

ON THE HISTORICAL AND DOGMATIC METHODS IN THEOLOGY [1898]

Ernst Troeltsch

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(Remarks on the essay “On the Absoluteness of Christianity” by Niebergall, originally published with Niebergall’s piece in “Studien des rheinischen Predigervereins” 1898.)

In compliance with Herr Niebergall’s cordial invitation and the request of his editorial friends, I am presuming to add a few remarks to Niebergall’s essay that should illuminate the controversy more clearly and, in response to his objections, give a more exact account of my thinking, which he opposes, and of my whole philosophical and religious point of view. Since Niebergall represents essentially the thought of his teacher, Julius Kaftan, this essay is at the same time a final word in my exchange with that outstanding Berlin theologian and church official. It is a final word because the nature of the differences between us makes further discussion fruitless.

Niebergall has not entirely recognized that. He begins with the presuppositions that the authoritative concept of revelation is a foregone conclusion and that everything outside of Christianity is only “natural dressing” for it. To him and to his colleagues the whole garment of theology is so little problematic that the only work they find is mending a few worn spots. They assume this to be the case for all theologians. Such a standpoint certainly renders a service and has a practical significance, since many people need that kind of theology. But one can conceive the matter in an entirely different way, starting with the fundamental principles and going all the way through. My studies have led me in that direction to an increasingly greater degree. I have not “scoured the works of learned scholars for evidence against our supernaturalism” so that I could then smugly introduce it in my “view of the History of Religion as a progressive revelation.” This evidence has been in the air for 200 years. It isn’t necessary to “search” for it. Moreover, I have not taken my point of departure in the actual concurrence of various claims to revelation or in a “pantheistic” concept of development. All of that, likewise, presents itself to the student, and it has been treated more than sufficiently, at least externally, in theological apologetics. On the contrary, I have expressly pointed to the much deeper, special point of departure in the shattering of the Christian world view. To be sure, that is related to everything I have mentioned, but it is also relatively independent and, in any case, absolutely decisive by itself alone. I refer to the historical method purely as such, to the problem of “Christianity and History.” By this problem I do not mean the protection of Christianity from particular results of historical scholarship and from particular ways of looking at historical events but rather the effect of the modern historical method on the whole conception of

Christianity. Once the historical method is applied to biblical studies and to church history it becomes a leaven that permeates everything and that finally blows open the whole earlier form of theological method. I have expressly taken up this point of departure, and I have fully established the conception of the consequences that follow from it.

To be specific, Niebergall's essay has not impressed me. He acts as if there are no difficulties from this quarter, as if every problem has been overcome and the dogmatic method saved in principle by admitting that Christianity has "temporal limitations." That is an astounding truncation of the consequences inherent in the historical method. Compared to that, the older apologists of the eighteenth century and the less strict supranaturalists of the present may easily be demonstrated to be more perceptive. But it is a frequent habit in present-day theology and perhaps its most characteristic mark. One sees only individual problems arising from the study of history. Depending on the case, they are individually discounted or declared harmless. Meanwhile, in the basic study of Christianity one disregards all serious historical-critical work, argues for the preservation of the old authoritative concept of revelation with its necessities, postulates, claims, theories of knowledge or otherwise entirely general and airy things, and weaves with their help a passable dogmatic system. The exegetes and historians may then see how the dogmatic theologians preserve those pure dogmatic postulates in the face of the results of historical research and how the historians, for their part, ought to confine themselves to historical limitations and defer to the theologians in the fundamental questions. This kind of theology tosses one from pillar to post.

In contrast to that procedure I want to call attention in the most emphatic way to the meaning and implications of the historical method, the historical way of thinking, and the historical sense. I am not referring to the bits-and-pieces-history of an earlier age that criticized particular items, gathered information about interesting and exotic matters, or collected facts about past events. On the contrary, I am referring to thorough-going, modern history that takes up a definite position with reference to human life, sets forth a method for comprehending past and present, and because of this is fraught with extraordinary consequences. There are three essential points: the fundamental practice of historical criticism, the meaning of analogy, and the interconnection of all events of past history.

The first point claims that historical study renders only judgments of probability, of very different grades of probability, from the greatest to the least, and that with reference to anything that has been handed down from the past the first task is to measure the degree of probability appropriate to it. In doing that the attitude we take to the enormous amount of material given to us by memory and tradition is fundamentally changed even before we become acquainted with its

content. But even the content itself is changed, corrected, and broken up in a thousand different ways by criticism, and even then the results are only probable. It goes without saying that the application of historical criticism to the religious tradition requires a profound change in the inner attitude towards it and its comprehension. Above all, however, the application of criticism to this material means that the religious tradition should be treated in exactly the same way we treat other traditions. The fundamental similarity between the modes of handing down material means that it is highly problematical to exempt one tradition from criticism while applying it to all other traditions.

