

## Religion and the Crisis of Historicism: Protestant and Catholic Perspectives

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### Abstract

This paper raises the question to what extent the crisis of historicism is to be seen as a religious problem. There is, of course, no need to argue that religion in a broad sense of the word – ultimate concerns and fundamental values – played major roles in the debates over historicism. However, virtually no studies have been conducted on how the crisis of historicism can be “mapped” on the religious landscape in a more specific sense. Which theological schools and which church denominations, for example, were most affected by or concerned over the crisis of historicism? I address this question by presenting three case-studies of Protestant and Roman-Catholic thinkers in the Netherlands. These examples show that especially those Christian intellectuals whose theological or philosophical traditions were indebted to historicist premises participated in debates over historicism. In practical terms, this implies that Protestants of various persuasions were more heavily involved than Roman-Catholics. In a final section, the paper suggests some implications of this finding for how the crisis of historicism is best understood.

### Keywords

Historicism, Protestantism, Roman-Catholicism, Karel Hendrik Roessingh (1886–1925), Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977), Joannes Henricus Robbers (1894–1970)

### Introduction

“Modern thought in Germany,” writes historian Thomas Nipperdey, “did not coexist or conflict with theology, but dwelled in the long shadows cast

by the problems it had set.”<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, Thomas A. Howard, in his book *Religion and the Rise of Historicism*, makes a case for the overwhelming influence of “theological presuppositions and religious attitudes” on the tradition of thought known as historicism. Although Jakob Burckhardt, Howard’s prime example, famously experienced his Christian faith to crumble apart during a lecture course in historical criticism, the same Burckhardt, argues Howard, shows how deeply nineteenth-century historicism remained inspired, influenced, and shaped by Christian figures of thought. Burckhardt’s “cultural pessimism,” for example, in which Howard finds traces of an Augustinian theology of original sin, is presented to illustrate “the persistence of theological thinking in Burckhardt’s historical imagination.” If historians of historiography, indebted to some version of the secularization thesis, have often highlighted the discontinuities between “theological conceptions” of history and “secular historical consciousness,” Howard argues that “theology, especially German Protestant theology,” at least partly defined the framework and constraints within which historicists such as Ranke and Burckhardt reflected on their study of the past.<sup>2</sup>

If these examples seek to show historicism’s indebtedness to Christian theology, Howard, perhaps confusingly, also uses the terms “religion” and “theology” in a much broader sense, as denoting “a manner of regarding the world and human existence that privileges questions of faith, religious truth, transcendence, biblical interpretation, and moral behavior.” Thus, following Jörn Rüsen, he calls historicism “the last religion of the educated.” Also, echoing Karl Löwith, he argues that historicism, understood as a “totally anthropologized religion,” took over some functions previously performed by religious institutions.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in these examples, Howard uses “religion” as a broad category encompassing a variety of both Christian and non-Christian beliefs about transcendence, immanence, and ultimate values. The term comes close to the *Geschichtstheologie* (a discourse about what counts as absolute) that Wolfgang Hardtwig

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Nipperdey, *Germany from Napoleon to Bismarck, 1800–1866*, trans. Daniel Nolan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 466.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Albert Howard, *Religion and the Rise of Historicism: W. M. L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt, and the Theological Origins of Nineteenth-Century Historical Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 4, 11, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Howard, *Religion and the Rise of Historicism*, 3, 12, 20.

discerns in nineteenth-century historicism.<sup>4</sup> Apparently, in *Religion and the Rise of Historicism*, “religion” alternately serves as a short-hand for Christian (Lutheran) theology and as a generic term for deeply-held beliefs about what is absolute and meaningful.

With this distinction in mind, I want to raise the question how and in what sense the crisis of historicism associated with Ernst Troeltsch can be interpreted as a religious problem. Obviously, I hardly need to argue that religion in Howard’s broad definition – ultimate concerns and fundamental values – played major roles in the *Historismusdebatte* erupting throughout Europe in the early twentieth century. Recent scholarship, such as produced by Kurt Nowak, Wolfgang Hardtwig, and Friedrich Jaeger, suggests that the crisis of historicism, as defined by Ernst Troeltsch, can to a large degree be identified with a breakdown of nineteenth-century “theologies of history.” Troeltsch’s problem was not a tension between timeless truths and a historicist sensibility to the particularities of the past, but a collapse of the historicist *Geschichtstheologie* in which he had put his faith. For Troeltsch and many of his kindred spirits, the crisis of historicism consisted of a growing implausibility of the historicist notion that history was a process constituted by the organic unfolding of ideas over time. Painful experiences of discontinuity undermined their trust in historical approaches to identity, selfhood, and nationhood. They could no longer believe that the past offered meaningful guidance for the future. Accordingly, if we use Howard’s broad definition of religion, there can be no doubt that, at least for Troeltsch *cum suis*, the crisis of historicism was a religious problem.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wolfgang Hardtwig, “Geschichtsreligion, Wissenschaft als Arbeit, Objektivität: der Historismus in neuer Sicht” in Hardtwig, *Hochkultur des bürgerlichen Zeitalters* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 52.

<sup>5</sup> Herman Paul, “Who Suffered From the Crisis of Historicism? A Dutch Example”, *History and Theory*, 49 (2010), 169–193; Herman Paul, “A Collapse of Trust: Reconceptualizing the Crisis of Historicism”, *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 2 (2008), 63–82; Hardtwig, “Geschichtsreligion”; Friedrich Jaeger, “Theorietypen der Krise des Historismus” in Wolfgang Bialas and Gérard Raulet (eds.), *Die Historismusdebatte in der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996), 52–70; Kurt Nowak, “Die ‘antihistoristische Revolution’: Symptome und Folgen der Krise historischer Weltorientierung nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg in Deutschland” in Horst Renz and Friedrich Wilhelm Graf (eds.), *Umstrittene Moderne: die Zukunft der Neuzeit im Urteil der Epoche Ernst Troeltschs* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1987), 133–171.

