

1.

Introduction: On Compromise

This book is an attempt at a comparison between theology as it developed in three very different universities in three very different places. It addresses the history of theology as an academic discipline, which is located within distinct universities and churches. These institutions are themselves located within particular cities, which are subject to the changes and developments of educational policy, as well as national and international politics. Of course, personalities are important in the history of theology: the discipline in Berlin or Oxford might have evolved in a very different way without the theological genius of Schleiermacher or Newman, who feature in this book. Nevertheless, my principal concern is with the influence of external factors on the development of theology, and the constraints that these have placed on the discipline and those who practise it. Inevitably, theology will be involved with the constraints imposed on it by the wider world, which is why it has been so varied throughout its long and venerable history. I have chosen three cities to illustrate the sorts of compromises theology has had to make in order to gain a full role in the university and in the wider world: I have not sought to be comprehensive, but instead offer four simple case studies, one from Berlin, two from Oxford, and one from Chicago, which illustrate how theology developed in a period of unprecedented social and political change. Although my purposes are principally historical, and it would be rash to draw too many conclusions from such a limited number of examples, I will nevertheless venture a few concluding reflections about the nature of theology in the modern world, which is profoundly different from the period I discuss in this book.

The Legacy of Hensley Henson

The business of compromise was a particularly appropriate theme for the Hensley Henson lectures, since throughout his life, and particularly as Bishop of Durham, Herbert Hensley Henson (1863-1947)¹ was well aware of the tensions between the demands of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the political and pragmatic compromises

he was forced to make as a priest and later as a bishop. Writing about himself – always one of his favourite topics – to the recently retired Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, in 1928, he declared in rather lugubrious mood:

It has been my misfortune in the course of my life to disappoint every person who has followed me, and every party that has allowed itself to build hopes on me; and the accusation of inconsistency (not to use a harsher word) has been hurled at me from many sides. . . . A kind of Quixotic honesty, a fatal trick of lucid speech, and a temperamental indifference to the impressions I make, may, perhaps, explain the paradox I seem to be.²

Given the number of controversies in which he was involved, this was probably an accurate assessment.³ And it comes as something of a salutary reminder to anybody trying to respect Henson's legacy in the lectures that bear his name, even if they do not necessarily share his 'Quixotic honesty' or 'fatal trick of lucid speech'. Henson was something of an ecclesiastical loner, as well as an unrepentant controversialist, who was seldom afraid of offering an opinion on virtually any subject. He was also the archetypal illiberal Liberal: throughout his life he remained resolutely anti-catholic (of both the Roman and Anglican varieties), was an opponent of the women's franchise,⁴ and was also vigorously anti-socialist. Indeed, according to Matthew Grimley, he 'had a morbid obsession with Labour', even believing he would die in a street battle.⁵ Nevertheless, he remained a champion of the underdog. As Bishop of Durham, it is reported that he would go into Auckland Park to converse with unemployed miners.⁶ According to Sir William Anson, Warden of All Souls' College, Oxford, where Henson had been a fellow as a young man, he was 'a Jacobin lacquered over to look like a Tory'.⁷ Like many of his successors at Durham, he was a prolific author with a broad intellect, but, unlike some of them, he could hardly be classified as a traditional theologian. After all, at Oxford he had been a fellow at the idiosyncratic All Souls', rather than a pillar of the Anglican theological establishment as Canon Professor of Christ Church. He was always something of an outsider. Even his undergraduate career was unusual: he was an unattached student, which meant that he did not attend a traditional college, and he had been raised in the harsh environment of the Plymouth Brethren. After ordination, his theology evolved in the pulpit and in the pages of the popular press; it was more often apologetic and polemic rather than analytic and systematic.

