

Christianity in History, Then and Now

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The 1939 meeting of the Pacific Coast Theological Discussion Group met with topic, “What is essential in the Christian Religion?”¹ How did this question arise? It goes back to Harnack (and Troeltsch), and before them Feuerbach; indeed to Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher was the beginning of something new. Theology since about 1800 has been preoccupied with reassessing the history of doctrine, asking what matters, what does not. Trueblood’s 1939 paper is exemplary of that ongoing reassessment — one hardly finished today.

Several questions: What was Trueblood’s thesis, and how did his problem arise? What has become of his thesis since he wrote? Where does his problem fit, among other questions that arise in the re-understanding of Christianity today?

1 Trueblood’s Argument

Trueblood’s paper at the 1939 meeting, “Christianity as Idea and Event,” saw that Christianity is essentially about history, but that is not how it has always been viewed. It has often been seen as a way of life that is independent of history, just as the sciences (so he thought) present a view of nature that is independent of history.² Science is not *about* history, but science (so Kuhn) *has* a history, and its theories are history-laden. By the early twentieth century, it was clear that biblical religion both has a history and is about history. That was the result of a century or so of biblical scholarship. The concept of biblical religion had evolved from something with limited but necessary origins in history to being essentially and radically historical.³ On Hegelian grounds, Trueblood expected this line of development to come to some kind of synthesis. I would bypass Hegel and simply say that history alone, in and of itself, is not sufficient. It needs interpretation. I don’t think this comes from a Hegelian dynamic of ideas, it is simply in the nature of the pertinent concepts. That, in brief, was Trueblood’s thesis. Call it simply “historicality,” when a one-word moniker is needed.

¹D. Elton Trueblood, “What is essential in the Christian Religion?” Pacific Coast Theological Discussion Group, 1939, archived in the GTU library with the papers of the successor organization, the Pacific Coast Theological Society.

²This was twenty years before Thomas Kuhn. Extending historicality from the humanities to the sciences is one way in which Trueblood’s insight has been vindicated and expanded. The idea was in the air: see the last pages of R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford University Press, 1939).

³By contrast, Buddhism has a history, but its history, though interesting, is incidental to its message.

2 Context for the problem of historicity

How did this issue arise? There were earlier tremors, but it certainly intensified in the nineteenth century for Christian theology. We can back up a little to see how questioning about essentials and an accompanying turn to history arose. There is a helpful perspective in what might seem an unlikely place, Jacob Neusner's reflections on the birth of Reform Judaism.⁴ The Judaism from the fourth century to the eighteenth was shaped in the fourth century by the establishment of Christianity under Constantine. In parallel, of course, Christianity itself was reshaped by that establishment. At the end of the eighteenth century, the French and American revolutions demonstrated that neither religion nor the state needed the other. This was a conceptual disestablishment, even if the Church was not everywhere disestablished in law. The state could function quite well without the blessing of the Church, and the Church (in America, demonstrably) did not need the support of the State. The Synagogue would have to get along without such blessing as the state-supported order provided.⁵ The task assigned to theology by those late eighteenth-century events was to re-understand biblical religion's reason for being. Reform Judaism was followed by a conservative reaction in "Orthodox" Judaism, *claiming* to be the older Judaism continuing unchanged.⁶ Conservative Judaism mediating between them came last. But the same thing happened for Christian theology: Moses Mendelssohn was paralleled a little later by Friedrich Schleiermacher, Reform Judaism by Liberal Theology, Orthodox Judaism by various fundamentalisms, and Conservative Judaism by various mediating theologies (the Neoorthodox, while they lasted). Catholic development followed the same pattern, often delayed by many decades. The nineteenth century was the beginning of modern historiography, and history itself was re-understood. Together, these two developments in theology prepared the problematic that Trueblood recognized and spelled out.