However, if we employ the term “religion” in a more specific, confessional sense, as I shall do in the remainder of this paper, and ask whether, and how, the crisis of historicism was experienced by Jews, Roman-Catholics, and Protestants of various persuasions, not to mention Muslims or Eastern Orthodox Christians, we encounter a different set of questions. Whom of these religious groups participated in or contributed to the debates sparked by Troeltsch’s book, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (1922)? Where on the map of religious denominations can we locate the crisis of historicism? To what extent was this crisis merely a collapse of German *Kulturprotestantismus*, as represented by Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack, and the *Deutsche Protestantenverein* (1863)? Or did Roman-Catholics and conservative Lutherans or Calvinists, each in their own way, experience similar sorts of crisis, too? So far, none of these questions have received any scholarly attention. Apart from David Myers’s stimulating book on German-Jewish critics of historicism,<sup>6</sup> virtually no studies have been conducted on religious (that is to say: theological and denominational) contexts in which the crisis of historicism occurred.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as soon as we begin to contextualize this crisis in the religious realm of Protestantism and Catholicism in Europe, it becomes apparent that many groups of

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<sup>6</sup> David N. Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Those scholars who mention concerns about historicism articulated by Christian theologians in the decades around 1900 mostly restrict themselves either to methodological debates in the academic discipline of Biblical scholarship, to the wide range of protests sparked by David Friedrich Strauss’s *Das Leben Jesu* (1835–36), or to the “anti-historicist revolution” associated with Karl Barth’s second *Römerbrief* (1922). See, e.g., Otto Gerhard Oexle, “Krise des Historismus, Krise der Wirklichkeit: eine Problemgeschichte der Moderne” in Otto Gerhard Oexle (ed.), *Krise des Historismus, Krise der Wirklichkeit: Wissenschaft, Kunst und Literatur 1880–1932* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 49–52; Allan Megill, “Why was There a Crisis of Historicism?”, *History and Theory*, 36 (1997), 416–429; Annette Wittkau, *Historismus: zur Geschichte des Begriffs and des Problems*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), 102–107, 116–120, 164–168; Michael Murrmann-Kahl, *Die entzauberte Heilsgeschichte: der Historismus erobert die Theologie, 1880–1920* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1992); F. W. Graf, “Die antihistoricistische Revolution in der protestantischen Theologie der zwanziger Jahre” in Jan Rohls and Gunther Wenz (eds.), *Vernunft des Glaubens: wissenschaftliche Theologie und kirchliche Lehre: Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), 377–405.

Christian believers struggled with issues of history and historicity, but that only some of these groups suffered from a crisis of historicism.

In the following pages, I substantiate this claim by briefly presenting three Dutch Christian thinkers: one theologian and two philosophers. Of course, the interesting fact that at least two of them experienced something very similar to Troeltsch's crisis of historicism may be treated as evidence for a point I have tried to make elsewhere: that the crisis was not geographically limited to Germany.<sup>8</sup> In this paper, however, my question is not about geography, but about religious contexts in which Troeltschean crises took place. I argue that liberal and neo-Calvinist Protestants encountered something very similar to Troeltsch's *Krise des Historismus*, but that for neo-Thomist Catholics, there was hardly anything at stake in this crisis. Given that these neo-Thomists, nonetheless, extensively reflected on issues of history, historicity, and historical change, I suggest that the term "crisis of historicism" is of valuable but limited use. It covers only some of the early and mid-twentieth-century debates on how "historical relativism" could be avoided.

### **Karel Hendrik Roessingh**

Our first encounter is with Karel Hendrik Roessingh, a young and promising theology professor at Leiden University. In the early 1920s, Leiden had already a long-standing reputation, among friends and foes alike, for advocating "liberal" theology.<sup>9</sup> Since the mid-nineteenth century, almost all Dutch "liberals" had taught or studied at Leiden. Inspired by both German idealism and, to a lesser extent, the empiricism of the natural sciences, these liberals had earnestly tried to adapt their Protestant religion to the demands of a modern age. Not unlike Ritschl and Harnack, they had attempted to show how Christianity could be freed from anachronistic ideas and traditions and arrive at more enlightened positions if its "basic principles" were further developed in the light of modern scholarly knowledge. Their optimistic views on the co-evolution of religion and

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<sup>8</sup>) Paul, "Who Suffered From the Crisis of Historicism?"

<sup>9</sup>) I use the word "liberal" as perhaps the best equivalent of the Dutch "modern." In English-language historiography, it has become customary to classify the likes of Troeltsch as liberals. See, e.g., Mark D. Chapman, *Ernst Troeltsch and Liberal Theology: Religion and Cultural Synthesis in Wilhelmine Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

scholarship allowed for critical historical readings of the Bible and encouraged them to “emplot” the history of Christianity as a story of growing knowledge and piety. Allowing for some differences, this liberal theology is best seen as a Dutch version of German *Kulturprotestantismus*.<sup>10</sup> Although Dutch liberals, just like more traditional Reformed Protestants in the Netherlands, had organized themselves in theological societies such as the Conference of Modern Theologians (*Vergadering van Moderne Theologen*, 1865) and parachurch organizations such as the League of Dutch Protestants (*Nederlandsche Protestantenbond*, 1870), faculty of Leiden University continued to contribute heavily to the liberal agenda as well as to the movement’s self-evaluation in times of crisis.

Around 1920, the word “crisis” was, indeed, on many lips. Already in 1917, at the fourth centenary of Luther’s Reformation, commemorated under the shadow of the First World War and in an era witnessing a growing popularity of mysticism and spirituality, Dutch liberals had realized that their optimistic, scientific worldview had become less than attractive.<sup>11</sup> How could one associate, let alone equate, Christian religion with “progress,” that catchword of the nineteenth century, when empirical evidence of progress in society seemed increasingly absent? How could one defend a rational critique of Bible and tradition in a time yearning for religious experience? When Roessingh raised these questions, he did not hide his sympathies for Jan Hendrik Scholten and Abraham Kuenen, the great nineteenth-century liberals. They had rightly rebelled against fossilized orthodoxy and justly attempted to reformulate Protestant theology in a scholarly up-to-date vocabulary. But Roessingh – himself a less than optimistic person, temperamentally more inclined to maintain words like “sin” and “transgression” in his theological dictionary than many of his

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<sup>10</sup> Mirjam Buitenwerf-Van der Molen, *God van vooruitgang: de popularisering van het modern-theologische gedachtegoed in Nederland (1857–1880)* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2007). For German “Culture Protestantism,” see Gangolf Hübinger, *Kulturprotestantismus und Politik: zum Verhältnis von Liberalismus und Protestantismus im wilhelminischen Deutschland* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1994) and the essays collected in Hans Martin Müller (ed.), *Kulturprotestantismus: Beiträge zu einer Gestalt des modernen Christentums* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Pieter Jan Dijkman, “‘Of wij niet moeten komen tot een ziel’: vrijzinnige protestanten en de Reformatie-herdenking van 1917” in Herman Paul, Bart Wallet, and George Harinck (eds.), *De Reformatie-herdenking van 1917: historische beeldvorming en religieuze identiteitspolitiek in Nederland* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2004), 121–139.

liberal colleagues<sup>12</sup> – felt no longer able to understand Christian faith from within a progressive developmental narrative. “There is an easy, smooth optimism that does not hear the discrepancies, the deeper dissonances in reality,” he wrote in 1923. “This optimism was understandable in a previous period of history; after what our generation has lived through, it is hardly defensible anymore.”<sup>13</sup>