For the means by which criticism is made possible is the application of analogy. Analogy with the things that happen before our eyes and take place in our midst is the key to criticism. Deceptions, dislocations, formations of myth, imposture, factiousness, all of which we see before our own eyes, help us to recognize the same things in what has been handed down from the past. The agreement with normal, customary or otherwise attested conditions and modes of procedure is the mark of the probability for the events that criticism can leave standing or recognize as having actually occurred. The observation of analogy between similar events of the past gives the possibility of ascribing probability to them and of ascertaining what is not known in the one from what is known in the other. This omnipotence of analogy, however, presupposes the fundamental similarity of all historical occurrences. It does not presuppose an identity but a similarity that leaves all possible room for distinctions. But it depends on a kernel of common similarity from which distinctions can be sensed and grasped. The significance of analogy for research into the history of Christianity is thus given with historical criticism. Biblical criticism itself depends on the analogy with the ways by which all the rest of antiquity has been handed down to us. In countless cases criticism has been able to establish the states of affairs it is interested in only by the search for analogies. That means the inclusion of Judaeo—Christian history in analogy with all other history, and in fact the sphere of what is excluded from analogy has grown increasingly narrow. Many have already learned how to be satisfied with the moral character of Jesus or with his resurrection.

This means that no change can occur at one point without changes occurring before and after at other points, so that all events stand in a continuous, correlative interconnection and must necessarily constitute a single flow in which each and all hang together, and every event stands in relation to others.

These three items are the principles of historical explanation and interpretation. At every point something original and independent emerges which, however, through our capacity for sympathy is experienced as belonging to common humanity. But in addition these original powers stand in one correlative flux and interconnectedness that embraces the totality of human history. This

interconnectedness displays everything as conditioned by everything else, and it knows no exception to this mutual influence and interlacing. That all principles of historical explanation are built upon this requires no proof. The art of sympathetically sensing original contents and of tracing out correlative, mutually conditioning transformations is the art of the historian. His ultimate problems arise from the question about the essence and foundations of the whole interconnection and about the value to be assigned to its various forms and structures.

Because of all this, biblical scholarship must deal with the general political, social, and cultural history of antiquity, and the study and assessment of Christianity takes place ultimately in the context of the history of religion and the history of culture. Entirely of itself and step by step it has become necessary to illuminate the beginning of the religion of Israel in analogy with the religions of the Semitic peoples. The thoroughly original metamorphosis of the religion of Yahweh must be connected to its general relationship with the ancient Near Eastern world, its great catastrophies, and its general spiritual horizon. Judaism must be explained with reference to its relationship during the exile and the synagogal reorganization just as its greatly changed view of the world must be explained with reference to the mass of ideas it absorbed during the exile. The origin of Christianity must be seen in connection with the decay of Judaism, the political movements of the day, and the apocalyptic ideas of the time. And the expansion of the Christian church must be illuminated by an investigation of the interaction of primitive Christianity with the world of the Roman Empire. Such a comprehensive study cannot help but see in the powerful movement of Christianity the culmination of antiquity toward which the great developments of the ancient Near East and the western world struggled and in which quite different lines of development finally converged.

That's what results from the historical method which, once it is trained on a given point, must draw everything into its wake and implicate everything in one comprehensive interconnection of correlative effects and metamorphoses. There is no need at all for the specifically Hegelian—tinted thought of Strauss that the idea does not like to shower its entire fullness in a single individual. Achieving this result requires no general philosophical theories of any kind. The historical method, through criticism, analogy, and correlation, and with indisputable necessity, leads entirely from itself to the positing of such a fabric of mutually conditioning strands. These strands are isolated and absolute at no point but stand everywhere in connection with each other. Thus they can be understood only in the context of the greatest possible whole.

In its origin, of course, this method was not independent of general theories. That is the case with no method. But the decisive factor is the confirmation and fruitfulness of a method, its development in commerce with its object, and its production of understanding and coherence. No one can deny that everywhere the

historical method has been applied it has brought forth remarkably illuminating results and that trust in it has stood the test everywhere by clarifying items that were obscure. Such a power of clarification is unique to the historical method, and it is also its fully sufficient proof. He who has given his little finger to it must also give it his whole hand. Because of this it seems from an orthodox standpoint to be rather like the devil. Just like modern natural science it represents a complete revolution in our mode of thinking in comparison with antiquity and the Middle Ages. If modern natural science takes a new posture toward nature, then history takes a new posture toward the human spirit and its ideal products. The older absolute or dogmatic mode of thinking, which considered specific conditions and ideas as self-evident and thus absolutized them as unchangeable norms, has been displaced by the historical mode, which also deals with what is allegedly self-evident and which considers the widest circles of governing powers as witnesses of the flow of history. It takes hold of law, morality, sociology, political science, and aesthetics in the deepest way and subordinates them to historical points of view and methods. Whether this historicizing of our thinking is a piece of good fortune or not is not the question here. One can find observations worth considering about that question in Nietzsche's brilliant work, "On the Use and Disadvantage of History for Life." In any case we simply can no longer think without and against this method, and we must erect on it all our research into the essence and aims of the human spirit. Here we are left with Goethe's words that so strikingly describe the situation:

He who knows not how to give account of three thousand years,  
remains in the dark, inexperienced, may live from day to day.

