lies behind the symbols, in the immovable, God-given depths of human reason and in the eternal value of ideas. The symbol serves for illustration, not for demonstration. Therefore we also make the remarkable observation that the picture of Jesus, as his immediate community presented it in the gospels, remains and will remain more effective as poetry and truth than as any historical attempts at reconstruction, precise as they might be. This faith does not inquire into the historic reality in a narrow sense, but into the religious and the morally practical; it stops, consciously or unconsciously, at the

132. Bousset never names any representatives of the "old rationalism."
133. Ibid., 300.
134. Ibid., 392. The poet is Goethe, and the line "Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis" is from the final chorus of the last act of Faust. It is also the epitaph on the tombstone of the poet Kurt Tucholsky.
136. Ibid. Bousset's Kyrios Christos is partly devoted to analyzing the cultic status of Christ, in which elements of the genius and the hero are certainly present.
138. "Poetry and Truth" [Dichtung und Wahrheit] is the title of Goethe's autobiography. Bousset was almost certainly aware of this connection, as he had already quoted Goethe (without naming him) earlier in his paper. See Goethe, Goethes Werke, vol. 5, Dichtung und Wahrheit [ET: Goethe's Collected Works, vols. 4-5, From My Life].
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picture. . . . And if science were to pronounce the most extreme verdict that Jesus did not exist, faith will not be lost, because it rests on its own internal foundation and, moreover, the picture of Jesus in the gospels would nevertheless remain, and even if only as great poetry, still as poetry of eternal symbolic significance. 139

The value of the gospels does not rest in their historical veracity but in their capacity poetically and symbolically to convey the "eternal truths of faith." And if the gospels are understood in this way, as the product of "poetic fantasy" rather than as historical documents, then, Bousset believes, it is still possible to confess that "the Logos became flesh and we beheld his glory." 140

Bousset hopes to have removed faith from the vicissitudes of historical research by completely removing the basis of faith from history, establishing it in reason instead. There might be a historic basis of faith or there might not; the question of historicity is irrelevant. What matters most is the power of the symbol of Jesus Christ to convey what Bousset calls the "eternal truths of faith." The symbol of Jesus Christ exerts a powerful influence in the Christian tradition, and it is this symbol that serves as the basis of faith. There is an underlying truth, but by itself it is incomprehensible. It requires poetic, symbolic representation in order to be understood.

For Bousset, then, faith is not dependent on history at all. It is, as he candidly admits, a matter of faith resting on its own internal, rational foundation. Bousset has removed faith from the vicissitudes of history, but he has made faith its own product, a move that is difficult to defend as somehow remaining true to the Protestant tradition. 141 He seeks to avoid the problem of faith and history altogether by turning to a rational foundation for faith, in the tradition of, for example, Lessing, Kant, and Jakob Friedrich Fries. 142 And while his solution does make faith completely independent of the results of historical research, it will not be a satisfactory solution to the problem of faith and history for those who still want to have some historic basis for faith.

Geschichte und Historie

Wobbermin's Appraisal and Critique of Bousset's Position

Like Bousset, Wobbermin is concerned to remove the basis of faith from the vicissitudes of historical research. Unlike Bousset, he is not willing to divorce faith completely from any historic foundation. All of Wobbermin's criticisms of Bousset's position are based on one fundamental concern, namely the lack of terminological precision when discussing history and historical research. Bousset uses the terms geschichtlich and historisch interchangeably, and Wobbermin attributes many of his own misgivings to this lack of terminological precision in Bousset's paper. The question of whether Bousset himself might admit the possibility of greater clarity by means of such a distinction is left unasked. For Wobbermin, Bousset's position would be much improved were such a distinction consistently employed.