Roessingh’s worries were focused, in particular, on the historicist element of the liberal worldview. In two lectures, delivered in 1919 and 1920, he explained why he could no longer share the confidence with which Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of liberal theology, had spoken about the meaning and purpose of history. Sure, Schleiermacher’s grand historical narrative, about the progressive identification of reason and nature, had its attractiveness:

[W]e human beings have a deep-felt need to insert all history in an ethical scheme; we want to escape the relative and are supported by the formal consolation that there is a meaning in the restlessness of history! But what meaning? I assume, we think too historically to be able ever again to believe we can grasp the meaning of world history in a once-and-for-all closed system.<sup>14</sup>

What, then, does it mean to think “too historically”? For Roessingh, that problem was identical to what Troeltsch called the crisis of historicism. Whereas historicism in its early incarnations had been idealistic enough to believe in the progressive realization of “ideas” through history, an increased historical awareness brought the realization that such ideas could not be objectively identified, and that any attempt to trace a self-realizing idea in the course of history was itself historically conditioned. Accordingly, the liberal attempt to ground Protestant religion, the church, or God’s revelation in history was, if not entirely a product of history, at least “not free of a certain subjectivity.”<sup>15</sup> In turn, this implied that Roess-

<sup>12</sup> E. J. Kuiper, “Karel Hendrik Roessingh (1886–1925): een schets” in H. J. Adriaanse (ed.), *Karel Hendrik Roessingh: theoloog op het breekpunt van de tijd* (Utrecht: De Ploeg, 1987), 10–11; J. P. Heering, “Met een oprecht verlangen naar God: over het godsdienstig element in het leven en het werk van K. H. Roessingh”, *ibidem*, 34.

<sup>13</sup> K. H. Roessingh, “Christendom en wereld” in *Verzamelde werken van dr. K. H. Roessingh*, ed. G. J. Heering, vol. III (Arnhem: Van Loghum Slaterus, 1927), 192.

<sup>14</sup> K. H. Roessingh, “Het probleem der geschiedenis” in *Verzamelde werken van dr. K. H. Roessingh*, ed. G. J. Heering, vol. II (Arnhem: Van Loghum Slaterus, 1926), 295.

<sup>15</sup> Roessingh, “Probleem der geschiedenis”, 301.

ingh no longer felt able to speak about the “absoluteness of Christianity” in the way Troeltsch had employed this formula in 1901. Troeltsch had conceived the superiority of Christianity over other religions, not as a religious *a priori*, but as the outcome of a historical comparison. In the course of its evolution, Christianity had developed into a “higher” religion than Judaism or Buddhism.<sup>16</sup> However, if such progressive narratives turned out to be themselves historically conditioned, the project of defending Christian religion with historical means – what Troeltsch called “modern evolutionary apologetics”<sup>17</sup> – was doomed to failure. “The nineteenth century appears too stark”, wrote a disillusioned Roessingh; “history has overpowered me.”<sup>18</sup>

What then? How to justify one’s Christian faith if history is no longer available as a ground of justification? As H. J. Adriaanse has insightfully argued, Roessingh refused to draw the radical conclusion of Wilhelm Herrmann, the anti-metaphysical theologian (and teacher of Karl Barth) who proposed a strict neo-Kantian dichotomy between history and religion.<sup>19</sup> Roessingh explicitly dissociated himself from those who tried to make religion independent of history, for example by putting all cards on religious experience in the here and now.<sup>20</sup> Although, for Roessingh, *historicism*, understood as progressive historical narratives aimed at justifying present-day religion, had reached a crisis, *history* was indispensable for Christians, if only because Jesus Christ had been a historical figure. Roessingh therefore choose to draw his inspiration from Troeltsch. In Roessingh’s reading, Troeltsch allowed liberal Protestants to base their convictions on history – for example, on the person of Jesus, in whom Roessingh recognized “the highest value that history displays.”<sup>21</sup> Like Troeltsch, Roessingh admitted that such a choice could not be historically justified. In that sense, the *kulturprotestantistische* project had failed. What resulted instead was a personally lived-through decision for or against

<sup>16</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1912), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Troeltsch, *Absolutheit des Christentums*, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Roessingh, “Probleem der geschiedenis”, 303.

<sup>19</sup> H. J. Adriaanse, “Roessingh als godsdienstwijzgeer en ethicus” in Adriaanse (ed.), *Theoloog op het breekpunt*, 22–23.

<sup>20</sup> Roessingh, “Geloof en geschiedenis” in *Verzamelde werken*, vol. II, 309.

<sup>21</sup> Roessingh, “Geloof en geschiedenis”, 313.



Christ.<sup>22</sup> “All temporality, the eternally changing play of history, is transitory. For me, however, Christ, the Lord over everything and all, is the meaning of that history. And for this reason, the restless and seemingly meaningless passing by of all reality no longer weights down on me.”<sup>23</sup>

One may wonder, of course, how satisfactory this solution was. What matters for my purposes, though, is that Roessingh experienced a crisis very similar to Troeltsch’s. That is hardly a surprise. Roessingh corresponded with Troeltsch and more than once invited the German theologian to lecture in the Netherlands.<sup>24</sup> In 1922, for example, Troeltsch visited Leiden, where he stayed for a couple of days with the Roessingh family and spoke to a student audience about “modern historicism.” (“It implies,” so a Dutch newspaper reported, “the evolutionary transformation of life in the unlimited flow of emerging consciousness, and it attempts to find in this flow firm foundations for the present time.”)<sup>25</sup> After Troeltsch’s death, in 1923, Roessingh declared to consider his deceased colleague a “king by the grace of God” in the realm of scholarship.<sup>26</sup> He so thoroughly sympathized with the German theologian that he has been described as “Troeltsch’s chief witness in Dutch theology.”<sup>27</sup> And he was not the only liberal admirer of Troeltsch: other studies of Leiden-based theologians, published in the interwar years and devoted to Troeltsch or historicism, also echoed many of Troeltsch’s struggles and worries. Like Roessingh, they recognized that the liberal theology of previous generations had plunged into crisis in so far as it had been indebted to historicist narratives of progressive development.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Roessingh, “Probleem der geschiedenis”, 298–299, under reference to Troeltsch’s *Die Bedeutung der Geschichte für die Weltanschauung* (Berlin: Mittler, 1918), 43.

<sup>23</sup> Roessingh, “Geloof en geschiedenis”, 315.

<sup>24</sup> A. L. Molendijk, “Ernst Troeltsch’s holländische Reisen: eine Skizze: im Anhang: drei Briefe Troeltsch’s an Karel Hendrik Roessingh”, *Mitteilungen der Ernst-Troeltsch-Gesellschaft*, 6 (1991) 24–39; Gaathe Willem Reitsema, “Ernst Troeltsch in Holland” in Horst Renz and Friedrich Wilhelm Graf (eds.), *Troeltsch-Studien*, vol. III (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1984), 308–318.