In effect, the changes begun with the nineteenth century were, like those of the fourth century, made in response to external changes: establishment under Constantine, and disestablishment ("separation of Church and State") in France and America.⁷

⁴Jacob Neusner, *The Death and Birth of Judaism; the Impact of Christianity, Secularism, and the Holocaust on Jewish Faith*, New York: Basic Books, 1987. Reform Judaism was ahead of events; coming disestablishment was clear in the middle of the eighteenth century, and indisputable after the French and American revolutions.

⁵European governments tolerated rather than supported rabbinic Judaism. Nevertheless, even though deprecated, Judaism of the Dual Torah (as Neusner calls it) had a place within the religious worldview of Europe until the end of the eighteenth century.

⁶Neusner does not accept that claim, and says there were significant differences between the Judaism of the Dual Torah and Orthodox Judaism of the nineteenth century, not least because they were responding to different challenges from the culture.

⁷This is an instance of a pattern: theology develops to solve problems, or in response to challenges from culture. The most obvious example is the birth of Christianity and rabbinic Judaism in response to the Disasters of the first century. Even the canonization of the Pentateuch fits: Fantalkin Alexander and Oren Tal, "The Canonization of the Pentateuch: When and Why?" *ZAW* 124 (2012) 1–18 and 201–212. Readers can multiply examples easily.

3 Historicality before and after Trueblood

Radicalized consciousness of history came at the beginning of the nineteenth century with biblical scholars, but attention did not begin to focus on history and historicity for their own sake until the end of that century, with Dilthey, Troeltsch, and Heidegger. That story is well known.

Trueblood's vision has been amply vindicated, though it has developed in ways he did not foresee in that 1939 paper. He spoke for a movement in theology that was well under way in 1939, and which has developed considerably since then. H. Richard Niebuhr (present at one of the 1940 PCTS meetings) repeated the thesis about history and interpretation a year later in *The Meaning of Revelation*.⁸ In the years before and after, Old Testament theologians deepened the importance of history for Israelite religion.

Why did the neoorthodox happen when they did? They, too, were responding to external challenges: the harvest of nineteenth-century biblical scholarship, and two world wars and the National Socialist disaster. More than Liberal theology was needed in a time of crises, though we seem to have slipped back into liberal theology today. Catholic scholars in the twentieth century had to fight to be allowed to think historically, but for them, too, historicity was the major issue from 1900 to Vatican II.⁹

Note a few of the landmark titles in those years and since¹⁰:

Martin Noth, *The History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (1948) consolidated the documentary hypothesis, which was taught in seminaries by late 1930s.

Gerhard Von Rad, "The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch" (1938); *Old Testament Theology* (1957) came later, and developed the historicity of biblical religion more.

In 1960 Hans-Georg Gadamer published *Wahrheit und Methode* (trans. 1975), and Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) was translated into English.

Mircea Eliade saw the differences between religion(s) of history and religions of nature in *Cosmos and History* (French, 1949, ET 1959). Paul Ricoeur saw some of this in *The Symbolism of Evil*, but missed the importance of the Exodus; when Merold Westphal constructed a typology of religions (*God, Guilt, and Death*, 1984), he followed Eliade and Ricoeur, with amendments from Old Testament scholarship on the importance of the Exodus. Westphal called biblical religion "historical-covenantal" religion. I have sometimes changed his term to "world-affirming historical religion," in contrast to world-affirming nature religion and world-denying religion (Westphal's "mimetic" and "exilic" religions).

There has been more development since Trueblood, and it grows out of the issue that he named, whether history by itself, or only with some degree of active interpretation, can give meaning to life. H. Richard Niebuhr dealt with it under the difference

⁸In considerable detail, he explains how history as revelation is not just a matter of history by itself (what would such be?), but is also a matter of interpretation. His instincts were probably Neokantian rather than Hegelian, but showing that would take a lot of work.

⁹Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) reviews Chenu, Congar, Schillebeeckx, de Lubac among others.