Wobbermin agrees with Bousset that the results of historical research cannot serve as the basis of faith. To claim to do so is to give up the security of faith from the outset. 143 Wobbermin further agrees that the historical [historisch] can never serve as a foundation because it is by nature always secondary, never primary. 144 But Bousset also claims that faith cannot be based on the historic [geschichtlich] appearance of Jesus of Nazareth. 145 Where Bousset wants to deny the possibility of basing faith on either the results of historical research or the historic appearance of Jesus of Nazareth, Wobbermin wants to make a distinction between these two possibilities. As Wobbermin puts it:

To want to entrust the security of our faith to historical research is for me an absolutely senseless undertaking. For that means nothing other than to give up the security of this faith at the outset. But on the "historic appearance of Jesus of Nazareth" - more precisely put: on the historic picture of the person of Jesus Christ, on the picture of the person of Jesus Christ as history presents it to us in order to establish faith, that appears to me, then, absolutely to be warranted, if one does not understand this picture of the person of Jesus Christ as separate and unrelated to our own spiritual life, but

140. Ibid.
141. To be fair, Bousset never claims that he is attempting to defend a specifically Protestant understanding of faith.
142. These are the three figures whom Bousset acknowledges as influencing his own thought on the rational foundation of religion. Ibid., 299-300.
143. Wobbermin, Geschichte und Historie, 50.
144. "Das Historische kann unmöglich als etwas Fundamentales gelten, denn es ist nichts Primäres, sondern etwas durchaus Sekundäres." Ibid., 51.
rather precisely in its relation to this our own spiritual life and in its significance for it.148

Again, Wobbermin is concerned to establish the continuity of the historic picture of Christ with its efficacy persisting in and through history. The efficacy of this picture will persist regardless of historical inquiry into its origins, and its value [Wert] is based precisely on the fact that it will persist, regardless of the results of historical inquiry into its origins. The value of the picture of Christ lies in its dependence on Geschichte, specifically that it proves itself to be historically [geschichtlich] efficacious. And this historic efficacy also proves that the picture is not merely the product of what Bousset called “poetic fantasy.”149

Both Bousset and Wobbermin agree that historical research cannot provide the foundation for faith, but they disagree on what should provide that foundation. Bousset suggests that faith finds its foundation in reason, whereas Wobbermin suggests that the foundation is furnished by Geschichte (as distinct from Historie) “in its significance for the personal life of faith.”150 Wobbermin is unwilling to follow Bousset in securing


147. At this point it must be said that perhaps Wobbermin has missed Bousset’s point. Bousset claims that the symbol of Christ as the product of poetic fantasy remains the means by which the eternal truths of faith are conveyed to human beings. Wobbermin does not put the efficacy of the picture of Christ in terms of eternal truths immediately available to reason, but refers to the efficacy of the picture of Christ within history as the enduring value of the picture. Both Wobbermin and Bousset arrive at the same goal from different starting points. Yet Wobbermin insists that his goal cannot be reached through a product of poetic fantasy, that historic efficacy is proof that the picture is not the product of poetic fantasy but of a historic figure. It is difficult to see how this is a valid argument against Bousset, or how historic efficacy must have its origin in a historic figure rather than in poetry or symbol.

148. “Das andere Fundament liefern die Geschichte. Die Geschichte nämlich, wie dieser Begriff durch die bewußte Unterscheidung vom Begriff der Historie näher bestimmmt wird. Diese Geschichte in ihrer Bedeutung für das persönliche Glaubensleben ist oder liefert das notige Fundament.” Ib., 55–56. Wobbermin also suggests that this is the beginning of the foundation of faith in reason because, in his estimation, Bousset has inverted the proper relationship between reason and Geschichte. While Bousset subordinates Geschichte to reason, Wobbermin insists that reason must be subordinated to Geschichte.