Although he never achieved high academic status, he nevertheless moved from relatively modest beginnings into the heart of the political and ecclesiastical establishment as Fellow of All Souls', Canon of Westminster, Dean of Durham and finally Bishop, successively of Hereford and Durham. Given this background, it is hardly surprising that he was particularly interested in the relationship between church and state. Indeed, he felt that this constituted perhaps the most intractable problem in the whole of European history. Citing William Stubbs, the great constitutional historian of late Victorian England and afterwards Bishop of Oxford, he claimed that, 'The careful study of history suggests many problems for which it supplies no solution. None of these is more easy [sic] to state, or more difficult to handle, than the great question of the proper relation between Church and State.'⁸

In his own somewhat sketchy studies of church history,⁹ Henson constantly returned to this key issue, which also preoccupied him for much of his episcopate: although he might have changed his mind over Establishment after the Prayer Book controversy after December 1927, which he did chiefly out of an anxiety about what the socialists might do to the church, he nevertheless remained a firm believer in the closeness of the connection between church and state. Both institutions, he held, were 'Divinely appointed instruments through which the Kingdom of God shall be set'.¹⁰ As a bishop, he was both engaged and frequently highly engaging in matters of church and state.

At the same time, however, Henson was no mere sentimentalist. Unlike some others, who addressed similar problems at the time, he never thought that the medieval world could be reproduced in the present. Instead, he recognised that society had changed: there simply could be no going back to the time of Richard Hooker or any other golden age in the past when church and state co-existed in some sort of perfect harmony. Instead, it was important to ask the same question which had been asked in earlier generations, but he sought to apply it to the new circumstances: 'What are the limits of a morally legitimate compromise which, in the interest of its spiritual task, the Church may accept? What is the true meaning of Establishment?'¹¹ In order to answer such a question it was necessary to look at the past to assess the compromises that had been made as the church related to the state in which it was set. Only in this way would it be possible to discern what might remain of the apologetic potential of the Christian faith in the context of the twentieth century. For Henson, the future of the Established Church would look very different in the transformed conditions of post-First World War England.

Although Henson's use of history was far from sophisticated, his boldness was sometimes striking and revealed a great deal about his approach to the past and present. For instance, he (not unreasonably) felt that the self-absorption of the church, its focus on liturgical and structural reform, seemed quite ludicrous when set against the great issues of politics and economics in which both church and state were intimately involved in the 1920s.¹² In making his case, he frequently took analogies from the history of the church and applied them to the problems of his own times. Thus, in his first charge to the diocese of Durham in 1924, he attacked the recent church Conference on Christian Politics, Economics, and Citizenship (COPEC) on economic reconstruction for trying to exercise something like what he called the 'Temporal Power of the Papacy' in its 'assumption that the Kingdom of God can be set up on earth by the political action of Christian men'.¹³ Similarly, and with equally anti-Papal sentiments,¹⁴ he reflected on the General Strike in May 1926, noting that it was:

the modern equivalent of a papal interdict. . . . It also overrides all the reconciling influences of neighbourhood and personality. The discredit of the medieval interdict did finally reach such a pitch that it worked a cure in the total defeat of the Papacy: will a similar result follow in the case of the General Strike? Will the tyranny of the Trade Unions perish as that of the Popes perished under the disgrace of its own excesses?¹⁵

For Henson, any solution to such problems would inevitably have to be a compromise between the high ideals of the church and the realities of contemporary politics, which meant that those visions gleaned from the past would always have to be set against the constraints of the economic and political circumstances of the present. For the Church of England, he felt, this might even result in disestablishment, in order that the church might be able to maintain its identity against an increasingly secular state. Thus, he asked in 1939: 'To churches, as to men, the Divine Challenge is spoken – "*What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose or forfeit his own self?*"'¹⁶ For Henson, then, church history was to some extent the history of compromises between what he deemed the prophetic spirit of the Christian Gospel and the institutions in church and state which have sought obedience from their members and which have exercised external constraint.

Insofar as Henson had a guiding theme to his apologetic system, it was that of the overarching importance of the protection of the individual human spirit. Citing a favourite text of the Cambridge Platonists, 'the spirit of man is the candle of the Lord' (Proverbs

20:27),¹⁷ he defended the importance of human autonomy and liberty. There was, Henson claimed, 'no explosive force known to human experience more powerful than that of a large idea introduced into minds too small to comprehend it'. The 'explosive force' was expressed first and foremost in the 'doctrine of the Divine right of the individual human spirit'. He continued:

It is ultimately this prophetic doctrine of the Divine right of the individual human spirit which carries the promise, nay which involves the necessity, of immitigable conflict between man and every demand of external authority, however strongly entrenched in tradition, and heavily armed with coercive power, which insults his reason or wounds his conscience. It is the Magna Carta of the human spirit, the affirmation of man's personal autonomy.¹⁸