Thus has the historical method taken hold of theology, at first coyly and fragmentarily with all sorts of reservations and restrictions, then more comprehensively and energetically until it began to affect theology the same way it affected everything else—by causing a fundamental transformation in the whole mode of thinking and the basic attitude toward its object. At first, for the most part, only fragmentary results and an uneasy uncertainty penetrated the general consciousness. But unconsciously its fundamental significance took effect everywhere consistently with the necessity immanent to the method. The verification of the method in particular and small matters required its extension to the whole and to the basic way of looking at things. Even here the impulse was not provided by theory and system but by the pressure of the object which, once it was engaged with the historical method, became marvellously alive and understandable. Because of this the exceptions and reservations which step by step the retreat required and which often, as a last line of defense, dredged up only the uncertainties that are in the possible lacunae of the tradition and its sources, are futile.

The particular results that have come from the historical treatment of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, as weighty as they are, are by no means the decisive

factor. It is rather a question of the consequences of the method as such, and by the nature of the case these have to do with two points. First, historical criticism renders every particular fact uncertain and certifies to us only those effects on the present that have a historical interconnection. Precisely because of that the coherence of religious faith is tied up with data of all sorts. Certainly it is not destroyed, but it is transformed. It becomes impossible to erect the faith on a single fact as such. It is always tied together with other factors by extensive interconnections.

Second, this interconnection that affects the present is not itself isolated and absolute. It stands in the closest correlation with a much greater historical interconnection within which it emerges as a form comparable to other occurrences, and it should be understood in this total context. I do not mean to deny its originality. But its originality is analogous to other movements that arise in these interconnections and is neither more nor less mysterious than these. Further, I do not intend to deny the creative significance of the personalities that mold the great movements of life. The personalities of Judaeo—Christian history are no less comprehensible than the personalities of the Greeks and the Persians. But I do intend to say one thing, and it is exceptionally important: It follows from the comparability and the over—all interconnectedness of historical developments that every evaluation and judgment, just like every interpretation and description, must proceed from the over—all interconnection. One can make a judgment about Christianity only from a study of its total historical context and not from an isolated judgment and claim of the Christian community itself as many theologians want to make us believe, just as one does not let the self judgment of the Greeks or the Romans determine one's assessment of their lasting contribution to the human spirit without taking account of other factors.

That is the evident effect of the historical method. It relativizes everything, not in the sense that every gauge of value is ruled out and nihilistic scepticism must result, but in the sense that every moment and every construct of history can be conceived only in connection with others and finally with the whole, that the construction of every gauge of value cannot be based on isolated particulars but only on an overview of the whole. This relativising and the view of the whole belong together, just as they are always together in the practical application of the method. This spirit of historical research is by and by pressed into every pore of historical theology; Christianity can be viewed as an entity that is existing, explicable and susceptible to evaluation only in the context of the whole; only investigations inspired by these thoughts have produced real historical knowledge, while all retorts set forth only blockages of the method or corrections of individual results but not independent and proper principles.

For all these reasons the old dogmatic method is not adequate to historical

experience. Because of this and solely because of this all theories take the same course as those advanced by me. Once the method has been applied its inner logic presses forward, and all the antidotes cited by theology for making this method harmless or for fencing it into a restricted area crumble in the hands the more insistently and eagerly one tries to convince oneself of their real validity. These consequences must dawn especially on the biblical scholar and on him especially in his concrete work. One need read only the treatments of the Kingdom of God idea or of the messianic consciousness of Jesus to see more fully how impossible it is to accept one of the theories. One also realizes that with a method that has introduced such questions and has demanded historical understanding, a peeling away to some kind of unhistorical inner kernel is impossible. Or for the reverse one need only survey the enormously complicated apparatus Zahn developed for the purpose of nullifying the results of the historical method. One will see, on the one hand, that he makes nothing at all of the principle. He sets results against results, not method against method. On the other hand, one will see that his complicated deductions serve only to rebuild with difficulty the naive, old, and more secure relationship to tradition which was the presupposition of the old dogmatic method.

Given this state of affairs, there is only one alternative: We must carry through with the historical method in full seriousness. I say this not just because we recognize the relative uncertainty of all historical knowledge and thus conceive the relationship of religious faith to individual historical events only as mediate and relative, not just because we roundly and firmly subject the Judaeo—Christian history to all the consequences of a purely historical method without anxiety about or evasion of its results, but above all because we take note of the interlacing of Christianity in the general course of history and because we proceed with the task of our research and evaluation only from the context of the totality of history. This is the basis for the demand for a reconstruction of theology by the historical method with attention to the totality of history, and since Christianity is religious and ethical, that means a reconstruction by the method of the history of religions.