<sup>25</sup> “Der moderne Historismus”, *Het Vaderland* (April 1, 1922), 2.

<sup>26</sup> K. H. Roessingh, “In memoriam Ernst Troeltsch” in *Verzamelde werken*, vol. II, 473. Cf. Carolien Post Uiterweer-Roessingh, *Karel Hendrik Roessingh, 11-3-1886 – 29-10-1925: een beeld van zijn persoonlijk leven* (Warnsveld; Amsterdam: s.n., 1996), 21, 44.

<sup>27</sup> G. W. Reitsema, *Ernst Troeltsch als godsdienstwijsgeer* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974), 141.

<sup>28</sup> E.g., Heije Faber, *Geschiedenis als theologisch probleem: een studie naar aanleiding van Ernst Troeltsch “Der Historismus und seine Probleme”* (Arnhem: Van Loghum Slaterus, 1933).

## Herman Dooyeweerd

If Troeltsch was intensely read at Leiden, both *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (1912) and *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (1922) also found their way to the Free University in Amsterdam.<sup>29</sup> This was hardly a surprise. Founded in 1880 by Abraham Kuyper, the multi-talented pastor, theologian, journalist, and future Prime-Minister of the Netherlands (1901–1905), the Free University defined itself in terms of Kuyper's "neo-Calvinism." This "neo-Calvinism," though doctrinally far removed from German *Kulturprotestantismus*, shared with the latter at least two important features. First, neo-Calvinism was Kuyper's answer to the problem what to do with Calvinist doctrine in a society changing so rapidly that it no longer bore much resemblance to John Calvin's Geneva or the Dutch Republic at the time of the Synod of Dordrecht (1618–1619). Rather than choosing between Calvinism and modern society – that is to say, rather than requiring strict obedience to the theology of former generations or putting that theology aside as superseded by history – Kuyper argued that Calvinism essentially was a set of ideas, or principles, which could organically unfold throughout history. In his *Stone Lectures*, delivered at Princeton in 1898, he explained that Calvinist core-principles, such as human equality before God, could be further developed than Calvin had done in his time by applying them to modern issues such as democracy and universal suffrage.<sup>30</sup> This argument appears to have been influenced by Scholten, Kuyper's liberal teacher at Leiden, and also bears a striking similarity to the *kulturprotestantische* assumption that the history of the church could be written in terms of unfolding "ideas" or "principles".<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>) See, e.g., Barend Bartholomeus Keet, *De theologie van Ernst Troeltsch* (Amsterdam: Swetz & Zeitlinger, 1913).

<sup>30</sup>) A. Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Stone-Lectures* (Amsterdam; Pretoria: Höveker & Wormser, [1899]).

<sup>31</sup>) Herman Paul, "Gereformeerde beginselen" in George Harinck, Herman Paul, and Bart Wallet (eds.), *Het gereformeerde geheugen: protestantse herinneringsculturen in Nederland, 1850–2000* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2009), 293–305; Arie L. Molendijk, "Neo-Calvinist Culture Protestantism: Abraham Kuyper's *Stone Lectures*", *Church History and Religious Culture*, 88 (2008), 235–250; Clifford Blake Anderson, "Jesus and the 'Christian World-view': A Comparative Analysis of Abraham Kuyper and Karl Barth", *Encounters*, 2 no. 2 (2006), 61–80.

A second, closely related parallel was the “historical principle,” or view that one’s identity, as an individual, church, or society, was to be deduced from the unfolding history of such core-ideas. For Kuyper, this implied that nineteenth-century Calvinists had to understand themselves as products of a long developmental history. If they wanted to advance Calvinist scholarship, Calvinist politics, or Calvinist ethics, as Kuyper insisted they were religiously obliged to do, then the Calvinist worldview they needed was “not to be invented nor formulated,” but “taken and applied as it presents itself in history.”<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, Kuyper spent nearly as much time as Troeltsch in examining how Calvinist ideas, principles, or values had developed themselves historically. In vivid prose, his *Stone Lectures* described how Calvin’s Reformation had been a source of blessing, not only for the church, but also for science, politics, and arts. What was needed was simply a continuation of that wonderful Calvinist tradition.<sup>33</sup>

Although this optimistic neo-Calvinism had considerable influence in the early decades of the twentieth century, its attractiveness declined after Kuyper’s death in 1920. Under the impression of World War I, among other things, some younger, high-educated members of Kuyper’s church denomination (the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*, or Reformed Churches in the Netherlands) began to wonder how their experiences of sudden change could be reconciled with Kuyper’s organic modes of thought. More in particular, they began to question Kuyper’s historicism. Could Calvinist identity really be derived from history?<sup>34</sup> Their criticism did not remain uncontested. On the General Synod of the Reformed Churches, in 1936, Kuyper’s oldest son, himself an influential theologian and church leader, complained emotionally that certain young pastors “disparage ‘historicism’ and deny the guidance of the Holy Spirit and

<sup>32</sup>) Kuyper, *Calvinism*, 4.

<sup>33</sup>) At this point, Kuyper’s affinities with Max Weber’s Protestantism thesis are obvious. Troeltsch also approvingly cited the *Stone Lectures* in his *Soziallehren* and expressed his indebtedness to Kuyper in private correspondence. See Max Weber, “Die protestantische Ethik und der ‘Geist’ des Kapitalismus”, *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, 2 (1904) 1–54 and 3 (1905) 1–110; Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1923), 731; Molendijk, “Troeltschs holländische Reise”, 28.

<sup>34</sup>) George Harinck, “Op losse schroeven: gereformeerden en de moderniteit” in Madelon de Keizer and Sophie Tates (eds.), *Moderniteit: modernisme en massacultuur in Nederland 1914–1940* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2004), esp. 342–346.

what the church of all ages has confessed. And this is done by beardless boys! It is the spirit of revolution, aiming to overturn everything.”<sup>35</sup>

One of the accused – beardless, indeed, although already middle-aged – was Herman Dooyeweerd, a philosopher at the Free University who almost single-handedly developed a philosophical system known by the title of the author’s *opus magnum*, “the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea” (*De wijsbegeerte der wetsidee*, 3 vols., 1935–1936). Dooyeweerd’s system can be called neo-Calvinist in so far as its aim was to present a truly Calvinist philosophy, based on God’s revelation in Scripture and nature, as free as possible from “pagan” or “idolatrous” influences, and serving as a framework within which other Calvinist scholars, in more empirical disciplines, could develop their own respective branches of Calvinist scholarship. Yet, as we shall see in a moment, Dooyeweerd explicitly distanced himself from Kuyper’s neo-Calvinism in so far as the latter sought to ground itself in history.<sup>36</sup>