¹⁰Titles only, because the members of the PCTS are familiar with the history, and many have taught it. The list is exemplary, not comprehensive.

between internal and external history, and his instincts were neo-Kantian, though that is seldom explored. I pass over the neo-Kantians as I pass over Hegel. The issue has arisen for other people more recently and in other ways. Georg Iggers, in *The German Conception of History*, covers much the same ground that Gadamer did in *Truth and Method*.¹¹ But that literature could make it seem as if history by itself interprets our lives now, without actually saying as much. Recent thinking knows better, and the problem of responsible interpretation of history remains open. Iggers himself confronted the issue.¹² It appears in the work of another professional historian, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, in a short book, *Zakhor*.¹³ Yerushalmi could be read as one professionally engaged in Niebuhr's "external" history, reflecting in that book on "internal" history. They are noticeably different. There may be more to it than what Yerushalmi tells, but his book would be a good start.

As Iggers noted in his book on the historiography of the twentieth century, the problem of truth and responsibility has become conspicuous. Rather than try to survey the literature (which I invite PCTS participants to do), let me just cite Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*.¹⁴ He approached the problem not from the neuralgias of historicism, relativism, and nihilism but just starting with the phenomenon itself: narrative. Narrative has attracted interest for its own sake in the second half of the twentieth century in a way that would have been unthinkable in the nineteenth. Narrative would make a good PCTS meeting topic, but it would also go far beyond the legacy of the 1939 meeting. It would follow in the footsteps of a sibling organization, the Center for Hermeneutical Studies.

4 Historicality among other problems

If Trueblood focused attention on the problem of his day, the historicality of biblical religion, where does historicality fit today? And among what other problems? And what is its relation to those other problems? I would choose four, including historicality, as it is still an incompletely solved problem today: History, pain (or evil), transcendence, and anthropology. We began with historicality, and will end with it, since it was Trueblood's chosen problem.

Pain poses a question: Are we saved *from* the pains of life, or *in* the pains of life? We give thanks to God (and rightly so) when we escape or avoid pains; but what about when we cannot? We all die, after all, and most experience more pains than just mortality. My contention is that biblical religion puts a positive construction on all of life, in full view of its pains, but people do not agree about *how* to do that. I learned this from Edward Hobbs. The pains come as Exposure, Limitation, and Need. They

¹¹Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The national tradition of historical thought from Herder to the present*. Middletown CT, Wesleyan University Press, 1968, 1983. I am indebted to Peter Degen for notice of Iggers' work.

¹²Georg Iggers, *Historiography In The Twentieth Century; From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*. Wesleyan University Press, 1997.

¹³Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. Seattle : University of Washington Press, 1982, 1996.

¹⁴Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*. Three volumes. French originals, 1983–1985. Translation, University of Chicago Press, 1984–1988.

each bring blessing, and are not evil.¹⁵ I would further contend that it is this positive construction on the pains of life that enables world-affirming historical religion to deal with the manifold pains of living in history. Pain and history have a special relationship in theology. Every seminarian in beginning Bible courses learns, whether or not it is spelled out in so many words (usually it is not), that the principle challenges to modern theology are *not* from science but from critical history, historical and cultural relativity, and religious pluralism. (For science, see below, on Chalcedonian vs. monophysite thinking.) The biblical scholars, to their credit, engaged the challenges candidly and found blessing in them, not enemies. History, relativity, and pluralism are species, respectively, of Exposure, Limitation, and Need.¹⁶

Let me exceed my authority (or my assignment) in this paper, and say a little about anthropology and transcendence. First, anthropology. Most of this is well-known to members of the Society, and details are not necessary. It is worth remark simply in the claim that it is an issue beyond what Elton Trueblood considered, and one very much alive today. In philosophical anthropology, the legacy of Descartes continues with us, as in computational models for mind; the “mind/body problem,” and many instinctive attempts to derive an anthropology from the natural sciences without facing the challenges of hermeneutics. I think Descartes is at root naturalistic, which is why his philosophy was so helpful for the sciences and so unhelpful for the humanities. Many would protect that naturalistic core and describe life starting in naturalistic terms. They think they can make sense of what lies beyond the natural sciences without reading Heidegger or Gadamer. I am not sanguine about such projects, but to comment would exceed my assignment even more. It would make a good focus of discussion for some other time. Against Descartes one could cite Heidegger and others, and existential phenomenology more generally.