In my previous work I tried to sketch and to indicate the structure of the idea of a theology based on the history of religions. Along with the first impulse of historical criticism this idea hovered before Deism and later was represented in various ways by Lessing, Kant and Herder, Schleiermacher, de Wette and Hegel and finally by Bauer and Lagarde. Today the idea can be developed only by setting aside rationalistic universal concepts of religion and the Hegelian dialectic of the absolute. I won't go into the details again here. That remains for a more comprehensive work. I will only emphasize that despite all the value I attribute to the many lines of investigation that have been carried out, for me it is essentially a question of the method. I do not at all doubt that even a presentation of the Christian life—world by means of such a history of religions method will not convince atheistic or religiously—sceptical people. It won't go that far, but it will satisfy the requirement

for consistency and unity in one's view of things. I also do not doubt that in this method, which is mine only in certain details, I will find at first few fellow—travellers to the right and left. It doesn't go that far either. It must first of all suffice that the scholar firmly convince himself in his work. But in any case I am confident that the consistency of the historical method in itself will lead through the present—day entanglement and silting of Biblical research to a full and resolute application of this method. Only then will the most troublesome present—day apologetic concerns fall from our hearts, and we will be able to observe much more impartially and freely the grandeur of God in history. The requirement for a consistency that enables such impartiality and freedom will lead ever more theologians, or at least people who are reflective about religion, in that direction. And the result, if I may repeat what I have written elsewhere, will be simply this: "All human religion is rooted in religious intuition or divine revelation which achieves in specific religious personalities the power for creating new communities, a power that is experienced again and again with somewhat less originality by the faithful. The belief in God, that is contained in this intuition and that, at an earlier stage among those whose consciousness was confined to the world of nature, was veiled in a religion of nature, broke loose from these restrictions and issued along with many parallel developments in the religion of Yahweh and in the proclamation of Jesus emerging from that. This in turn has undergone an infinitely rich development that could not have been previously achieved. In this development what matters is living by faith in the living God and the interpretation of our world out of this faith."

The essence of this new method would not be sufficiently presented if I did not contrast it to the old method in its true and consistent meaning. It is necessary to do that especially in relation to Niebergall's and related theologians, who acknowledge the method but who haven't been very clear about its real essence. The new method is called the history of religions method. In making value judgments it submits all tradition to criticism and always approaches major questions from the context of historical reality as a whole. The old method, then, should be characterized as the dogmatic method. It begins from a point fully removed from history and its relativity, and from that point it derives unconditionally valid statements which at best can be brought only later into touch with the knowledge and understanding of other aspects of human life. This method is fundamentally and absolutely opposed to the historical method. Its essential characteristic is the possession of an authority that avoids the overall interconnectedness of history, analogy with other historical events, and everything historical criticism has to say along with the uncertainty of its results. It wants to bind men to individual historical facts that claim to dissolve all historical analogies. It can contrive this binding power because its facts are different from all normal history and can neither be established nor shaken by criticism. Rather they are confirmed by a miraculous tradition and an inner seal of verification in the heart.



The method fails all the tests of the secular historical method: criticism, analogy and correlation. It tips its hat politely to criticism on indifferent details, but it fights tooth and nail at the point of the implications of criticism for understanding. It cannot tolerate criticism, not because criticism produces such scanty results, but because dogmatism cannot bear uncertainties and because its facts possess a character that contradicts all the presuppositions and the very possibility of criticism. It can neither admit nor make use of analogies. To do so would be to surrender its own essence which consists in the denial of every analogical similarity between Christianity and other religious developments. It cannot plunge into the interconnectedness of all events. It claims an entirely different kind of causality, and without that the dogmas it sets forth as the only truth could not be known. To be sure, it also wants to think that it depends on "history," but this history is no ordinary, profane history like that susceptible to critical study. Rather it is "salvation history" and the interconnectedness of saving facts. These can be known and proved as such only to the eyes of faith, and they have a different set of criteria from those by which profane, critical history determines whether something has actually occurred. It is only fishing in troubled waters when the profane appreciation of current historical and social powers in contrast to individual strivings and fancies is brought into play apologetically on behalf of this dogmatic insistence on the "historical" character of Christianity. Such an apologetics has long since caused sufficient confusion in theology.

Today people want to designate every conceivable thing as "historical" and as a "fact," including what is not and cannot be historical or factual because it is the very opposite, namely a miracle that can be ascertained only by faith. One gives to the Jewish—Christian miracle a name that has universal resonance, that obliterates the distinction with the profane world. This is how the miracle is smuggled in. Then, after the border into the land of theology has been safely passed, the delusions can fall away. Even Niebergall has paid a handsome duty to this method. But it is absolutely clear that genuine dogmatics cannot be served by such a pure "historical" power that in the last analysis is only accidental. What it needs is a history which, by concentrating on the necessary, absolute truth in a single point, distinguishes itself from ordinary history with its relative truths and mutual effects. What it needs is an evident dissolution of the interconnectedness and of any similarity to it. Otherwise it is susceptible to all the conditions pertaining to this interconnectedness, the mutual restrictions, and the ever changing flux.

