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0521026334 - Religion and the Rise of Historicism: W. M. L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt,
and the Theological Origins of Nineteenth-Century Historical Consciousness
Thomas Albert Howard

Excerpt

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Introduction

History, Theology, and Modernity

[A] secular understanding of reality and the social bond is essentially constituted within the religious field, whether it was nurtured by religion's substance or deployed as an expression of one of its fundamental potentialities.

– Marcel Gauchet, *Désenchantement du monde*

[We] anti-metaphysicians take our fire from the brand kindled by the faith of many centuries.

– Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*

IT IS LARGELY TAKEN FOR GRANTED today that a greater historical sense or historical consciousness is a distinguishing feature of modern Western thought.¹ To a large extent, this heightened sensitivity to history and to the “constructed” character of one’s ideas and beliefs – historicism as it is generally called and as I shall call it² – first developed among German scholars, in universities and academies, at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. At this time, it is said, a secular historical consciousness freed itself from long-standing theological conceptions of history. Present-day intellectual and cultural historians have generally portrayed the process as fundamentally discontinuous: history triumphed over the “theological stranglehold” that it had languished under for centuries; the “modern mind” became historicized, emancipated from traditional, biblical-theological *modi cognoscendi*.³

In the present study, I suggest limitations with this view. Instead of charting the liberation of history from theology, I focus on the impact of theology on the development of secular historical thinking. I hope to awaken interest among historians of Europe in the significance of theology, especially German Protestant theology, in the modern period. Particular attention will be devoted to post-Enlightenment epistemological problems confronted by theologians and to problems associated with the application

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of critical scholarship – *Wissenschaft* – to biblical hermeneutics. The broad cultural ramifications of these distinctively theological problems greatly affected the character of modern historical thought and the shaping of historical studies as an academic enterprise.

Previous studies have examined the impact on historical scholarship of developments at the universities of Göttingen and Halle in the eighteenth century, of activities at various German academies, of the philosophies of Herder and Hegel, of Wilhelm von Humboldt's writings, and of Leopold von Ranke's seminars and methods.⁴ Less is known, however, about the role played by theology during the "emancipation" of modern, critical history from traditional, religious patterns of thought. Theology's role is important because of the close relationship between theology and history in German universities before the nineteenth century and because of their relationship of antagonism or indifference ever since. In premodern Europe theology was, after all, the "queen of the sciences," and, as Konrad Jarausch rightly notes, history, like philosophy, was long considered a "handmaiden of theology," an unsung ancillary field (*Hilfswissenschaft*) whose primary purpose was to instruct in the development of dogma and church history and to act as a repository of moral lessons for theologians, law professors, and statesmen.⁵

But history did not remain in its subordinate position. "A gradual reversal of roles" occurred by the nineteenth century, notes Jarausch, from "history as a handmaiden of theology" to history as a "dominant form of humanistic scholarship."⁶ At the University of Göttingen in the eighteenth century, such scholars as Johann Christoph Gatterer and August Ludwig von Schlözer, began a melting down of *historia sacra* into secular world history.⁷ The tradition of universal history (*Universalgeschichte*), originally based on the four monarchies of the seventh chapter of Daniel and expressed best in the lectures of the Reformation humanist Philip Melancthon and in Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet's *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*, gradually separated itself from theological assumptions and biblical chronology.⁸ This process of secularization, which was largely complete by the early nineteenth century, paved the way for history's institutionalization and professionalization. In short, history became an autonomous *Wissenschaft*, and perspectives and methods drawn from history began to affect other areas of inquiry, notably theology and biblical criticism.