Like the great German sociologist Max Weber, for whom the Hebrew prophets were the forebears of western rationality,¹⁹ Henson saw them as originally responsible for introducing the spirit of autonomy and liberty against the stultification of religion by authoritarianism and traditionalism.²⁰ They consequently stood as the progenitors of the human spirit, even if so often people had failed to understand the overwhelming importance of that prophetic spirit for the development of the modern world. The prophets and their successors through history constantly challenged their surrounding society and its institutions with a simple message that was first and foremost a championing of the free spirit against whatever stifled its expression in both church and state.

At the same time, however, the prophetic ideal always had to gain a foothold in history through the very institutions it sought to challenge. World history, according to Henson, had been a history of compromises, as the demand for the liberty of the human spirit had struggled for expression within the institutions of church and state, which frequently resisted its challenge, even if in the end they succumbed to its liberating power. This leads on to a second key theme in Henson's thought, which rests in his efforts to understand the often uneasy relationship between the Christian Gospel and the prophetic spirit and human authorities and institutions. It is a recognition and an appraisal of the many compromises that have had to be made in a busy and complex world. This theme of compromise rests behind each of the theological projects that will be discussed through the course of this book, even if some of the theologians would have been surprised to learn that they were compromising.

As I have already noted, for Henson, the need to compromise was clearly expressed in the great demands that were placed on the senior clergy. He consequently took to heart a well-known dictum from Lord Acton's influential inaugural lecture on the study of history: 'Every student ought to know that mastery is acquired by resolved limitation.'²¹ In his autobiographical reflections, he noted that he had interpreted this maxim quite practically. On being appointed as Dean of Durham in 1912, he commented with his typical wit:

This is a dictum which a modern dean may well lay to heart, for it may easily happen that he will dissipate himself on a multitude of petty concerns, responding with too facile good nature to the requests of fussy folk, who have no notion of the value of his time or the conditions of his work. Such fussy folk gather about all men in gaiters, and smother the aspirations of even self-respecting ecclesiastics in muffts and shawls!²²

The senior cleric's lot did not necessarily allow for the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Bishops consequently found it hard to be prophets among the 'fussy folk' who went to church. For Henson, compromise proved inevitable in the life of the eminent churchman, and had been so throughout the history of the church. The history of the church and its theology is consequently a history of repeated compromises as Christians sought to address the needs of their day. This, as we shall see, is particularly true of the nineteenth century, which forms the subject of this book.

*'The Appeal to History as an integral part
of Christian apologetics'*

The terms of Henson's benefaction to Oxford University are that the Hensley Henson lectures should be on the 'The Appeal to History as an integral part of Christian apologetics'. He presumably wanted others to make up for the lack of time available to him for such work. I will consequently be discussing the key themes that guided his thought, which I have highlighted in this introduction as they relate to the development of theology in the nineteenth century. Central to my discussion is the intimate relationship between church, university and state, and the ways in which these institutions have shaped and been shaped by what might be loosely referred to as the 'prophetic spirit' (or some other equally problematic formulation such as 'essence of Christianity', as with Schleiermacher, or 'Christian ethos', as with Newman). Theology usually understands itself as having something to do with the acquisition of a deeper knowledge of God,

as well as trying to discern how to live the Christian life better, and it immediately encounters the sorts of problems identified by Henson, which tend to interfere with the purity of the pursuit of knowledge of God or living out the Christian life. Fussy folk, from ecclesiastical, academic and political bureaucracies, have always gathered (and still gather) around theologians, frequently trying to smother their prophetic aspirations and to force them to compromise their ideals by applying political, ecclesiastical and financial constraints.²³

Theology is conceived in this book as an academic, political and social activity which cannot be isolated from the wider ethical and social ideals and structures of the state and society. But at the same time – and here there is likely to be a degree of conflict – theology usually claims to discern truths about God and his world. What will become clear, I hope, is that the challenge to traditional authority embodied in institutions of church and state became particularly acute in a century when what Henson called the ‘explosive force’ of human autonomy threatened all forms of institutional authoritarianism. Furthermore, when the ‘prophetic spirit’ was identified with the autonomous individual, who was increasingly liberated from traditional authority (at least from the time of Immanuel Kant), there was almost inevitably a clash between the spirit and the state, together with its academic and ecclesiastical institutions. Despite reaction, repristination and restoration after 1815, states and their institutions changed through their encounters with various understandings of the autonomous human spirit both inside and outside the church.