The traditional dogmatic method has perceived all these matters perfectly consistently and rightly. It wants a dogmatic, not a historical authority. It wants an authority ascertained through itself without comparison and thus without anything in common with the rest of historical life. It does not want a historical substance that is strong in facts and rich in influence and subject to evaluation by the philosophy of history. It wants a foundation of dogmatic truths essentially removed

from history and innately distinguished by the special marks of supernatural origin. Therefore everything depends on a proof of the supernatural origin that grounds this dogmatic character and elevates its historical character. One may give more emphasis on the external or internal sides. In either case one must finally turn to the inner supernatural character of the effects of grace as proof for the credibility of the supernatural power operating externally to elevate the historical events. The miracle is decisive, and since there is no way publicly to confirm or deny a purely psychological miracle, it is always necessary to appeal to a delicate, psychological miracle if one is to be able to deduce from it a massive physical miracle. Everything finally depends on this, and it would be much better if the dogmaticians would admit it rather than continuing to speak of a “history” which is not history at all but its opposite.

Only by such a proof based on miracle can the dogmatic method gain a firm hold and the essence of a methodical principle. Both methods rely on the acceptance of metaphysical principles. The historical method is born out of the metaphysical acceptance of the overall coherence of the universe. Thus it grants autonomy to the activities of the human spirit and then has to construct other general theories about the essence of history and about the principles for making value judgments. The metaphysical principle of the dogmatic method is more instinctive, but it has been developed clearly and strictly in the course of time. It is rooted in the proof for the supernatural character of the authority or for the miracle. Without this the dogmatic method is nothing but a knife without handle or blade.

The division of historical life into a sphere without miracles, susceptible to the ordinary, historical—critical method, and a sphere suffused by miracles, susceptible only to special methods of study grounded in inner experience and the subordination of reason, is the principal foundation of the dogmatic method. The construction of such a concept of history together with the insistence on entirely independent and special means for treating dogmatic—historical or history of salvation matters is the fundamental presupposition of the dogmatic method in theology. In the past century there are repeated instances of appeals to a special history of salvation. They circumvent the secular historical method and insist on special Christian theories of knowledge that are said to be grounded either on the principle of churchly obedience or on rebirth and inner experience. Only great fatigue with such fruitless apologetics can excuse the remarkable expectation of present—day dogmaticians. They think they can pluck the fruit without the tree, or they believe fruit will grow on a dried—up twig they have cut from the old tree.

This sharp division between the spheres of history and the method that corresponds to it do not exhaust the essence of the matter. In addition to these points it is important to see how the duality of the spheres of history is necessarily founded in the essence of God and man. Ultimately the duality of history depends on

a duality in the essence of the divine being. This duality is viewed and cherished by the dogmatic method as the original and fundamental pillar of its concepts. In their view God is not enclosed in a correlative, mutually conditioning series of causes and effects. He is not confined to a purpose that produces every living movement only as a movement within the total interconnectedness of things. Rather, in addition to his regular mode of acting, he is capable of extraordinary deeds that break through and transcend this interconnectedness. Everything is contained in this concept of God.

Not less depends on a concept of man that requires the kind of extraordinary divine activity to which I have referred. I mean a concept of man as one guilty of original sin who has fallen from the regular, normal, unified order of things, and whose salvation requires an extraordinary restoration of the divine order. These dualistic concepts of God and man are the inescapable presupposition of the dogmatic method with its dualism of two historical methods, a secular—historical, critical—relativistic method and a method for salvation history that is absolutely and apodictically certain.

At this point boredom with the efforts of apologetics has caused many theologians to renounce these theories or to replace them with others. The astounding discovery of the indifference of metaphysics for theology especially has led to a renunciation of the proof for this dualism. But it has not led to either the ability or the will to surrender respect for its value. As if the essence of a theology that frees itself from every metaphysics were not the setting aside of this dualism and its consequences, theology transformed itself into a phenomenological—historical treatment of religion by means of which the kernel of truth in Christianity was to be discovered by peeling away the non—essential factors. In this way a new metaphysics came into being. It was more limited and foresighted. It founded itself on moral certainty or feeling, and above all it renounced the dualism based on miracles. For the young theologian at the beginning of his studies nothing is more astounding than to hear a professor renounce any special concept of God or man's original condition or original sin or miracle and then proceed in such a way as if all of that—with the exception of a few mediating concessions to the conception of historical time—were legitimate. One accustoms oneself to anything and can make a virtue out of necessity, but to anyone who has a sense for clarity, consistency and tidiness there can be no virtue to this tommyrot. Thus most of the students return to the old metaphysical foundations of the dogmatic method and learn from their studies only that there is no final proof for the method. The consequences of the method lead to this result with inner necessity just as the historical method from its own inner necessity requires a theology thoroughly involved in the history of religions. I won't attempt a detailed rebuttal of this method here. I only wanted to exhibit its essence and to contrast it with the historical method. One could call the old method "the Catholic method" because it was created and classically formed by Catholic theology. And one could call the new