Many critics have perceived in the expanded scope of historical thinking pioneered by German scholars nothing less than the nascence of a post-theological worldview coeval with modernity. Friedrich Meinecke, for example, in 1936 famously described historicism as "one of the greatest intellectual revolutions that has ever taken place in Western thought."⁹ "Historicism," writes Ninian Smart, "[is] the decisively new element in

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modern Western thought.”¹⁰ But conclusions of this type beg many questions. How did history overcome its ancillary position and achieve such a grand(iose) stature? What explains the fact that history and theology, with respect to *wissenschaftliche* dominance and credibility, more or less switched places in the nineteenth century? Moreover, how does one account for the historicization of theology, a process that was greatly accelerated during this time? And how have the religious and cultural uncertainties generated by a historicized approach to theology affected intellectual conventions and social forms, including academic life, pedagogical theory, personal belief, and the like? Finally, why did such extensive historicization occur at this particular time in European history? In pursuing such questions, I am less concerned with charting the emancipation or triumph of historicism – which, as indicated, much recent scholarship does in a persistently progressivist fashion – than in understanding the cognitive situation of its emergence, its prior rootedness in deep-seated religious *Weltanschauungen*. The German Enlightenment is distinguished, one must remember, by its profoundly religious character: “among thinkers of the German Enlightenment,” writes Ernst Cassirer, “the fundamental objective is not the dissolution of religion but its ‘transcendental’ justification and foundation.”¹¹ Might then a secular historical outlook, born in the wake of the German Enlightenment, retain traces, revealing elisions, hereditary marks that betray significant continuities between premodern-theological and modern-historical ways of thinking? Karl Löwith has pointed out that even outspoken critics of Christianity in the nineteenth century were for the most part theologically educated Protestants.¹²

In this study I use the term *theology* not only narrowly, to describe a disciplinary practice or academic faculty, but also broadly, to denote a manner of regarding the world and human existence that privileges questions of faith, religious truth, transcendence, biblical interpretation, and moral behavior. “In its explicit attempt to come to grips with ultimate values,” notes Douglas Cremer, “theological reflection verbalizes concerns that remain unspoken in many other discourses.”¹³ Indeed, since the Enlightenment, changes and continuities in the vocabularies and epistemologies of theology are crucial sources for illuminating broader cultural developments and problems. Admittedly, changes have been immense: European cultural life has experienced processes of secularization and historicization, whereby religious symbols, theological reflection, and ecclesiastical authority have undergone “disenchantment” (*Entzauberung*), as Max Weber put it, or “detheologization” (*Enttheologisierung*), as certain present-day German critics phrase it.¹⁴ These processes and their attendant “isms” – secularism and historicism – represent valid, however terminologically problematic, attempts to account for fundamental transformations in modern European and Western intellectual life.

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Yet there are few wholesale breaks in history: modernity's predominantly secular, historical elite culture bears a complex and profound relationship to its predecessor biblical-theological culture; the latter has exercised extensive and often unrecognized influence on the former. M. H. Abrams noted in his interpretation of nineteenth-century Romanticism that

we . . . remain unaware of the full extent to which characteristic concepts and patterns of . . . [nineteenth-century] philosophy and literature are a displaced and reconstituted theology, or else a secularized form of devotional experience. . . . [We] readily mistake our hereditary ways of organizing experience for the conditions of reality and the universal forms of thought.¹⁵

Abrams's words apply to attitudes toward history as well; theological presuppositions and religious attitudes shadowed and shaped nineteenth-century historicist thinking.

Despite secularizing and historicizing tendencies, theology *qua* theology has persisted (albeit with diminished institutional prestige and power) both as an academic discipline and as a general way of thinking, insistent on its own *raison d'être* and sources of legitimation (ecclesiastical tradition, the Bible, religious conviction). Historians concerned with the secularizing novelties of modernity have been reluctant to recognize theology's resilience in the face of criticism. A host of avowedly secular thinkers have been singled out as defining the discourses of modernity – Comte, Marx, Engels, Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud, inter alia – and theologians and other religiously inclined thinkers normally do not “make the cut.”¹⁶ Indeed, historians often know little of such thinkers; and even when recognized, theologians are looked upon condescendingly, as cultural dinosaurs trafficking in dubious realities – God, transcendence, truth, justice, love – that long ago should have been consigned to the realm of the metaphorical and private. Against this tendency I argue that historians overlook modern theological reflection at the expense of both historical accuracy and valuable cultural knowledge.