The rise of the perception of the autonomous human spirit was intimately related to the growth of an historical consciousness. By questioning the authority of all institutions and structures, those who adopted a critical method inevitably began to historicise those institutions. They increasingly saw them as related to their particular contexts and times, rather than simply to God’s eternal decrees: institutions might therefore have a beginning and even an end. Throughout the nineteenth century there was also a growing awareness of other cultures, cultures that seemed to rival even Europe in terms of their development. This was something that was just beginning to shape theology by the end of the nineteenth century. The security and stability of much of the European world were violently shaken by the simple awareness that things could have been different, and indeed that they were very different in other parts of the world. As Gibbon wryly noted in the eighteenth century, it would not have taken much for the Arabian fleet to have ‘sailed without a naval combat into the mouth

of the Thames. Perhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the Schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet'.²⁴ This historical consciousness, with its increasingly relativist worldview, had a profound impact on university life in the nineteenth century. While the natural sciences came to be dominated by a naturalistic empirical method, what we now call the humanities, or what the Germans call the sciences of the spirit (*Geisteswissenschaften*), came to be studied historically. This historical method, or historicism – more accurately, 'historism' as a better translation of the German term (*Historismus*) in contrast to naturalism – profoundly transformed all disciplines, including theology.²⁵

These changes constituted a particular challenge to the authority structures of the past, particularly in the German-speaking territories. A discussion of these changes, which stemmed from the Enlightenment and which were spread in part by the French revolutionary wars, forms a key part of the next chapter, where I look in detail at the development of theology in early nineteenth-century Prussia, especially in its relatively upstart capital city, Berlin. In the patchwork of smaller and larger principalities that constituted the German-speaking world, which had been enshrined in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the general rule was for the administration of the church and of the university (where one existed) to be understood as simply a branch of the state. Within the protestant territories, and even to a large extent in the Roman Catholic areas (many of which were ruled by ecclesiastical dignitaries), authority in the church was at one with authority in the state. Within Prussia, for instance, which emerged as the strongest protestant power in the German-speaking world in the eighteenth century, the monarch's rule was exercised over the church by a direct form of 'consistory' government, with very little self-government given to the churches and their congregations. Later, after the defeat of Napoleon, administration of the church was placed under the Ministry of the Cult (*Kultusministerium*), whose brief also covered education. There may have been a theological recognition of the priesthood of all believers among Lutherans, but such priesthood was usually exercised on behalf of the people by the king and his bureaucracy. Luther's supposed freedom of a Christian man was circumscribed by the authorities in what remained of the semi-feudal *Obrigkeitsstaat*: as Ernst Troeltsch recognised, the Lutheran compromise resembled the unified worldview of the Middle Ages.²⁶

The 'givenness' of these political and religious settlements, which were frequently justified in terms of their divine or natural

foundations as part of the will of God for his creation, came to be increasingly challenged by the critical spirit through the eighteenth century. They were shattered, at least temporarily, by the overwhelming effects of the French revolutionary wars, which made a huge impact on the German territories and their ecclesiastical and political settlements. The speed of change was rapid: while in 1790 the Holy Roman Empire was not completely moribund, by 1792 the French army gained easy victories over considerable areas of land, and not long afterwards all of Germany west of the Rhine was placed under French rule. The old order of petty states was abolished: in 1803 about 112 rulers lost their sovereignty and were absorbed in something larger. When Napoleon declared himself emperor in 1804 the Holy Roman Empire was fatally wounded, and in 1806 it was formally abolished. In the German territories, the Napoleonic wars culminated in Napoleon's victory over the Prussian forces of Friedrich Wilhelm III at the Battle of Jena-Auerstedt on 14 October 1806. This meant that the legal status and invulnerable character of states and their institutions were thrown into disarray. This included their foundational documents – including, obviously, the sacred texts of the churches. Jena was, as Hegel noted, the end of history. The effects of the Battle of Jena on theology, as I discuss in the next chapter, were enormous. Indeed, it was perhaps the most far-reaching event in the history of theology in the nineteenth century.