According to Wobbermin, reason must be subordinated to Geschichte because human reason is only exercised and developed within Geschichte and is therefore necessarily dependent on it. Reason exists and functions only within the realm of Geschichte precisely because human beings are historic subjects standing within Geschichte. To rationalize religion – to remove it from the realm of Geschichte and to place it above and beyond Geschichte – is to give it up, because religion is irreducibly historic.149

Geschichte, not reason, is the realm of religious truth. For Wobbermin, the historic character of the Christian religion is rooted in the historic picture of Jesus Christ as its creative source. Bousset prefers to speak of the symbol of Christ as the creative source of the Christian religion. The person of Christ, he suggests, transcends mere historicity and creates a living symbol that is “more effective as poetry and truth” than as a historic figure. The symbol of Christ, according to Bousset, illustrates the ultimate truth and reality lying behind the symbol. He paraphrases Kant to make precisely this point: “the symbol serves for illustration, not for demonstration.”150

Wobbermin also appeals to Kant’s proposition to make his case against Bousset’s rationalization of religion, but he makes one important addition. Kant suggested that the “Historische” does not serve for the demonstration, but for the illustration of truth.151 Wobbermin revises Kant’s dictum to read, “Geschichte does not serve for a demonstration of religious truth, nor merely for its illustration; Geschichte serves for the
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invention of religious truth." 152 For Wobbermin it is Geschichte, not reason, that is the essential and permanent condition for the acquisition of religious truth, both because all truth is essentially historic and because human beings and religion itself are irreducibly historic:

“This picture of Jesus Christ as a historic figure is the norm and not merely the symbol of the Christian religion. It does not serve merely for the illustration of Christian faith in God. It serves for its invention and indeed in a double respect: it serves faith for its practical religious life of faith as the way to the living God, and it serves theology for its theological work as the methodological means of a more precise definition of the Christian idea of God.

Indeed not as a dogmatic confession, but also not only as a product of poetic fantasy, but rather as a confession of faith that seeks and finds the revelation of God in history do we adopt the words: The Logos became flesh and we beheld his glory. Yes, we may adopt it even more wholeheartedly and say: The Logos became flesh and we behold his glory. 153

On the basis of his conclusion, it is clear that Wobbermin is not willing to give up the importance of divine revelation in history in favor of a purely rational or symbolic foundation for faith. And this is the primary difference between his position and Bousset’s, despite many important similarities. Bousset is willing to give up revelation as a historic event, while Wobbermin insists that to give up historic revelation is to give up the Christian religion. So in spite of many similarities, which Wobbermin

152. “Die Geschichte dient zwar nicht zur Demonstration der religiösen Wahrheit, aber sie dient auch nicht bloß zu ihrer Illustration; die Geschichte dient zur Invention der religiösen Wahrheit,” Wobbermin, Geschichte und Historie, 70. Emphasis mine. It is interesting that Wobbermin chooses to use the English word “invention” here rather than the German “Erfindung.”


154. “Gewiß muß echte Religion gegenüber aller bloß historischen d.h. nur mit den Mitteln historischer Forschung faßbaren Uberlieferung ganz und unlängst frei sein und sei also solcher Forschung unbegrenzte und räumliche Freiheit zugestanden. Aber damit ist doch nicht gesagt, daß auch das die Religion mit der Geschichte selbst unmittelbar verknüpfende Band verschwinden müßte. Vielmehr darf dieses Band nicht zerschunden werden, wenn nicht die Religion selbst in ihrem eigenen Wesen verletzt werden soll. Denn eine Beziehung zur Geschichte gehört eben zum Bestande aller echten und gesunden Religion hinzu... Und im Christentum konzentriert sich die Beziehung zur Geschichte in dem

THE HISTORIC PICTURE OF JESUS CHRIST

In a 1911 essay entitled “Psychologie und Erkenntnistheorie der religiösen Erfahrung,” Wobbermin emphasizes the historic character of the Christian religion and seeks to define Christianity in its relation to Geschichte and in opposition to Historie:

Certainly genuine religion must be completely and unconditionally free vis-à-vis every merely historical tradition (i.e., tradition comprehensible only by means of historical research), and it must therefore grant such research unconditional and complete freedom. But this is not to say that the link that immediately connects religion with Geschichte itself must be severed. Rather, this link may not be severed if religion itself is not to be harried in its most proper essence.