To be sure, a few names are widely recognized: Friedrich Schleiermacher, Søren Kierkegaard, Ernst Troeltsch, and Karl Barth are examples. Besides the luminaries, however, there are many other neglected figures, no less important (and often more so) in helping one understand the internal dynamics and intellectual presuppositions of a certain period. German-speaking lands in the nineteenth century comprised a virtual hatchery of “important lesser” theologians and biblical critics: H. E. G. Paulus, Gottlob Wilhelm Meyer, Karl Daub, F. C. Baur, K. G. Bretschneider, August Neander, Ernst Hengstenberg, Philipp Konrad Marheinecke, W. M. L. de Wette, Bruno Bauer, F. A. G. Tholuck, Richard Rothe, Albrecht Ritschl, A. E. Biedermann, Julius Wellhausen, and Martin Kähler, among others.

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Apart from scholars interested in Left Hegelianism, intellectual historians have not been passionate about examining any of these figures.¹⁷ Moreover, theologians' forays into history – with a few exceptions – rarely go beyond studies of so-called great men and their ideas. Consequently, a significant and influential component of nineteenth-century German culture remains neglected. From a historian's standpoint, this situation is unfortunate because such overlooked and marginal figures are often the ones who best illuminate the problems and tensions of a given epoch.

The present study was prompted by the discovery of an interesting encounter between one of these secondary theologians, Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette (1780–1849), and a young aspirant to the ministry, the historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897). During his years as a theology student at the University of Basel (1837–1839), Burckhardt came into contact with de Wette's radical historical criticism and innovative, non-orthodox theology. Burckhardt, son of Basel's highest ranking Protestant pastor, experienced a shattering crisis of faith as a result. He vowed to be an "honest heretic" (*ehrlicher Ketzer*) – presumably to avoid being a dishonest one – and gave up theology in favor of historical studies. In 1839, he left his hometown for Berlin, where he studied history under some of the greatest names of nineteenth-century German historical scholarship: Leopold von Ranke, J. G. Droysen, Jakob Grimm, and Franz Kugler.

Scholars interested in Burckhardt's development as a historian are often either puzzled by or dismissive of his prior commitment to theology. Yet many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars began in theology. Fifty-six of the ninety-three holders of historical chairs in Germany before 1800 had received theological training. The major nineteenth-century historians – Ranke, Droysen, and Theodor Mommsen, like Burckhardt – all came from pastors' homes and (except for Mommsen) had studied theology before experiencing difficulties and switching over to history.¹⁸ Numerous lesser historians followed the same path. Even better known are the Tübingen seminary experiences that launched the careers of Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the best-known case is Nietzsche, a pastor's son, who spent two semesters studying theology at the University of Bonn, during which time he read D. F. Strauss's critical *Das Leben Jesu* and jettisoned theology for a career in philology.¹⁹ Indeed, the pious *Elternhaus* (sometimes also a *Pfarrhaus*) and the *Theologiestudium* – which was often accompanied by a religious crisis or at least by an extreme attenuation of orthodox belief – were nearly routine and profoundly formative experiences for many nineteenth-century, secular, German intellectuals.²⁰ This has led Thomas Nipperdey to remark that "modern thought in Germany did not coexist or conflict with theology, but dwelled in the long shadows cast by the problems it had set, by the 'totality' it had laid claim to."²¹