In a lecture delivered for university alumni in 1932, Dooyeweerd illustrated the need for Calvinist philosophy by pointing out how deeply Western thought had been fallen, and in what endless paradoxes it had become entangled, since philosophers had come to favor Descartes’ *cogito* or Kant’s idealism over God’s revelation. One of Dooyeweerd’s most vivid examples was “historicism,” defined as an intellectual heresy “which reduces all spiritual aspects of reality to history.” Historicism, said Dooyeweerd, sees “law, morality, and faith as merely historical phenomena.” It “distorts the meaning of history” because it refuses to acknowledge a God-given creational order, in which “the historical aspect of reality” has its own, well-defined place alongside other, equally important aspects of reality. Historicism does not know the meaning of history, because it does not know the Creator on which all meaning and purpose of created reality depends. In other words, for Dooyeweerd, historicism was not the nineteenth-century tradition of thought that Troeltsch and Roessingh saw heading towards crisis, but a sign of crisis of Cartesian and Kantian-inspired philosophy.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Cited in “Generale Synode der Gereformeerde Kerken”, *De Reformatie*, 16 (1936), 433.

<sup>36</sup> Dooyeweerd explained his attitude towards Kuyper in “Wat de Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee aan Dr Kuyper te danken heeft”, *De Reformatie*, 18 (1937), 64–65; and “Kuyper’s wetenschapsleer”, *Philosophia Reformata*, 4 (1939), 193–232.

<sup>37</sup> H. Dooyeweerd, *De zin der geschiedenis en de “leiding Gods” in de historische ontwikkeling* (s. l.: s. n., [1932]), 13. Dooyeweerd unpacked this criticism in *De wijsbegeerte der*

If historicism, in this context, served as “the other,” defined in contrastive relation to the Christian worldview that Dooyeweerd “philosophy of the cosmonomic idea” aimed to promote, it may have come as a surprise, to some in the audience, that Dooyeweerd also observed strong historicist elements in his own, neo-Calvinist tradition. In his lecture, he explicitly accused some prominent neo-Calvinists, including Kuyper himself, of ascribing “normative meaning” to the historical process. Influenced by Friedrich Julius Stahl (Dooyeweerd’s *bête noire*), these neo-Calvinists had adopted an “organological theory of historical development,” said Dooyeweerd, and thereby “transferred a dangerous plant from foreign soil in Christian earth.” “I want to show,” the philosopher argued, “how our view of history would be corrupted in root and branch through an infection with the irrational philosophy of history of German speculative idealism.”<sup>38</sup> In this passage, Dooyeweerd came much closer to Troeltsch’s conception of historicism. If nineteenth-century neo-Calvinism had been indebted to the “historical principle” of German historicism, then Dooyeweerd seemed to imply that the fate of the historicist tradition in the 1920s would be a good reason not to share Kuyper’s view that Calvinist principles could be derived from history. Indeed, much of Dooyeweerd’s philosophy can be seen as an attempt to free neo-Calvinist thought from Kuyper’s historicist elements and to ground it, not on history, but on God’s creational order.

This example shows, among other things, that historicism in the inter-war period served as an “essentially contested concept” that could be used in various meanings and for various purposes. Unlike Roessingh, Dooyeweerd primarily perceived of historicism as a danger, as an example of the nihilism in which all godless philosophy had to plunge. Simultaneously, however, not unlike Roessingh, Dooyeweerd realized that part of his own religious tradition would face a crisis if it continued to depend on histori-

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*wetsidee*, vol. II (Amsterdam: H. J. Paris, 1935), 146–148, 160–163, 219–220. See also his *De beteekenis der wetsidee voor rechtswetenschap en rechtsphilosophie* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1926), 67, 70, 102; and *De crisis der humanistische staatsleer in het licht eener calvinistische kosmologie en kennistheorie* (Amsterdam: W. ten Have, 1931), 38–39, 76–83, 125–128, 168, 186–187.

<sup>38</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Zin der geschiedenis*, 3, 4. On Stahl’s influence in the Netherlands, see Gerard Fafé, *Friedrich Julius Stahl: invloeden van zijn leven en werken in Nederland, 1847–1880* (Rotterdam: Bronder, 1975).

cist arguments. For both Roessingh and Dooyeweerd, the crisis of historicism was also a crisis of the “historical principle” to which liberal theologians and neo-Calvinist thinkers in the Netherlands had subscribed. This is an important insight: it shows that these religious traditions had reasons of their own to worry about historicism. They experienced a crisis of historicism in so far as they recognized that their inherited modes of thought depended on historical principles, that is to say, on progressive developmental narratives that became increasingly implausible.

### **Joannes Henricus Robbers**

Was such a crisis also experienced by Roman-Catholics in the Netherlands? My third and final example is Joannes Henricus Robbers, a neo-Thomist historian of philosophy and philosopher of history at the Catholic University in Nijmegen. This institution was founded in 1923, as a Catholic equivalent to the neo-Calvinist Free University. The traditions of neo-Thomist and neo-Calvinist philosophy had some clear affinities, if only in their shared ambition to create a truly Christian alternative to both the state universities and the increasingly secular knowledge students there received. Besides, just as the neo-Calvinists were decidedly non-conservative in their beliefs, especially if compared to their Pietist fellow Protestants in the Netherlands, the neo-Thomists at Nijmegen, though loyal to the clerical authorities, did not subscribe to the strict neo-Thomism that the likes of Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange taught in Rome.<sup>39</sup> Their close connections to the Higher Institute of Philosophy in nearby Leuven (Belgium) made the Nijmegen faculty more receptive to the “open Thomism” for which Leuven since the 1880s had gained recognition.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Richard Peddicord, *The Sacred Monster of Thomism: An Introduction to the Life and Legacy of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2005). For a brief survey of the various neo-Thomisms available in the early twentieth century, see Emerich Coreth, “Schulrichtungen neuscholastischer Philosophie” in Emerich Coreth, Walter M. Neidl, and George Pfligersdorffer (eds.), *Christliche Philosophie im katholischen Denken des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, vol. II (Graz; Vienna; Cologne: Verlag Styria, 1988), 397–410.

<sup>40</sup> Georges Van Riet, “Kardinal Désiré Mercier (1851–1926) und das philosophische Institut in Löwen” in Coreth, Neidl, and Pfligersdorffer (eds.), *Christliche Philosophie im katholischen Denken*, vol. II, 206–240.

Robbers, perhaps the most prolific Dutch neo-Thomist of his generation, is a case in point.<sup>41</sup> From his earliest publications onwards, he advocated a neo-Thomism capable of developing itself organically through history and able of responding constructively to debates among non-Catholic philosophers. For these two reasons, one would almost expect Robbers to engage at some length with the challenges of historicism.