For a relation to Geschichte belongs to the continued existence of every genuine and healthy religion. . . . And in Christianity the relation to Geschichte is concentrated in the picture of Jesus Christ as it radiates outward toward us from the New Testament, as it is available and comprehensible to every religious experience independent of all historical criticism of the tradition. 155
Wobbermin admits that this position is often misunderstood, especially in terms of the role of historical criticism. He argues for the unrestricted access of historical criticism to the Christian tradition, including the picture of Jesus Christ found in the New Testament. However, if this picture is to be available and comprehensible to religious experience, it must be in some sense also immediately available, without first being provided by historical research. The New Testament picture of Christ must be subjected to rigorous historical criticism, both in order to strip away any false support of faith and to allow the effects or efficacy of that picture to shine through the tradition and become immediately available to religious experience. It is specifically the effect or efficacy of this picture for religious experience that is independent of historical research and remains unaffected by it.

Here Wobbermin’s implicit distinction between effect or efficacy and historie becomes vitally important. Historical research can uncover or reveal the effects or efficacy of the New Testament picture of Christ, but Wobbermin insists that these effects are not thereby made the product of historical research. The effects or efficacy of the picture remain prior and superior to historie, which serves only the purpose of uncovering or revealing the effects so that they are immediately available to religious experience.

Wobbermin’s three “essential elements” of the historic picture of Christ can serve as a test case for this theory. Each of the three essential elements – Christ’s ethical disposition toward love, his unity of will with his heavenly Father, and his elevation to the Father following his suffering and death, along with the effects or efficacy of these elements in the present – exist prior to historical criticism of the New Testament texts, but it is only by means of historical research that these three elements are isolated from the remainder of the biblical picture of Christ.155

The significance of the picture of Christ for religious experience is determined by religious experience itself.156 Historical research cannot detract from the value of this picture because the relationship between the historic figure of Christ and individual religious experience is primarily a historic, not historical, relationship. This relationship exists prior to historical inquiry into that picture and does not depend on the results of that inquiry for its value. It does not have to do with a historically (historisch) questionable figure from the past, but with a historic figure that is active and efficacious in the present: “For religious experience, the New Testament picture of Christ is an immediately given historic figure; it maintains its value and its reality through its effect on the moral-religious life.”157

Again, the decisive question in this context is how this historic picture of Christ is defined in order for it to remain independent of historical criticism. Wobbermin suggests that individual events and statements in the life of Jesus must be subjected to historical criticism, but that the overall impression, the main and decisive traits of the picture (and therefore its effect or efficacy), are those stressed by the entire New Testament and which therefore are a result of the power of the historic figure of Christ himself. These main and decisive traits are the three “essential elements” uncovered or revealed by historical research of the New Testament texts.

The third trait is the most significant for Wobbermin, and it is this trait that most clearly distinguishes his position from Herrmann’s, for example. The resurrection belongs to the essential picture of Christ both because Christian faith is always Easter faith in the risen Christ and because the resurrection is the basic presupposition of the entire New Testament. There are many important historical considerations to be taken into account, most importantly whether the resurrection can be considered a historical event at all. Wobbermin does not answer this question in his early work and only discusses this aspect of the question much later, in


155. This is why Wobbermin cannot agree with Kähler that the historic Christ cannot be separated from the biblical picture of him. The results of historical investigation of the New Testament texts finally demand such a distinction, in Wobbermin’s opinion.

156. This is the beginning of the so-called “religio-psychological circle” [religionspsychologischer Zirkel], which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

157. “Für die religiöse Erfahrung ist das neutestamentliche Christusbild eine unmittelbar gegebene historische Größe; es bewahrt ihren Wert und ihre Wirklichkeit durch ihre Wirkung auf das sittlich-religiöse Leben.” Emphasis mine. Wobbermin further argues that this effect on the moral-religious life is the first and most important criterion for evaluating the New Testament picture of Christ from a religious perspective. Wobbermin, Geschichte und Historie, 75–76.
his systematic theology. In Geschicthte und Historie his primary concern is to clarify the essential traits of the historic picture of Christ found in the New Testament.