Practically and in ethics, anthropology means sex — i. e., life after contraceptives. About sex we are mixed company and I shall say nothing. The changes since the 1960s have redefined what it means to be a sexual being, and so have rewritten theological anthropology in a most profound way. This is not well understood, and it is not my topic. But it cuts across both Catholic and Protestant theologies and institutions, and it has the potential to tear the GTU apart.

Transcendence is more interesting (to me at least). There are reasons for digressing into the problem of transcendence. I would contend (if I may be contentious) that transcendence has to be faced if the problem of pain is to be met, and the problem of pain has to be dealt with if the problems of history are to be lived with.¹⁷ Otherwise, history hurts too much.

¹⁵This has appeared in many places: Edward C. Hobbs, “An Alternate Model from a Theological Perspective,” in Herbert A. Otto, *The Family in Search of a Future* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), pp. 32–33. Parts of that paper were quoted in Andrew Porter and Edward Hobbs, “The Trinity and the Indo-European Tripartite Worldview,” *Budhi* (Manila) Vol. 3, nos. 2 and 3 (1999) 1–28; available online at <http://www.jedp.com/trinity.html>. The thesis is repeated in *Elementary Monotheism* (<http://www.jedp.com/eln.pdf> and [alhr.pdf](http://www.jedp.com/alhr.pdf), chapter 3), *Unwelcome Good News* (chapter 2), and *The Waters of Naturalism* (<http://www.jedp.com/waters.pdf>, sections 7.1, 7.2, 8.2, 9.1).

¹⁶Andrew Porter, “History, Relativity, and Pluralism,” *Budhi* (Manilla) VI nos. 2 and 3 (2002) 223–234 Online at <http://www.jedp.com/hrp.pdf>.

¹⁷It also appears that transcendence today is exhausted and unable to make much progress.

There is a principle in the Definition of Chalcedon that is there applied only to the doctrine of the Person of Christ, but which could be applied far beyond just the hypostatic union. If we may speak not of two *φύσεις* in one *ὑπόστασις* or one *πρόσωπον* but of two realities in one phenomenon, the principle in the Definition may be generalized. The words “reality” and “phenomenon” are vague words of convenience, to be given meaning in the course of use. Specifically, every phenomenon in the world embodies both a transcendent reality and an intramundane reality. Let me then emend the words of the Definition, so that the presence of God in any phenomenon in the world

is to be recognized in two realities
without mixture,
without transformation,
without division,
without separation;
the difference of the realities
being in no way abrogated through the unification;
the properties of each reality
remaining, rather, preserved.¹⁸

Robert Sokolowski explains why the surrounding fourth and fifth-century still-pagan culture found the biblical God incomprehensible, unthinkable: For them, the gods were part of the world, and one thing in the world could not be another thing¹⁹ without so to speak “cutting a hole” in one thing to make room for the other (his p. 36). Transcendence doesn’t work that way.

Chalcedonian theology, of course, stands in contrast to monophysite thinking. Yet the craving for monophysite explanations endures, for if the reality in question is worldly, there is some possibility of getting control over it, and in any case, it can be understood. Transcendence is precisely what we cannot get control over or understand. Monophysite conceptions of acts of God were what gave rise to the so-called “conflict between science and religion”: Divine action was conceived as a species of efficient causation, one that interferes with or displaces ordinary natural causation. But if transcendence doesn’t work that way, how *does* it work? That question is not easy.