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In Burckhardt's case, the *Pfarrhaus* and *Theologiestudium* are treated in the secondary literature only cursorily, and then almost always as a perfunctory prelude to the *Geschichtsstudium*, considered to be more important. It was during the *Geschichtsstudium* that Burckhardt trained in Ranke's seminar at Berlin and began to develop as a cultural and art historian and Renaissance scholar. While the importance of Burckhardt's seminar training and subsequent historical scholarship cannot be doubted, one cannot dismiss his prior religious upbringing and theological studies as inconsequential prehistory. In reading the young Burckhardt's letters, in examining his upbringing in Basel as the oldest son of a prominent Protestant minister, and in exploring the theology and pedagogy of his main professor, de Wette, I became persuaded that Burckhardt's pre-Berlin, pre-Ranke theological phase was not only interesting for its own sake but was also of crucial importance for understanding the genesis and makeup of his subsequent historical thought. Although Burckhardt abandoned theology, theology did not easily leave him; an abiding Protestant-theological *Weltanschauung* and *Denkweise*, as well as a lingering sense of crisis and religious uncertainty, provide keys for understanding Burckhardt's mature intellectual personality, philosophy of history, and historiography.

The case of Burckhardt also casts light on larger issues in nineteenth-century intellectual history. With respect to the themes of secularization and historicism, I interpret Burckhardt's transition from theology to history as a paradigmatic event in the nineteenth century. His decision to become a "profane" historian rather than a "pious" clergyman, as well as his conscious rejection of his religious heritage in Basel, dramatically illustrate a more pervasive ebbing of religious sensibilities: "the secularization of the European mind in the nineteenth century," as Owen Chadwick once put it.²² However, I shall also make clear that Burckhardt's negative stance toward his religious-theological heritage was, paradoxically, conditioned by this same heritage. His religious situation before apostatizing determined to a large degree the course and character of his secularization.²³ Commenting on the emergence of "the modern secular personality," Mircea Eliade makes a relevant observation:

Nonreligious man descends from *homo religiosus*. . . [H]is formation begins with the situation assumed by his ancestors. . . [H]e is an inheritor. He cannot utterly abolish the past, since he is himself the product of his past. To acquire a world of his own, he has desacralized the world in which his ancestors lived; but to do so he has been obliged to adopt the opposite of an earlier type of behavior, and that behavior is still emotionally present to him, in one form or another, ready to be reactualized in his deepest being.²⁴

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Although Eliade's starkly dichotomous "nonreligious man" and "homo religiosus" do not exist except as ideal types, the quoted passage certainly applies to what Burckhardt called his "transitional period" (*Übergangsperiode*), a time of inner struggle during which he consciously sought to distance himself from his religious heritage.²⁵ In what follows, I shall elaborate on Eliade's point, calling attention to the manifold complexities, tensions, and continuities involved in the secularizing and historicizing of an influential – and, in some respects, exemplary – nineteenth-century personality. On many counts, Burckhardt resembles Eliade's nonreligious man, but I shall argue that the long shadows of theological presuppositions and attitudes, albeit in secularized forms, are ultimately more significant than the radical break that notions of religious crisis and apostasy seem to entail. Deep-seated biblical and theological patterns of ordering and interpreting human experience determined to a large degree the conditions, possibilities, and limits of the historical imagination realizable by Burckhardt.

The catalyst for Burckhardt's religious crisis was the theologian and biblical critic, W. M. L. de Wette. It is an interesting and perhaps revealing irony of nineteenth-century intellectual life that a theology professor unseated the faith of a pastor's son. De Wette's uncompromising critical theology led directly to Burckhardt's apostasy and to his preference for history over theology. "De Wette's system grows in stature every day," a distraught Burckhardt told a friend in 1838, "one simply *must* follow him, there is no alternative; but every day a part of our traditional church doctrine melts away under his hand."²⁶

Who was W. M. L. de Wette? A major part of the present study is an attempt to recover de Wette's thought and capture its rootedness in specific late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century social, intellectual, and cultural contexts. I have chosen to concentrate on de Wette's thought for a number of reasons, all of which work to illuminate the epistemological, cultural, and religious issues at stake during Burckhardt's encounter with de Wette in the late 1830s. Furthermore, an examination of de Wette's thought calls attention to the interrelatedness of many larger themes in nineteenth-century intellectual history: Enlightenment rationalism, liberalism, Romanticism, positivism, and historicism, among others. In short, my treatment of de Wette functions as an individual case study only in a secondary sense; its primary function is as a reference point for elucidating an assortment of consequential changes occurring in early nineteenth-century thought and theology.