But there is a more basic question that must be raised in relation to the historic picture of Christ, namely, is it true? Wobbermin treats this problem in three parts: first, in terms of the actual question of truth; second, in terms of the question of the historic reality of the person of Jesus Christ; and third, in terms of the question of historicity or of historical comprehensibility.

Is the New Testament picture of Jesus Christ actually true? The religious interest in the picture of Christ is concerned only with truth in the strictest, ultimate sense, i.e., as eternal truth. It is not primarily a question of truth as posed in the realm of scientific knowledge, which understands truth in terms of the highest possible probability. Rather, truth in this case is an expression of the conviction of faith that the picture of Christ is God's self-revelation. That the picture of Christ represents and embodies the self-revelation of God is always a conviction of faith, never of historical knowledge.

The decisive question for Wobbermin is the question of value, specifically the value of this conviction of faith for the moral-religious life. The Christian worldview is essentially and characteristically an ethical worldview because it finds its ground and basis in a personal, ethical God who is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. This conviction raises the second, equally decisive question of the historic reality of the picture of Christ. For Christian faith the question of the reality of the picture of Christ is not simply collapsed into the question of its historicity or its historical comprehensibility. The key to this question is the central role of religious experience in Christian faith:

For faith, the decisive criterion for the unique historic reality of Jesus Christ is the fact that the corresponding conviction of faith,

Finally, for Wobbermin the question of historicity is ultimately irrelevant. It can be answered affirmatively or negatively on the basis of historical research, but it cannot serve as the basis for faith. Faith would cease to be faith were it based solely on the results of historical research. Although Wobbermin does not put it in such terms, there is here a distinction between the man Jesus of Nazareth behind the texts of the New Testament and the New Testament picture of him. The man Jesus of Nazareth behind the New Testament texts is a shadowy figure and cannot be known only by historical research (and even then very little can be known with any certainty). He becomes the historical Jesus of modern biography and historical research. The historic picture of Christ, as it confronts Christians in and from the New Testament, is the Christ of faith. That picture ultimately transcends the historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth. Faith is not primarily interested in the man Jesus of Nazareth; faith is primarily interested in the three “essential elements” of the picture of the historic Christ (particularly their effects and efficacy) handed down in the New Testament and the Christian tradition.

According to Wobbermin, Christian faith could withstand a negative answer to the question of the historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth because faith is not ultimately concerned with Historie, but with Geschich.' As he puts it, “the historicity – the historical comprehensibility – of Jesus is not an essential presupposition for the truth of the New Testament picture of Christ at all.”

A faith that is based on the results of historical research into the question of the historicity of Jesus – whether that historicity is affirmed or denied – ceases to be faith.

159. Wobbermin, Geschichtte und Historie, 77–78.
160. This recalls Wobbermin’s criticism of Lessing’s distinction between contingent and necessary truths, particularly Wobbermin’s insistence that truth has an irreducibly eternal character. Unfortunately neither there nor here does he offer an adequate definition of eternal truth.
161. Ibid., 78ff. It is a question related to his third definition of Geschichtte, as the interrelation of human beings as spiritual-moral beings in their development.
162. "Dem Glauben ist das entscheidende Kriterium für die geschichtliche Einzelwirklichkeit Jesu Christi der Umstand, daß die entsprechende Glaubensüberzeugung, wie sie sich im Verkehr mit dem erhöhten Herrn Ausdruck verschafft, die sicherste und wirksamste Bürgschaft für die Wahrheit des Christusbildes als der Offenbarung Gottes ist. Das ist aber unabhängig von der Frage nach der historischen Füllbarkeit der Person Jesu Christi." Ibid., 80.
163. "Denn unumgängliche Voraussetzung für die Wahrheit des neutestamentlichen Christusbildes ist die Historizität – die historische Füllbarkeit – Jesu überhaupt nicht." Ibid., 84.
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To doubt the historicity of Jesus signifies historical arbitrariness. The question of the historicity of Jesus may and must be affirmed with the best historical conscience. But I may not and will not base my faith on the affirmative answer to this question. For then it rests on my historical understanding. And faith would cease to be faith if it were based on historical understanding.