Alongside such earth-shattering political events, the stress on the autonomy of the human spirit, which Hensley Henson regarded as the most distinctive feature of human development, was set against the servitude of the supernaturally-founded authority of the past. It presented a radical and total challenge to church, state and university. Where the church functioned chiefly as the ideological prop of the state, the idea of enlightenment was obviously subversive, and threatened not merely the state, but also the church and its theological claims. According to Kant, whom I discuss in the next chapter, the autonomous individual, acting in accordance with the critical principles of knowledge is given the faculty of criticising all pre-existing social structures to purify them of their oppressive and irrational features. As Kant put it: 'Enlightenment of the masses is the public instruction of the people in its duties and rights vis-à-vis the state to which they belong.'²⁷ Given the profound political and social effects of the spirit of criticism, it can be suggested that the central theological question of the nineteenth century was, as one commentator put it, 'the Christian legitimization of the enlightened liberal idea of human rights and individual autonomy'.²⁸

My intention in this book is to illustrate how an awareness of human autonomy and the related rise of historical consciousness increasingly shaped the nature of the theological task through the nineteenth century. But I do so against the backdrop of social and political history, which placed huge constraints on the churches and their theologians. In different ways and in different places, there was a clamour for security, whether a prophetic challenge, a certain sort of feeling, a transhistorical essence, that is, a set of values or virtues that transcended the flux of history, and could survive the dismemberment of authority. By focusing on snapshots from the three cities of Berlin, Oxford and Chicago at critical moments in their development, I show how the fundamental transformations of human autonomy and historical consciousness were contained and shaped, often unwittingly, within redefinitions of the theological task under various social, political and academic circumstances. What will become clear from my discussions of these three vitally important, but very different, cities is that the bonds between theology – as well as the university in which it was located – and the church were gradually loosened. This was equally true of the religion that theology sought to describe and define. Throughout the nineteenth century, an increasingly historicised theology, especially in Berlin and Chicago, had surprisingly little to do with the traditional task of pursuing the truths about God. It did, however, have a great deal to do with Christian piety (which may of course have had something to do with God). At the same time, theology remained closely associated with certain institutional tasks, especially those related to pastoral ministry, for which churches had traditionally been responsible, and which helped churches (and theology) redefine their role under the constraints of the new historical and academic circumstances of the nineteenth century. My central premise is that institutional and political constraints and the concomitant need for compromise – or quite frequently resistance to any compromise – shaped the development of much nineteenth-century theology and forced it in certain directions which were quite different from those that had gone before: as well as becoming historical, in Berlin and Oxford theology also became very practical; and eventually in Chicago it became almost indistinguishable from practical, ameliorative sociology.

*The Problems of Compromise*²⁹

It is fair to say that my very ‘untheological’ approach to the history of theology, which focuses on history, society, and politics, is not something that appeals to all who seek to expound

nineteenth-century theology. To illustrate some of the more problematic issues which emerge from my method, I will consider the twentieth century in both Berlin and Oxford. The kinds of practical compromises made through the nineteenth century have not always had a good press, and some theologians see them as amounting to a fundamental betrayal of the theological task. This problem was noted by one of the great German liberal theologians, Ernst Troeltsch, shortly before his death in 1923. By that stage he was a professor in the philosophical faculty in Berlin, principally engaged with the philosophy of history, and at the same time an active politician, but only vaguely a theologian, since he felt he had outgrown the theology faculty.³⁰ In one of his lectures intended for delivery in England, which he would have given in the Oxford Examination Schools had he not died prematurely shortly before it was due to be given, he wrote in words that resemble Henson's:

Many of us in Germany regard 'compromise' as the lowest and most despicable means to which a thinker can have resort. We are asked to recognise a radical disjunction here, and to choose either *for* or *against*. . . . But twist and turn the matter as you will, the fact remains that all intransigence breaks down in practice, and can only end in disaster. The history of Christianity itself is most instructive in this connection. It is, in the long run, a tremendous, continuous compromise between the Utopian demands of the Kingdom of God and the permanent conditions of our actual human life.³¹