method “the Protestant method” because it finally developed from the Protestant critique of the Catholic doctrine of authority. But the old method lies so deep in the nature of the dogmatic inclinations of men and is so necessarily the result of an age that was not historically sophisticated that it makes no sense to designate it specifically as Catholic. One finds it just as much in Jewish and Islamic theology. On the other side, historical criticism in Protestantism was intended to be only partial and apologetic, and the time of the origin of Protestantism was quite alien to a fundamentally historical way of thinking. The age of the Enlightenment was the first to pave the way for historical thinking even though its alleged unhistorical way of thinking is a wide—spread legend. It was the first age to free itself from reigning authorities by means of criticism, and thus it was the first age to put everything on the same plane. But out of this levelling process work on distinctions and shadings began to take place, and this could not happen until all objects of study had been transformed into purely historical objects. In this transitional situation supernatural dogmatism was transformed in part into a rational dogmatism. Where this was not tenable a new world view was developed out of history although what was historical and what was considered to be of universal validity continued to be held together so that we can speak of it as historical only a posteriori. Even so, we can see the difference. Thus the only appropriate names for these methods are the “dogmatic” and the “historical.” Each one has its own foundations and problems, and each is consistent in itself. We are not concerned here with the particular problems of either. We are concerned only to insist that because of the consistency of each in itself they cannot be mixed together.

The above discussion completes the major aim of these pages. As an addendum I would like only to represent my own position in this conflict of methods against a few objections of Niebergall and also to illuminate the inconsistency with which Niebergall himself embraces the dogmatic method.

First, Niebergall objects to my method because of its difficulty and because of the subjective limitation with which it is carried out. It is self—evident that constructing a scale of values for the great spiritual types of history is dependent on subjective judgments and can never be completely convincing. I have always explicitly emphasized that. Yet I am convinced that a penetrating analysis of the essence of these types, an analysis that gets to the kernel, will yield a relatively unanimous judgment among morally and religiously serious, thinking men. I refer to men who do not play with the matter or try to be clever but for whom it really is a matter of living import. To be sure, that is a conviction, and it depends on a religious—ethical faith that ultimately is grounded in the fundamental similarity of human nature and a commonality in the recognition of the highest standards of value. The judgment will have to be worked out from this faith. As for the difficulty in carrying out the method, I can only say that no emphasis on the difficulties of a possible method can commend the application of an impossible method. We must

simply work harder in a common effort. Further, Niebergall protests that I combine the setting up of such a scale of values with a metaphysics of history. He claims I derive this metaphysics from the essence of the human spirit or rather from the transcendental ground that creates values by a logical and self—intensifying succession of ideas. I cannot now deal with his observations about intellectualism and practical reason which are entirely incomprehensible to me as he presents them. I will only emphasize that no person would try reasonably to discover a scale of values in history if he considered history a sheer chaos. Faith in a reason that governs history and progressively reveals itself in history is an unavoidable presupposition. Moreover, it is a faith that has an ethical—religious origin, and it confirms itself, in my opinion, in the continuous deepening of personal life taking place in history.

As a third objection Niebergall points to the danger of self—delusion in my way of constructing a scale of values. I will not ask whether a greater danger accrues to that way than to the dogmatic method with the special conditions it claims for its apologetics. The masters of that method consider it unnecessary to be warned about such a danger. I will only emphasize that I do not consider the danger quite so insurmountable. The actual situation is not always what those theologians think who can imagine only that one would start with a pre—conceived thesis and then try to prove it with all sophisticated means and with the highest possible appearance of impartiality. In a complicated, highly individualistic culture like ours one often doesn't know whether one is on one's head or one's feet. And it is actually possible to want to orient oneself by a comparative overview without any pre—conceived partiality for Christianity. He who in this way ends up by esteeming Christianity as the highest moral and religious power does not need to have had this result in his pocket to begin with, not even if he—as is self—evident to a serious man—had esteemed Christianity in a relative way from the beginning. The confession of Christianity as the greatest religious power in history (a conclusion to which I have come) is always something different from such a relative and cursory evaluation. A serious person is never unconditionally bound to such a first immediate judgment.

Finally, Niebergall has charged me with inconsistency insofar as I am said to move from an alleged historical relativism to a recognition of the “absoluteness” of Christianity. He thinks such a recognition is impossible for a person of my persuasion. Niebergall can rightly point to changes not only in expression but also in way of thinking in my publications over the years. Had he looked at these carefully he would have been able to see that I gradually pressed the consequences of the historical method more strictly and that I finally used the word “absoluteness” as hardly more than a rationalized and disguised residue of the dogmatic method. In my estimation, as a matter of fact, not much hangs on this word. Certainly not in his case because his opposition to the much abused relativism is not as weighty as it seems to a dogmatic way of thinking. Yes, I am prepared to say it: The essence of my view is that it roundly opposes historical relativism. Relativism issues from the

historical method only for those who use it with atheistic or religiously sceptical presuppositions, and relativism is overcome by a conception of history as an unfolding of the divine reason.