Although I have referred to de Wette as a lesser player in the German theological scene, this characterization is really true only from a twentieth-century perspective. In the nineteenth century de Wette was in fact a theological and biblical-critical titan. Even as late as 1910, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* noted that de Wette's "tendency to free critical inquiry" and his

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“unfettered mind toward history” had allowed him to “occupy . . . an almost solitary position among German theologians.”²⁷ The present study attempts to reconstruct de Wette’s stature in the eyes of his contemporaries; I also suggest reasons for the subsequent eclipse of his legacy.

Most important, however, particularly with respect to Burckhardt’s connection with de Wette, is de Wette’s implication in what theologians generally describe as the problem of historical knowledge, or what came to be known in the late nineteenth century as the “crisis of historicism.” De Wette was one of the earliest pioneers of the historical-critical method of evaluating biblical texts. Drawing from such *Aufklärung* predecessors as J. S. Semler and J. A. Ernesti, de Wette advocated the use of historical-critical insights in religious apologetics and in the assessment of doctrinal truth. Thus, he assisted in the creation of a hermeneutical situation, exemplified later by D. F. Strauss’s *Das Leben Jesu* (1835), in which historical criticism was seen as necessarily prior to dogma and in which “the influence of a biblical author’s culture over his mind and outlook played a larger role than his conscious intention in the critic’s determination of the meaning of his words.”²⁸ Like many Protestant critics, de Wette believed that he was continuing the work of the Reformation, using historical-critical exegesis to discover the true religious kernel of Christianity while discarding accumulated ecclesiastical and cultural dross. As we shall see, he felt that historical-critical knowledge was epistemically separable from the “true spiritual meaning” (*wahre geistige Sinne*); religious apologetics and hermeneutics could and should accompany seemingly faith-threatening criticism. Yet as we shall also see, de Wette’s contemporaries did not always understand his sophisticated theoretical stances. Orthodox and pietist camps often rejected his views outright.²⁹ Even the sophisticated and avowedly secular had problems. Burckhardt found de Wette’s criticism true and justified, but deemed his avant-garde religious apologetics unintelligible.³⁰ Nietzsche’s critique of historicism in *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* includes an excoriating treatment of “the contemporary *theologus liberalis vulgaris*” that would apply to de Wette: Nietzsche derided those who “have resolved it [Christianity] into pure knowledge about Christianity, [which] . . . ceases to live when it is dissected completely, and lives a painful and moribund life when one begins to practice historical dissection upon it.”³¹

Indeed, the relationship of historical knowledge to theology and biblical interpretation and the influence that a critical-historical theology and biblical exegesis has exerted on modern culture at large remain among the most important and perplexing aspects of modern European intellectual history. Moreover, the authority dispute between historical *Kritik* and religious truth, felt poignantly by intellectuals in the early nineteenth century, importantly foreshadowed the question of history (or historicity) as it arose in

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the course of what Martin Heidegger famously interpreted as the dissolution of Europe's metaphysical tradition. The early nineteenth-century crisis of transcendent Christian orthodoxy, which many (e.g., Ranke, Hegel) softened by attributing historical immanence with a religious character,³² established the conditions for a later, more pervasive crisis of historical thinking – a crisis that entailed the near wholesale disavowal of history's theo/teleological potential. This later period of crisis (roughly 1880s–1920s) in turn created an inclination toward crisis thinking that has permeated modern and postmodern thought ever since.³³ “Once the historical method is applied to Biblical science and church history,” wrote Troeltsch, “it is a leaven that alters everything.”³⁴ Such a situation, Troeltsch claimed, threatened Western civilization with the specter of complete cultural relativism. Although one may have philosophical reservations about Troeltsch's conclusion, his words remain relevant. In present-day humanistic discourse, religious truth-claims, as well as truth-claims in general, notes Alister McGrath, remain “condemned to history.”³⁵ Yet the suggestion that all truth-claims are historically conditioned must itself be treated as a historically conditioned insight, reflecting a specific cultural framework, outside of which (either as in the past or in some unknown future time) it may altogether cease to be valid.