To begin with some of the intramundane realities, in the history of religions, all human religions are human social constructions. We trust that transcendence (or better, here, ultimate reality, u-r for short) enters into our human socially constructed realities (SCRs).²⁰ In the spirit of Chalcedon, it does so on both its terms and ours, truncating neither, respecting both. Nevertheless, its interpretation of our SCR (our covenants, to anticipate a biblical term) may not entirely be what we expect. See Psalm 89, among others. You can put promises on God’s lips, but be very careful. You may be surprised.

Several things follow, if this line of inquiry is explored further.

¹⁸Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), p. 35, quoting the Definition of Chalcedon, altered by Porter.

¹⁹C. S. Lewis, in *The Screwtape Letters*, Letter 18, lampoons the idea that “one thing is not another thing,” and he assumes that his readers will know which philosophers he is lampooning. Alas, I don’t. Any help would be gratefully appreciated.

²⁰Andrew Porter, *Unwelcome Good News* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004), section 6.1, “Children’s Games.”

In the first place, people do not agree about whether transcendence is understandable. As D. Z. Phillips has it,

[W]hether one is reacting to the vicissitudes of human life religiously or non-religiously, one is reacting to something that is beyond human understanding.

The great divide in contemporary philosophy of religion is between those who accept and those who reject this conclusion. It has certainly been rejected by religious and secular apologists alike. When a sense of the limits of human existence has led to bewilderment and to the natural cry, ‘Why is this happening to me?’, ‘Why are things like this?’, it is essential to note that these questions are asked, not for want of explanations, but *after* explanations have provided all they can offer. The questions seem to seek for something that explanations cannot give. This is what theodicies and secular attempts at explanation fail to realize.²¹

In my view, transcendence is about unanswerable questions: not about answering them (that would be the Principle of Sufficient Reason), but about dealing with them. This position is outside the mainstream, as can easily be observed merely by inspecting anything in analytic philosophy of religion.

In the second place, if human religion is a socially constructed reality, much of it, if viewed candidly, is an attempt to cover up its human origins.²² This is bad faith.

In the third place, the human heart craves an anthropomorphic deity and the orthodox will seek monophysite theology for its anthropomorphism whenever they can get away with it.

In the fourth place, acts of God (like acts of humans) arise in narrative, not in will or intent as efficient cause of motions.²³ This represents a conception of action, both human and divine, that is quite different from the inherited notion that an act is a kind of caused motion, motion caused by will or intention. That Aristotelian concept already presupposes too many uncriticized narrative decisions, and those editing decisions are by no means obvious or unproblematic. This approach also radicalizes the human responsibility for human religion, because it is humans who construct the narratives. We have ways of deciding that one narrative of an act of God is better than another, but the problem has not gotten much recognition for its own sake. *Living in Spin* was an inquiry into the structure of human action, and so into what it means to be a historical being, which would seem to be required if one is to understand historical religion. The contentions in this paper (here and in the next section) are taken up at more length in an unpublished manuscript on basic concepts in biblical religion.

²¹D. Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), pp. 133–134. Some italics in the original removed.

²²Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

²³Andrew Porter, *Living in Spin: Narrative as a Distributed Ontology of Human Action* (Bloomington: Authorhouse, 2011), chapter 5. Available online at <http://www.jedp.com/spin> and [doha.pdf](http://www.doha.pdf). Will and intention are themselves actions that arise in narratives, narratives shared and criticized by a community of competents, not just the “actor.”

5 Problems growing from historicity

We have come a long way around Trueblood's problem of the historicity of biblical religion, and it is time to return to it, and survey some of the features of historical religion that have emerged in the seventy-five years since he took stock of the situation in 1939. They are here noted with little or no explanation, mere theses hoping to provoke discussion.

(1) Religion is not about "religion" but about basic life orientation. Beneath this lies the problem of the narrative coherence of a human life. What does it take?

(2) The problem of pain at its most acute: *Radical Monotheism*, in the supplementary essay "Faith in Gods and in God," p. 122, that "the causes for which we live all die." Human socially constructed realities are not ultimate, even if they host the immanent presence of ultimate reality — as we trust they do.

we entertain visitors
from u-r?