Exasperated by what he regarded as the disastrous lack of a readiness to compromise among his own political leaders at the beginnings of the Weimar Republic, Troeltsch suggested that his pleas for compromise might have a far better reception in England, with its long tradition of parliamentary horse-trading.³²

Earlier in his career, in his often long-winded and somewhat idiosyncratic manner, Troeltsch charted the history of compromises between church and state in his massive book, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches and Groups*, which, thanks to an early translation, remains his best-known work in the English-speaking world.³³ In his analysis of Christian history, Troeltsch frequently points to the close relationship between Christian ethics and its theology and the political authority, structures and legal framework of the wider context in which they are set. On this basis, he discusses the different compromises between church and state that have emerged

throughout Christian history: like Hensley Henson, he emphasised the inevitable reshaping of the Christian ideal as it gained expression in history. The history of Christianity was simply a cycle of conflict and compromise.³⁴

In a similar way, Troeltsch's friend and erstwhile colleague at Heidelberg, Max Weber, also emphasised compromise. Thus, in his classic essay 'Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions', he pointed to the inevitable clashes between what he called 'the religion of brotherliness' and the 'orders and values of this world', which become more pronounced when 'the values of the world have been rationalised and sublimated in terms of their own laws'.³⁵ Religions, for Weber, were to be classified in terms of their approaches and attitudes to the *saeculum*. For Christians, this meant that there would inevitably be a conflict between the purity and anarchy of the Sermon on the Mount, with its moral absolutes such as 'Blessed are the peacemakers', and the following principle: 'You shall help right to triumph by the use of force, otherwise you too may be responsible for injustice.'³⁶

For both Troeltsch and Weber, there was, from the very beginnings of Christianity, a conception of the world as 'other', which was constantly encountered by those seeking to live out the prophetic demands of the Kingdom of God. It was this world that constrained and limited all human activity and was determined by its own forces and laws with which the Christian ethos constantly clashed. This means that John Milbank's claim in the portentous-sounding opening words to his ground-breaking *Theology and Social Theory*, that 'once there was no "secular"', is at the very best misleading. The 'secular' is as much an ancient theological term as it is a modern invention of the sociologists and 'secularization' theorists (of whom Weber was one of the first), whom Milbank criticises.³⁷ Instead, theology (and the churches it serves) have always been constrained by the power of worldly institutions, even when they have sought to challenge those very institutions. The nineteenth century, it seems to me, was no different from earlier periods in the need to compromise, even if the speed of change in that period was somewhat more rapid than it had been in the past. Furthermore, theology was increasingly embedded in institutions that were no longer exclusively controlled by the church, which meant that there was a more direct encounter with increasingly secular forces.

The idea of reading the history of the church and its theology as an inevitable series of compromises and conflicts with the 'secular' has not always been popular – even in the recent history of the University

of Oxford. In 1997, for instance, John Webster, the recently-appointed Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity, gave his inaugural lecture in the Examination Schools entitled 'Theological Theology'.³⁸ In it he discussed the idea of theology in the university, offering a passionate plea for what he called a 're-regionalization' of theology,³⁹ based on its proper subject-matter, God himself.⁴⁰ Much modern theology, he claimed in the lecture, had surrendered to the prevailing norms of scientific reason, rather than trusting in its own 'scientific' language established upon God and his Word.⁴¹ For Webster, the principal problem for modern theology was consequently that of the

steady expansion of certain academic practices, rooted in a universalist anthropology of enquiry and largely detached from particular fields of intellectual work, and the decline of the invocation of theological doctrine in talking about what theology is, as theologians conform their practice to prevalent cultural norms.⁴²

In his own constructive theology, Webster makes it clear that he regards the pursuit of theology as a 'theological task' based upon a distinct form of knowledge which is rooted in God himself. This means that the history of theology is studied in the same way as any other theology, principally for the sake of understanding more about the God of Jesus Christ. Webster, a leading expositor of Karl Barth with an impressive grasp of the breadth of his writing, sees himself as sharing a similar method to his hero. In his detailed expositions, particularly of Barth's earlier writings on the history of theology, Webster reads him as a theologian seeking to gain what he calls

access to a store of language and ideas which enabled him not only to determine why he was troubled by the more recent past of Protestant theology but also to give voice to his growing wonder at the scope and majesty of the Christian gospel.⁴³