Thus, if necessary, faith would also be able calmly to accept a negative answer to the question of the historicity of Jesus Christ. It does not stand or fall on the affirmative or negative answer to this question. 164

The only legitimate historical question in this matter, as Wobbermin sees it, is the question of the Christian tradition itself. Christian faith can trace itself back to the first Christians and throughout its history consistently refers to a historic personality. Because the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth is neither historically comprehensible nor theologically relevant, according to Wobbermin, the question of the unbroken succession of Christian self-consciousness leading back to the first Christians, in which the New Testament picture of Christ remains immediately present and available to religious experience, becomes the decisive question. But it is the question of Geschichte, not of Historie, that is finally decisive for Christian faith:

164. “Die Historizität Jesu zu bezweifeln, bedeutet historische Willkür. Die Frage nach der Historizität Jesu darf und muß mit bestem historischem Gewissen bejaht werden. Aber meinen Glauben darf und will ich auf die Bejahung dieser Frage nicht gründen. Denn sie beruht auf meiner historischen Einsicht. Und der Glaube würde aufhören, Glaube zu sein, wenn er auf historische Einsicht gegründet würde. Also würde der Glaube auch die Verneinung der Frage nach der Historizität Jesu Christi gegebenensfalls ruhig hinnehmen können. Er steht und fällt nicht mit der Bejahung oder Verneinung dieser Frage.” Ibid., 82. Emphasis in original. In light of this affirmation of the ultimate irrelevance of the historical comprehensibility of the existence of Jesus of Nazareth and what that means or does not mean for Christian faith, Wobbermin's criticisms of Drews come into sharper focus. While Drews concluded from the historical incomprehensibility of Jesus that he did not exist at all, Wobbermin concludes from the perspective and the presuppositions of Christian faith that the historicity of Jesus is not the primary question. The primary question is the efficacy of the New Testament picture of Christ, and that question must not be collapsed into the question of historical comprehensibility. Drews and Wobbermin both agree that the existence of Jesus of Nazareth cannot be demonstrated with absolute certainty by historical research, but they disagree on what that means for Christian faith. And that is the important question, at least for Wobbermin.

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For the Christian religion is that religion, that form or highest phase of religious life, which came into existence under the impression of the picture of the person of Jesus Christ and which has its permanent norm in just this picture of the personal and salvific life of Jesus Christ, the norm namely for its individual forms of embodiment as well as the norm for its historic development. 165

It is this question of the relationship between the historic picture of Christ and personal religious experience that will occupy Wobbermin for the better part of his career. The distinction between Geschichte, Historie, and Wirkung or Wirksamkeit serves as the foundation of the religio-psychological method that he developed in his three-volume systematic theology and defended in a series of Streitzeitschriften directed against Karl Barth and dialectical theology. It is to this method, and more specifically to what Wobbermin called the "religio-psychological circle," that we now turn.

165. “Denn die christliche Religion ist diejenige Religion, diejenige Form oder Stufenhöhe religiösen Lebens, die unter dem Eindruck des Personbildes Jesu Christi entstanden ist und an eben diesem Bilde des Person- und Heilandsleibes Jesu Christi ihre bleibende Norm hat, die Norm nämlich für ihre individuellen Ausgestaltungsformen sowie die Norm für ihre geschichtliche Entwicklung.” Ibid., 86.