(3) Exposure, Limitation, and Need we have seen above, in literature there cited.

(4) History, relativity, and pluralism we have also seen above.

(5) World-affirming historical religion, or historical religion, as it appears in Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death*, chapter 11.²⁴

(6) Historical religion has features different from nature religions: see "Seven Lessons of the Exodus," in *The Waters of Naturalism*.²⁵

(7) The backbone that holds the Bible together is the Exodus. The Exodus shapes the Common Documents (see von Rad, "The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch"). The Exodus is the model (*not* merely the prolog) for the Gospels and by extension for the New Testament as a whole.²⁶

(8) A typology of religions follows, as in Westphal, chapters 9–11. It could be expanded to distinguish the meditative traditions from exilic religion, and to add informality (aka secularism) and the modern analogs of the hellenistic mystery religions, among others.

(9) People in a historical-covenantal religion have a responsible liberty of interpretation in the conduct of a covenant. This appears in many places in the New Testament, but outside of Galatians it is rarely more than a phrase or two. The classic elaboration of it occurs in the Talmud, Bavli Baba Metzia 59b, the story of the Oven of Achnai.²⁷

(10) Revelation is the history that makes sense of the rest of history.²⁸ In intramundane terms, that is a responsible human choice (hence Trueblood's observation that it takes active interpretation to understand history), and in transcendent terms, it is something that challenges us whether we want it to or not.

(11) The Trinity needs to be re-understood; Edward Hobbs and I made a start in the Trinity paper in *Budhi* cited above, but that paper contained many conjectures, and

²⁴Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

²⁵Andrew Porter, *By the Waters of Naturalism* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), section 6.4. Online at <http://www.jedp.com/waters.pdf>.

²⁶See Exodus typology in the Gospels, or my own *In the Beginning, Exodus: The Bible then and Now* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2008), section 4.7. See also Meredith G. Kline, "The Old Testament Origins of the Gospel Genre," *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (1975) 1–27.

²⁷Soncino translation (London: Soncino Press, 1935), Seder Nezikin 1, p. 58b ff. In the New Testament, rarely is not never. One could argue that the entire epistle to the Galatians is about responsible liberty of interpretation. What has been harder to hear is that that same liberty applies equally to rabbinic Judaism.

²⁸H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (1940) 1st ed., p. 98; 2nd ed., p. 63; 3rd ed., p. 50.

neither of us are in a position to test them.

(12) A historical religion needs a kind of reason appropriate to living in history: that is the fruit of Thomas Kuhn's work, in conversation with many others. Alasdair MacIntyre called it "tradition-bound rationality." This is in opposition to Platonist ahistorical absoluteness. When Nietzsche called Christianity "Platonism for the masses," I agree with Nietzsche and disagree with the majority in the tradition. But Christianity need not be Platonist; the Bible is not, though the New Testament is more vulnerable to Platonist eisegesis than the Common Documents are.

(13) Human existence is always already relational. In anthropology, the mistake on page 12 of *Sein und Zeit* has to be corrected (it's clearer in English): Dasein is not just the sort of being that has a stake in its own being, it has stakes in other Daseins' being, as they do in its own.²⁹ Or to put it in Kierkegaardian terms from *Sickness Unto Death*, a self is a relationship that relates itself to itself, but it is constituted as such not just by a transcendent Other, but proximately and intramundanelly by many human others also.

(14) If I may be partisan, a Chalcedonian method in theology (not just Christology): The intramundane and the transcendent are both fully present in phenomena in the world, neither is truncated or altered to make room for the other. This rules out violations of laws of nature. Transcendence is to be thought of in some other way. Clearly, I am at odds with most of the tradition. Leaving aside Christology, monophysite theology is far more common than Chalcedonian metaphysics of acts of God, or of divine presence in the world.

(15) Transcendence as mystery, as what cannot be understood. See D. Z. Phillips above.

²⁹See *Living in Spin*, sections 3.4.1 and 3.4.2.