Indeed, like Roessingh and Dooyeweerd, Robbers spent a considerable number of pages on historical change and distance from the past. His *Neo-Thomism and Modern Philosophy* (*Neo-thomisme en moderne wijsbegeerte*, 1951), for example, was entirely devoted to the question how twentieth-century philosophers could possibly profit from a thinker centuries removed in time and culture. Although Robbers welcomed the energy that some Catholic philosophers invested in historical exegesis of Thomas Aquinas, he fiercely opposed what many non-Catholic philosophers believed neo-Thomism to be, namely, a tradition blindly obedient to the Angelic Doctor. “Saint Thomas is not a master teaching a pre-prepared lesson,” argued Robbers, “but a master who shows the way, a way on which one may travel further than he did, and see broader than he saw.” And: “What was merely a germ in Saint-Thomas grew further and still develops itself, also develops itself in contemporary neo-Thomism.”<sup>42</sup> This insistence on the (organic) development of neo-Thomism – an ideal shared by many of Robbers’s Catholic colleagues in the Netherlands and Belgium – explains why Robbers also rejected the charge that Thomas was out of date. For what future generations developed was not the time-bound aspects of Thomas’s philosophy, but rather those insights from the *Summa Theologiae* that, “in spite of all historicity,” touched upon a truth “that is supra-temporal and unchangeable.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, neo-Thomists tried to build upon the truths that Thomas had found; not to start from scratch again.

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<sup>41</sup> C. Braun, “Prof. dr. J. H. Robbers S. J.: een verkenningstocht in zijn geschriften” in C. Braun, J. Arntz, and H. van Luijk (eds.), *Filia: wijsgerige opstellen in vriendschap aangeboden aan prof. dr. J. H. Robbers S. J.* (Nijmegen; Utrecht: Dekker & Van de Vegt, 1966), 19–37; C. E. M. Struyker Boudier, *Wijsgerig leven in Nederland en België 1880–1980*, vol. I (Nijmegen; Baarn: Katholiek Studiecentrum; Ambo, 1985), 90–99, 273–277.

<sup>42</sup> H. Robbers, *Neo-thomisme en moderne wijsbegeerte* (Utrecht; Brussel: Het Spectrum, 1951), 84, 75.

<sup>43</sup> Robbers, *Neo-thomisme*, 25.

Secondly, like Roessingh and Dooyeweerd, Robbers addressed one of the most fiercely debated questions among philosophers in interwar Europe: what, if anything, is the meaning of history? In a 1942 essay that examined how Hegel, Cassirer, Simmel, and Rickert, among others, had responded to this question, Robbers clearly showed his awareness of the *Historismusdebatte* in Germany. He quoted Troeltsch's *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* and devoted a full paragraph to Friedrich Meinecke's "vertical solution" to the problem of historical meaning.<sup>44</sup> Although his own solution came relatively close to Meinecke's, it displayed a distinctly neo-Thomist attitude in arguing that philosophers cannot go further than to leave open the possibility of a transcendent meaning of history. God's revelation in Jesus Christ as the ultimate meaning of the historical process can only be affirmed by faith, not by philosophical means. The possibility of such a revelation, however, implies that philosophers have to challenge any attempt to limit the meaning of history to the realm of human activity.<sup>45</sup>

Although both of these arguments touched upon issues central to the crisis of historicism, Robbers managed to avoid the term historicism almost entirely. In spite of Troeltsch and Meinecke, the 1942 essay did not say a single word about historicism. In *Neo-Thomism and Modern Philosophy*, the term emerged only twice, in brief passages on Wilhelm Dilthey, the philosopher whom Robbers considered "one of the sources of contemporary relativism." In passing, the author observed that "such an absolute relativism and historicism" was safely avoided in his own, evolutionary approach to the history of philosophy.<sup>46</sup> And that was all that Robbers had to say about historicism and its crisis. Apparently, the urgency with which Protestants warned against or tried to "overcome" historicism was foreign to Robbers's philosophical world. Despite his lively interest in Protestant thought – he was among the first Dutch Catholics to respond to Dooyeweerd's philosophy<sup>47</sup> – Robbers seemed not to share Roessingh's or Dooyeweerd's deep worries about historicism.

<sup>44</sup> H. Robbers, "De zin der geschiedenis", *Bijdragen*, 5 (1942), 238, 240, 246. For Meinecke's "vertical solution," see his "Geschichte und Gegenwart" in Meinecke, *Zur Theorie und Philosophie der Geschichte*, ed. Eberhard Kessel (Stuttgart: K. F. Koehler Verlag, 1959), 90–101.

<sup>45</sup> Robbers, "Zin der geschiedenis", 254–255.

<sup>46</sup> Robbers, *Neo-thomisme*, 130, 115, 116.

<sup>47</sup> H. G. Geertsema, "Dooyeweerd in discussie met de rooms-katholieke filosofie" in H. G. Geertsema et al. (eds.), *Herman Dooyeweerd 1894–1977: breedte en actualiteit van zijn filosofie* (Kampen: Kok, 1994), 231–239.



How representative was Robbers in this regard? Among the faculty of Nijmegen, only one professor, Karel Bellon, spent more than a few words on historicism. In his *Philosophy of History* (*Wijsbegeerte der geschiedenis*, 1952), Bellon explained at some length that historicism leads to “relativism” – that is, to an absence of Archimedean points in epistemology and ethics – as long as it rejects a solid Catholic philosophy of being. Although Bellon admitted that he had been fascinated by historicism, and devoted no less than some dozens of pages to Dilthey, Troeltsch, and Meinecke, his judgment was also critical. A “morass of relativism” could only be prevented by locating the “origin and purpose of history” in God. Only by acknowledging that human beings are created in the image of God, and participate in the divine being, one can affirm the historicity of human existence without falling prey to relativism.<sup>48</sup> Although such an invocation of the *analogia entis* as a remedy against the ills of modern thought was not uncommon among twentieth-century neo-Thomists, Bellon was, I think, unique in paying so much attention to historicism. Robbers’s brief comments were far more representative than Bellon’s extensive treatment.<sup>49</sup>

Why this was the case? There are, I think, several reasons why, comparatively speaking, Dutch neo-Thomists felt less motivated to participate in the debates over historicism. For one thing, unlike the traditions from which Troeltsch, Roessingh, and Dooyeweerd emerged, neo-Thomist philosophy was extremely abstract. According to Robbers, Thomas’s participatory ontology (with some of its major distinctions, between *actus* and *potentia* or *essentia* and *existentia*) counted as the only essential characteristic of it.<sup>50</sup> Whereas Kuyper’s neo-Calvinist tradition, with its far-elaborated views on politics, church doctrine, education, and gender roles, always had a hard time adapting itself to changing circumstances, the philosophical view that human being participates in divine being was hardly threatened by historical change. Also, in the interwar period, neo-Thomist philosophers in Europe generally perceived their tradition to be vindicated by the “return to ontology” in German and French

<sup>48</sup> K. L. Bellon, *Wijsbegeerte der geschiedenis* (Antwerpen; Amsterdam: Standaard, 1953), 242, 199, 245, 246.