This conception is the inalienable service of the Hegelian doctrine which must be freed from his metaphysics of the absolute, his dialectic of opposites, and his specifically logical treatment of religion. The point is that history is not chaotic but strives under the influence of unified powers toward a unified goal. For ethical and religious men history is an orderly succession in which the central truth and depth of the human spirit rises out of the transcendental ground of the Spirit, with conflict and error on all sides but also with the necessary consistency of a development that begins normally. The oppositions grow more external and occasional. In their kernel and essence the differences of the great historical creations are not nearly so important, and the real thoughts and values in the world are infinitely more rare than one thinks. Only their forms and ramifications are countless. Thus I believe with the great Idealists that in this apparent chaos the divine depths of the human spirit are revealed from various sides, that faith in God in all its forms—where it is real faith in God and not self-seeking magic—is identical at the center, that it receives an energy and depth from its own consequences and that means from the power of God active in it insofar as it honors the limits of the original connection of the human spirit to nature.

The human spirit has broken through these limits at only one point. That point lies in the middle of comprehensive and conflicting religious developments. It is in the religion of the prophets of Israel and in the person of Jesus, where the God who is different from nature brought forth a personality superior to nature with its eternally transcendent goals and its will—power to work against the world. In this is disclosed a religious power that represents itself to one who experiences it internally as the culmination of all other religious movements and constitutes the point of departure for a new phase of religious history. Nothing new and higher has hitherto come forth, and nothing new and higher is conceivable for us today however many new forms and combinations of this purely inner and personal faith in God might come forth. Obviously, this is not a dogmatic absoluteness. Nor is it a contrast of Christianity to history or a removal of it from the flux, conditionedness and variability of history. Rather it is a conclusion that can be reached by a philosophico—historical and historical mode of thought, and it suffices for religious men. We do not require more, and we cannot achieve more. In it we have the religious stability of our thought and life which emerged in the complex of the total life of our European culture as its center and which remains a power that can change and develop further. Certainly the relation of this European religion to the religions of the East is a great and dark question of the future. But whoever recognizes the decisive, upward leading powers in the break—through of nature, which is the faith of the prophets, and in the active and living love of God and man,

which is the faith of Jesus, can retain his serenity in our old religion and can leave to the future its further development. Here too Niebergall has measured me too strictly by requirements that are self—evident to himself but not to me. He simply has not been able to transpose himself into a religious mode that finds its stability and comfort in thoughts such as mine. He thinks I travel across a frozen land and through a dark tunnel into the pleasant fields of home, but the land is not so cold, the tunnel not so dark, and the goal not so natively pleasant as he thinks.

Finally, I have a few objections to Niebergall's position. Here also I won't go into epistemological matters with which he cuts the discussion short and thinks he is able to find the major distinction between himself and me. The problem is not helped by that appeal. If the question whether the scale of values for human life is to be gained from the investigations of a philosophy of history or from a supernaturally grounded authority is to be decided, it is useless to emphasize the elements of feeling and will that are unavoidable to any value judgment. Authoritarian supernaturalism can never be founded on the practical character of all values because this practical character also pertains to values that are outside of Christianity and even of religion. Rather it is finally a question of the foundation of the authority that the dogmatic method claims for its point of beginning. Here there is no doubt at all that Niebergall agrees with the intentions of the traditional dogmatic method. He wants a supernatural doctrine of authority, not a "historical, but a dogmatic—apologetic absoluteness." He wants an "absoluteness outside of and opposed to the history of religions," i.e. outside of and opposed to the historical—critical view overall. He wants a "sphere lying beyond the history of religions," i.e. a sphere lying beyond profane history. He wants "absoluteness as an immediate deduction from God" in contrast to the history of religions outside of Christianity and the mediate deduction of God characteristic of ordinary history, which depends "on purely natural endowments." He wants absoluteness as a "faith that absolute values have revealed themselves at one point in history in a supernatural way," i.e. values whose absoluteness is declared primarily in a supernatural revelation. For all his talk about respect for history and about the practical motivation of all faith, it is entirely clear that he wants something that is outside of and in contrast to history, something that is a history of a higher order, that has other presuppositions than ordinary history, and whose occurrences are recognized by signs that ordinary history cannot offer. When he speaks of the "independence of Christianity," he is only employing euphemisms for miracles which such theologians don't like to call by their right names.