My principal aim in this study is to shed light on the relationship between theology and history in the nineteenth century, reconstructing in particular the impact of theological reflection on secular attitudes toward history. But this is not my sole aim. There are a number of subsidiary themes that function alongside and supplement the main line of the account.

In chapter one, I situate de Wette's early theology and biblical criticism in the broader cultural contexts of the late German Enlightenment, early Romanticism, and nineteenth-century historicism. I show that despite de Wette's near anonymity today, he was in fact a major player on the early nineteenth-century German theological scene. Moreover, I make clear that the epistemological basis of de Wette's biblical exegesis was shaped by then current trends in German philosophy; I call attention to the influences of Herder, Kant, and Schelling on him, and I devote particular attention to de Wette's important friendship with the Kantian-influenced philosopher Jakob Friedrich Fries (1773–1843). What made de Wette's exegesis innovative and influential was his unique blending of *Aufklärung* historical-critical traditions in biblical scholarship, Kantian epistemological sensibilities, and the aestheticizing tendencies of early nineteenth-century philosophy – especially the philosophies of Schelling and Fries. De Wette's exegetical/philosophical abilities are best seen in his application of the category of myth to Old Testament interpretation.

In chapter two, I discuss de Wette's theology during his time at the University of Berlin (1810–1819) and the political events that led to his

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dismissal in 1819. Because of similarities in their theological positions, scholars often assume that de Wette was a disciple of Schleiermacher, who invited de Wette to join him on Berlin's first theological faculty. I demonstrate, however, that de Wette worked out his theological program – expressed best in his 1815 opus, *Über Religion und Theologie* – in conscious opposition to what he called Schleiermacher's "lax mysticism."

Moreover, I discuss the vitriolic debates at the University of Berlin over the nomination to fill J. G. Fichte's chair in philosophy, vacated on Fichte's death in 1814. De Wette sought to bring his friend and fellow Kantian, Fries, to Berlin. De Wette's efforts were opposed by his colleagues and especially by Schleiermacher, who feared the possible Kantian alliance of Fries and de Wette. Ultimately, the opening was filled by Hegel; and Hegel and Schleiermacher became the pacesetters for subsequent theological and philosophical directions. Yet what if the Kantians, de Wette and Fries, had achieved institutional dominance during this crucial period in the making of modern German thought? Might not the late nineteenth-century "back to Kant" movement have received an important foothold much earlier?³⁶ Examining this interesting scenario calls attention to institutional and circumstantial contingencies often overlooked in "high" intellectual history.

I conclude chapter two by recounting the so-called "persecution of demagogues" (*Demagogenverfolgung*) that resulted in de Wette's dismissal from Berlin in 1819. I emphasize the important and highly politicized role that religious issues played in German public life during the period. De Wette's dismissal, which had the effect of tarnishing his reputation, helps account for the subsequent eclipse of his legacy; it also suggests why de Wette accepted a position in 1822 at humble Basel, regarded at the time as one of Europe's backwater universities.

In chapter three, I turn to the weightiest dilemma of nineteenth-century Christendom: determining the nature of Christ's identity and of New Testament authority in light of the emergence of historical-critical biblical exegesis. The issue was one of the most explosive and divisive of the entire era; it began with Lessing's publication of Reimarus's *Wölfenbüttel Fragmente* (1774–1778) and culminated with Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* in 1835. De Wette's lifetime corresponded almost precisely with the playing out of this epoch-making theological issue. Significantly, it was de Wette's non-orthodox *Christusbild*, above all other issues, that precipitated Burckhardt's religious crisis in 1838.

I argue in chapter three that de Wette influenced Strauss much more than previous scholarship has acknowledged. De Wette was in fact the leading theorist of the "mythic principle" in biblical interpretation before Strauss. To a large degree, Strauss only synthesized and applied to the Gospel stories approaches that de Wette and earlier scholars had developed in theory and