<sup>49</sup> This judgment is based, among other things, on the annual reports of the Association for Thomistic Philosophy and the journals *Studiën*, *Bijdragen*, and *Studia Catholica*.

<sup>50</sup> Robbers, *Neo-thomisme*, 80–81.

existentialism.<sup>51</sup> And this brings us to the most important reason as why the crisis of historicism that Roessingh and Dooyeweerd so painfully experienced hardly affected the neo-Thomists at Nijmegen. Catholic philosophies of history developed in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s simply borrowed from other sources, and participated in different discourses, than Troeltsch's. Robbers was inspired by Étienne Gilson, Jean Daniélou, and Karl Jaspers; not (or hardly) by Dilthey, Troeltsch, and Meinecke. He explicitly declared that the historicity of philosophy was a theme discussed "especially in France."<sup>52</sup> Like the German *Kulturprotestanten*, Gilson and Daniélou were highly sensitive to historical change and to the historicity of human being, but unlike the former, they did not usually address these issues in terms of historicism.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, despite the high academic visibility of the debates over historicism in Germany, we must acknowledge that there was a variety of discourses that theologians and philosophers could employ in reflecting upon history or historical studies. Whereas, back in the nineteenth century, *Historismus* referred to a way of thinking that, at least in Germany, was developed most intensively by Protestant authors,<sup>54</sup> *Krise des Historismus*, too, originated in a Protestant discourse from which Roman-Catholic authors took notice, to which they sometimes

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<sup>51</sup> Richard Schaeffler, *Die Wechselbeziehungen zwischen Philosophie und katholischer Theologie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980), 22–30.

<sup>52</sup> Robbers, *Neo-thomisme*, 13.

<sup>53</sup> In his *Essai sur le mystère de l'histoire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1953), Jean Daniélou, for example, spoke only once and in passing about "the modern ideologies of progress, evolution, and historicism" (123). However, in the early 1930s, Gilson was accused of historicism by no one less than Maurice Blondel, the French neo-Thomist who as early as 1904, in the midst of the *crise moderniste*, had warned at length against this heresy, which he understood to be a "sort of dialectical evolutionism" stemming from "scientific determinism." See Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, trans. Alexander Dru and Illyd Trethowan (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 240; Laurence K. Shook, *Etienne Gilson* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), 200. It would not be difficult to find other instances of the word historicism in neo-Thomist circles. However, these examples do not falsify my thesis that, comparatively speaking, Protestants were far more concerned about historicism than Roman-Catholics.

<sup>54</sup> See Daniel Fulda, "'Die Idee der Ganzheit': Historismus und Katholizismus bei Franz Schnabel (1887–1966)" in Thomas Pittrof and Walter Schmitz (eds.), *Wahrnehmung und Deutung der Geschichte in der literarischen und der wissenschaftlichen Publizistik des deutschsprachigen Katholizismus 1919–1949* (Freiburg: Rombach, in press), esp. 66–74. I thank Professor Fulda for sending me the page proofs of this chapter.

responded, but to which they contributed far less extensively than Protestants who perceived their own historicism to be at stake.

## Conclusion

What light do these case-studies throw on the crisis of historicism as a religious problem? Granted that religion, in Howard's broadest sense of the word, was omnipresent in the interwar debates, what can we infer from Roessingh's, Dooyeweerd's, and Robbers's examples about the more specific religious dimensions of this crisis, or about its place on the map of Christian theologies and denominations in Europe? I draw five conclusions. The first of these – perhaps almost too obvious to mention, but necessary to correct those scholars who seem to assume that all belief in a transcendent God had been undermined by historicism<sup>55</sup> – is that the crisis of historicism was not perceived as a threat to Christian faith as such. Although certain Christian worldviews, or elements of these, were put under pressure, the possibility of religious belief was never questioned. Secondly, there is no evidence, among Dutch Protestants and Catholics, that the crisis of historicism was perceived to consist in the confrontation between timeless truths and a historicist sensitivity to the particularities of each historical situation. It may well be that, because of its abstract nature, the *philosophia perennis* that neo-Thomism claimed to offer was easier to reconcile with experiences of historical change than Kuyper's well-elaborated worldview. Yet, neither Roessingh nor Dooyeweerd felt they had to give up timeless truths. In fact, because of the historicist nature of their respective traditions, both already thought in thoroughly historical terms.

The problem brought to light by the crisis of historicism – this is my third and perhaps most important conclusion – was rather the impossibility to make present-day identity dependent on the progressive realization of ideas or principles in history. What was challenged was not God or the category of timeless truth, but the assumption that history could be emplotted in organic terms. This best explains, I think, why liberals and neo-Calvinists were confronted with a problem, whereas neo-Thomists, who had never relied on such historicist arguments, hardly felt challenged by the crisis of historicism. Given the attractiveness of this historicist

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<sup>55</sup> E.g., Oexle, "Krise des Historismus", 53–54.

strategy among all sorts of conservative and anti-revolutionary Christians in nineteenth-century Europe, it is no surprise to find a great number of religious thinkers involved in the early twentieth-century *Historismusdebatte*. The foregoing suggests, however, that this is better explained by the nature of their traditions than by the fact that they believed in God.

In the fourth place, for Dooyeweerd and Bellon, the crisis of historicism served as a background against which the Christian gospel and the need for Christian philosophy could be emphasized. Just as Kuyper, in 1899, had warned against Charles Darwin's evolution theory and Pope Pius X, in his encyclical of 1907, had condemned modernism as "the synthesis of all heresies,"<sup>56</sup> so Protestants and Catholics in the interwar period – perhaps especially those with apologetic reasons for throwing themselves into a *Kampf der Weltanschauungen* – perceived historicism as one of the modern evils they had to combat. In a similar manner, Christians in later decades came to identify "existentialism" and "postmodernism" as embodiments of a secular nihilism they were called to oppose.<sup>57</sup> The crisis of historicism, then, just like existentialism and postmodernism, was of religious significance in so far as it illustrated the "relativism" in which all non-Christian thought was supposed to result, and the need for a truly Christian alternative. The crisis of historicism entered religious discourse because of its apologetic usefulness, or because of the need to preach the gospel to those afflicted by relativism and meaninglessness.

My last conclusion is a historiographical proposal. Based on the observation that Dutch neo-Calvinists continued their quarrels with historicism until at least the late 1960s, I have suggested elsewhere that the crisis

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<sup>56</sup> A. Kuyper, *Evolutie: rede bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Vrije Universiteit op 20 oktober 1899 gehouden* (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, 1899); Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, as quoted in Lester R. Kurtz, *The Politics of Heresy: The Modernist Crisis in Roman Catholicism* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1986), 157.