But he steadfastly insists on his intentions. He says he wants his course of thought to be quite different from "a naked and barefaced supernaturalism"! He says almost nothing about his other works in which his thought is consistently grounded on the concept of God, the primal condition of man, sin and redemption and the pathetic rudiments of his proof of the miraculous character of holy history derived

from the facts of history. Yes, his intention is to ascertain a normative point of beginning without presuppositions and purely from historical observations. But he constantly crucifies this emphatically emphasized intention by a method the exact opposite of one that turns to general history and tries to discover whether absolute values corresponding to human needs can be discovered in it. The theologian pretends as if he knew nothing about Christianity and as if he sought from a universal human postulate an absolute, redeeming revelatory event. In this state he discovered the historical “fact” of Christianity, and he rejoices to find all his postulates verified in it. Since the historical mode of thought has made quite a deep impression and has transformed what used to be the point of beginning for a dogmatician by right of his office into a result of historical research, there is no longer any need to insist on the dogmatic presuppositions. In place of deduction from the concept of God and original sin we find verification by the satisfaction of human needs. Everything depends on the justification of these needs and on the factuality of their satisfaction. But that is as impossible to secure as anything else. About these needs themselves (the need he alleges Kant proved that theoretical scepticism has for a supernatural authority, a guarantee of victory and the forgiveness of sins) I do not want to discuss further. This argument might be justified, but in any case it cannot be denied that the same needs have appeared outside of Christianity and have been satisfied and that they themselves are purely historical products which do not lead to some sphere outside of history.

More important is the question why these needs may be considered to have found an absolute satisfaction in Christianity. Here again Niebergall does not refer to an inner necessity that pertains only to Christianity, but with the apparent objectivity so beloved by present—day theology he refers to the purely factual “claim” of Christianity. This is the same dialectical comedy we observed in the earlier theology. One happens upon the “historical fact” of a colossal declaration, and, completely surprised by this fact, one pretends that it is something quite shocking and shaking. The claim of Christianity is transformed into its essence, and the old theology of miracle is transformed into a theology of claim. It lays claim to being absolute truth and redemption. Without recognizing this claim one does not have the truth. But so few requirements guarantee their own satisfaction, so few claims prove their own rightness, fewer still when one realizes that a series of competitive claims are presented in various religions. The only way to decide between these competing claims is by some kind of criterion. What is at work in all these statements is only an aversion to the proper roots of the dogmatic method and an external adaptation to pure historical argumentation. Actual requirements and actual claims are supposed to form the basis of the theory. But requirements and claims are the products of history, to be understood, explained, and amended in every possible way with reference to the interconnections of history as we have done with hundreds of other requirements and claims. A higher reality removed from historical relativity and criticism is in no way given.



The point is that these needs are not satisfied merely by a claim but by a higher reality. Niebergall finally gets around to that. But how faint and cautious is this assertion of a higher, supernatural reality and causality set over against profane history! He emphasizes the “supernatural” character and the “immediacy” pertaining to the revelation, i.e. the causality that is opposed to what is natural and mediated and that provides the foundation for the special character of Christianity. But he only does that in a general way. Absoluteness demands that “one found Christianity on a special revelation which will somehow make itself understandable as revelation.” This “somehow” is classical in present—day theology which in its superiority no longer has much to do with the cares of the old apologetics but settles for a “somehow.” If one searches Niebergall for traces of this “somehow,” one finds only one attempt to explain it more exactly. The personality of Jesus, he says, represents a break through of ordinary historical causality. But he speaks only of the mysterious and underivable personality of Jesus, as if that were not the case with every personality. “Here in the foundation of the soul we encounter a gap in the causal sequence—the greater it is the more unique and perfect the personality is—a gap which provides full play for the influence of a higher power. Here at this point, which contradicts every analysis, we conclude that the revelation that we faithfully acknowledge and honor has occurred.... We move from Jesus upward to the reservoir of revelation flowing from heaven and from earthly tributaries. The course of these streams leads to him.” To that he adds another sentence: “We decide that the helpful powers that come to the aid of our deep need point to a divine intervention because we know of no place within the world where they could have originated.” What can one say to such statements? Should one marvel at the modesty of a theology that has finally come to the point of seeing its foundation in a gap? Or should one emphasize the uncertainty with which these gaps are confirmed? Not once has Niebergall distinguished with certainty between the gap in the causal connection of ordinary human life and the gap that can be seen solely within the personality of Jesus. I think one can say nothing else than that such a doctrine of authority and revelation has been deeply corroded and almost destroyed by the spirit of historical criticism, analogy, and relativity, and that it endures only in pathetic, entirely general claims.

I make this judgment only from a pure, scientific point of view, and I appeal only to consistent thinking. Practically speaking, such a mollification and extraction of the old doctrine of authority may be a good thing. Without such middle groups practically nothing changes, and this might signify a very desirable transition for churchly matters. Thus I want to emphasize in conclusion that sub specie aeternitatis the differences between the historical and dogmatic methods may not be so crucial. Thus those of us who stand on opposite sides need not be alienated in this earthly pilgrimage.