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0521650224 - 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

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Religion and the Rise of Historicism

W. M. L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt,
and the Theological Origins of
Nineteenth-Century Historical
Consciousness

This book offers an interpretation of the rise of secular historical thought in nineteenth-century Europe. Instead of characterizing “historicism” and “secularization” as fundamental breaks with Europe’s religious heritage, they are presented as complex cultural permutations with much continuity; for inherited theological patterns of interpreting experience determined to a large degree the conditions, possibilities, and limitations of the forms of historical imagination realizable by nineteenth-century secular intellectuals.

This point is made by examining the thought of the German theologian W. M. L. de Wette (1780–1849) and that of the Swiss-German historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818–97). A theological radical, de Wette disputed orthodox doctrine and practiced historical biblical criticism. The son of a Protestant minister, Burckhardt aspired to become a clergyman and studied theology – until he encountered de Wette at the University of Basel. His studies under de Wette provoked a religious crisis that compelled him to forsake theology for a career in history.

Burckhardt’s encounter with de Wette and his decision for history over theology are interpreted as revealing moments in nineteenth-century intellectual history. By examining the encounter, its larger historical context, and the thought of both men, the book demonstrates the centrality of theological concerns and forms of knowledge in the emergence of modern, secular historical consciousness.

* * *

Thomas Albert Howard graduated summa cum laude/Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Alabama in 1990. He completed his MA (1992) and PhD (1996) in European intellectual history at the University of Virginia. The recipient of a Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst fellowship, Howard conducted research at Freiburg University (and at nearby Basel) in 1994–95. At Valparaiso University (Valparaiso, IN) he held a fellowship in the Lilly Fellows Program in the Humanities and the Arts in 1997–99. Presently Howard is Assistant Professor of History at Gordon College (Wenham, MA). Howard has delivered papers in both Europe and the United States, and has published articles and book reviews in such journals as *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, *Christian Scholar’s Review*, *German Studies Review*, *Storia della Storiografia*, *The National Interest*, and *The Journal of Religious History*.

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*In the last century men asked of a belief or a story, is it true?
We now ask, how did men come to take it for true?*

– Lord John Morley, 1874