<sup>57</sup> By way of example, I mention a Dutch neo-Calvinist (and pupil of Dooyeweerd) who spent years of his life exposing the dangers of existentialism: Sytse U. Zuidema. Some of his representative publications are *De mensch als historie: rede gehouden bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van buitengewoon hoogleraar in de faculteit der letteren en wijsbegeerte aan de Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam op woensdag 9 juni 1948* (Franeker: Wever, [1948]); *Nacht zonder dageraad: naar aanleiding van het atheïstisch en nihilistisch existentialisme van Jean-Paul Sartre* (Franeker: Wever, 1948); and "Het existentialisme bij Kierkegaard", *Philosophia Reformata*, 15 (1950), 40–46, 49–65.

of historicism is perhaps best conceived as a traveling problem, or as a feeling of crisis not limited to the interwar period, but occurring at different times and in different places, depending on the availability of certain necessary conditions.<sup>58</sup> Helpful as this may be, it does, alas, not solve the problem posed by Robbers's reflections on historical change and meaning. For even if we allow for flexible begin and end dates, those reflections can impossibly be subsumed under the heading "crisis of historicism." This is not merely because the term historicism hardly occurred in Robbers's writings, but also because his concerns were rather different from Troeltsch's and because the framework within which he phrased his questions as well as the answers he proposed to those questions stemmed from rather different sources.

If we consider Robbers's (and Bellon's) reflections as belonging to an ontologically-oriented philosophical discourse, rather than to a discourse concerned with historicism in Troeltsch's sense of the word, it could be helpful to distinguish between a number of partially overlapping, but nonetheless distinct Christian traditions of philosophical and theological reflection on history in twentieth-century Europe. Apart from the crisis of historicism, which affected especially those Protestants who, like the German *Kulturprotestanten*, had sought to derive identity from narratives of historical development, other debates took place, both among Protestant and Catholic intellectuals, on themes such as the meaning of history, continuity and discontinuity in Christian doctrine or practice, and the historicity of human existence. Obviously, to some extent, these debates may have had similar origins, such as deeply-felt experiences of change. They may have been stimulated by similar causes, including the two world wars. Also, as illustrated by Bellon, they certainly did not exist in isolation.<sup>59</sup> Yet, their differences, with regard to the questions they raised, the

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<sup>58</sup> Herman Paul, "Who Suffered From the Crisis of Historicism", 192–193. I made a similar point in Herman Paul, "Hayden White and the Crisis of Historicism" in Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domańska, and Hans Kellner (eds.), *Re-Figuring Hayden White* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 57.

<sup>59</sup> Another example is offered by Dooyeweerd's student, Meijer C. Smit, who briefly spoke about historicism at a conference on "the meaning of history" in 1949. As the only neo-Calvinist speaker at this predominantly Roman-Catholic gathering, however, Smit was the only one participant whose raised the H-word: none of the other speakers considered historicism relevant to their reflections on history. M. C. Smit, "De moderne protestantse visie op de geschiedenis" in L. J. Rogier (ed.), *De zin der geschiedenis voor geloof en*

vocabularies they used, and the sources of inspiration from which they drew, are too manifold to be lumped together under the rubric of “historicism and its discontents.” I would therefore suggest a more differentiated approach, in which the crises of historicism that occurred among liberal and liberal-inspired Protestants in Europe are distinguished from, as well as compared to, a variety of other discourses on the meaning, nature, and value of history.<sup>60</sup>

This, finally, might also enable us to overcome, in due time, a problem long faced by historians of the crisis of historicism, namely the contemporaneous character of that very expression, *Krise des Historismus*. Although scholars regularly acknowledge that “crisis of historicism” was a phrase coined by Troeltsch and further popularized by Karl Heussi,<sup>61</sup> the term is often treated as a historiographical concept, as if it not only expresses the anxieties of Troeltsch and his contemporaries, but also conveys what, from a historian’s hindsight point of view, is most characteristic about the past under investigation. Put in more technical language, it seems that historians have promoted an expression found in their source-material – in the discursive language of some early twentieth-century German theologians – to the status of “colligatory concept” (“a higher order concept that brings a series of events together by describing them from an aspect that makes them intelligible or relevant in an explanation”).<sup>62</sup>

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*rede* (Heerlen: Winants, [1949]), 245. Likewise, Smit’s Ph.D. thesis, defended at the Free University, shows that it was not impossible for a neo-Calvinist to immerse oneself deeply in Roman-Catholic theologies of history: M. C. Smit, *De verhouding van christendom en historie in de huidige rooms-katholieke geschiedbeschuwing* (Kampen: Kok, 1950). In turn, this “neo-Calvinist” book was highly praised and explicitly recommended by the Capuchin Seminary in Udenhout: “Theologie der geschiedenis in het verleden en het heden”, *Katholiek Archief*, 8 (1953), 309. So, even in the “pillarized” Netherlands, Calvinist and Catholic traditions could interact with each other.

<sup>60</sup> This proposal has a certain affinity with Elías Palti’s suggestion that “historicism” is better treated as a discourse than as a set of ideas. Indeed, what seems most promising, as well as most interesting, from a historian’s point of view, is not to employ essentialist definitions of historicism, but to investigate how and for what reasons people in various circumstances used such words as “historicism” and “historicity.” See Elías J. Palti, “Historicism as an Idea and as a Language”, *History and Theory*, 44 (2005), 431–440.

<sup>61</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, “Die Krisis des Historismus”, *Die neue Rundschau*, 1 (1922), 572–590; Karl Heussi, *Die Krisis des Historismus* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1932).

<sup>62</sup> I am referring to W. H. Walsh’s classic essay, “Colligatory Concepts in History” in Patrick Gardiner (ed.), *The Philosophy of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974),

However, as my fifth conclusion indicates, “crisis of historicism,” understood as a colligatory concept, has a rather limited scope. While representing the worries felt by liberal as well as neo-Calvinist *Kulturprotestanten*, it fails to include those debates, especially among Roman-Catholic authors, that Robbers’s writings exemplify – unless, of course, the “crisis of historicism” is specifically redefined. My plea for a differentiation between a number of overlapping but irreducible debates among twentieth-century Christian thinkers on the nature, meaning, and significance of history therefore encourages a historicization, or recontextualization, of the expression “crisis of historicism,” while simultaneously allowing for the development of new and hopefully better-suited colligatory concepts.<sup>63</sup>

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127–144, but quote the definition provided by Ola Halldén in his apt summary of Walsh’s argument. Ola Halldén, “Conceptual Change and the Learning of History”, *International Journal of Educational Research*, 27 (1997), 204.

<sup>63</sup>) Funding was provided by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).