Webster's understanding of Barth as a historian sees him as somebody who immersed himself in the depths of the past, not as a 'critical historian', but as what was termed an 'attentive listener'.⁴⁴ This method, Webster holds, is best exemplified by Barth in his lectures on the history of protestant theology in the nineteenth century, which, in their generally sympathetic treatment of the past, are quite different from the rhetorical excess of a text such as Emil Brunner's *Die Mystik und das Wort*, with its blanket dismissal of Schleiermacher.⁴⁵ Attentive listening, Webster holds, produces a

style of theological history that allows the interpreter to hear God speaking through the words of those who had similarly struggled to grasp the eternal truths of the Gospel in the idiom of their day.

Webster's reading of Barth leads him to criticise those historians of theology – including me⁴⁶ – whom he regards as simplifying and distorting Barth's method of attentive listening, often for polemical purposes.⁴⁷ While some scholars, usually of a more liberal persuasion, may perhaps have been a little too keen to be over-rhetorical in their dismissive assessment of Barth's reading of his immediate past, this does not exonerate Barth from the charge of frequent simplification of history and of the complex inter-relationships between institutional and social change and theology. Indeed, it might even be suggested that Webster tells only half the story. Barth's 1956 lecture on 'Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century', for instance, which was the basis for my own critique of Barth's understanding of history,⁴⁸ is – at least to my mind – distressingly inattentive in its listening.⁴⁹ It is as if guns of Flanders and France that Barth imagined from his Swiss enclave finally drowned out his ability to listen dispassionately forty years on from his lectures on the history of theology. Similarly, at the end of his life, in his 1968 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript' to his lectures on Schleiermacher, Barth gave a cursory dismissal of 'everything which flowed from the pens of the German theologians' before the First World War.⁵⁰ This, it seems to me, is hardly to be classified as the most attentive listening. 1918, contrary to some theological myths, was not the year *Null* in German history.

Webster is similarly critical of those who see Barth as a representative of what has been called by Kurt Nowak the 'anti-historicist revolution'.⁵¹ Instead, for Webster, Barth was highly attuned to a theologically-interpreted history which he saw as representing the genuine effort of the interpreter to 'submit both past and present to the judgement by the object of theology'.⁵² For Webster, this turns Barth into a 'theological historian, "describing and understanding" the history [sic] as a "theological" task'.⁵³ According to Barth, then, the historian of theology, which he admits is an aspect of the broader history of the church and university, seeks first and foremost to understand the past as that place where earlier generations of Christians have faced the judgement of their creator. Such a judgement, however, is not conceived as the dialectical encounter with a radically other God, but is instead understood in terms of the ways in which that judgement has been made manifest through the history of the saints. If – as Christians, including Barth

and Webster, maintain – the saints of the past are in some sense still alive,⁵⁴ then history will be read *theologically* in the light of the present participation of the Christian in the communion of saints.⁵⁵

For critical historians, however, this approach has some serious problems. Admittedly, for Christian believers, this style of theological history obviously has much to commend it – and as a theologian I have frequently indulged in it myself.⁵⁶ But when it is read as *history* (rather than theology), my anxiety is that those who maintain such an approach can sometimes understand their fabrications of theological history as if they are *historically* (rather than simply theologically) true. In contrast, I would contend that the theology that history seeks to describe is about a lot more than listening out for the Word of God. Indeed, it is frequently not about God at all. Instead, it is often a discussion of the sorts of compromises that inevitably result when what Christians call the ‘prophetic spirit’ (or its equivalent) is enfolded in institutions and practices. Of course, Barth knew this, and he could be deeply critical of the Church’s frequent bouts of excessive sinfulness, but, as a historian, he did not seem to be able to suspend his belief altogether in the Church as a divine institution. This meant, according to Webster, that

what Barth will not allow is that this recognition requires the historian of the church to refuse to see the subject-matter as anything other than mere religion, culture or ideology, any more than a frank admission of Christian impiety and worldliness requires us to suspend talk of the justification of the ungodly.⁵⁷

However critically aware and however sympathetic Barth might have been to scientific history, on his understanding, the history of the Church and its theology nevertheless always becomes something theological. Consequently, according to Barth, the history of theology is

the history of the church’s coming to terms with the theme given her in Scripture. . . . Church history must rather be understood as the history of the government of the Church by the Word of God, the history of exegesis of Scripture accomplished by Scripture, i.e., by Jesus Christ Himself in the church.⁵⁸

This approach, I would suggest, can make for very bad or at least very misleading history since the subject-matter – God – is usually regarded as being beyond the flux of time and human development. It means that it is unlikely to be very useful in the apologetic task to which Hensley Henson has directed my attention. Divine causality is simply not a very helpful way of explaining to outsiders why things are the way they are.

My unease with the sort of theological history (or 'theological theology') maintained by Webster under the influence of Barth is that since it presupposes the influence of God and asserts divine causality, it can underplay the constraints and the pull of the institutions and forces of the wider social and political world which provided the setting for theology. It is for this reason that this book will make few assumptions about God and his relevance, or otherwise, for the history of theology. Instead, in my discussions of Berlin, Oxford and Chicago, I simply see theology as a human academic activity that takes place predominantly in universities and churches, institutions which were undergoing profound change through the nineteenth century. Theology is obviously a form of intellectual and cultural discourse that seeks to give voice to the principles Christians use to describe their beliefs and actions; but its setting in a state-sponsored university and church (as in Berlin or Oxford) or in a private institution with links to a free denomination (as in Chicago), makes the practice of theology something that can be understood only in relation to its wider context.

Trying to grasp something about the wider context of the three cities under investigation should assist in the complex task of working out why theology developed in such a variety of ways in different places. This means paying proper attention to the authority structures of the state as well as the wider purposes of its ecclesiastical and academic sponsors and paymasters. These are the areas that are open to historical investigation, and, of course, they might even be of help in the apologetic task. This is partly because theology, through the course of its history, has frequently engaged in a degree of critique of those institutions, even if that critique is always circumscribed and constrained by the institutional setting: this was especially true for some of those nineteenth-century theologians who acknowledged the liberation of the human spirit so highly praised by Hensley Henson. This means, in short, that the history of theology will always be principally concerned with the cycle of critical and constructive compromises between Christian Ideals and political realities. I am here following the sort of method outlined by Troeltsch and taken up by many other thinkers.⁵⁹ The history of theology is a history of compromises or efforts at synthesis which have been profoundly shaped by the particular circumstances of the time. Although this method might seem straightforward enough, it is not something that can be taken for granted among historians of theology.

Conclusion

Over the course of this book, I shall describe four different 'compromises' between theology, university and society in three different places. I have chosen Berlin, Oxford and Chicago as representative examples, not merely because they have each exerted a profound influence on the development of theology within their societies, but also because their ecclesiastical, social and political contexts are quite distinct from one another. In each of the three cities, theologians and churchmen sought to relate what they regarded as the true core of Christianity as a lived religion to their rapidly changing world. Theology was not first and foremost about propositions and beliefs, but about the living of the Christian life. I shall also note in passing the reactions of some of the theologians active in each of the three cities (and more widely) who were deeply critical of some of the new compromises and apparently novel ways of understanding the theological task. What will become clear is that the problems of critical history, of political authority, of increasing global awareness, and of the need for social amelioration, profoundly shaped the way in which theology was practised during the nineteenth century. In the next chapter, I begin by describing the birth of the autonomous spirit as a challenge to the authority of the past, with a particular emphasis on the work of the Kant, before describing the closely-related historicisation and systematisation of theology developed in Berlin by Schleiermacher. What is important to note is that their principal emphasis was less on detailed propositional knowledge and understanding of the God who communicates to human beings, than on the practical concerns which result from a faith and trust in that God.

Indeed, it will become clear over the course of this book – even if I seldom address the subject directly – that through the nineteenth century an often somewhat vague piety was usually sufficient to convince theologians that what they were doing remained theological. Experiential religion in several different guises proved remarkably resilient in undergirding theology's academic credibility (or, at least, in allowing theologians to remain religious practitioners). This meant that a significant number of theologians did not always worry too much about defending the truth claims of Christianity. Something like Schleiermacher's feeling of absolute dependence, or the value judgement of faith of the Ritschlian theologians of the late nineteenth century, or Newman's great trust in the church, which was fundamentally a product of the will, served at least temporarily

to counter some of the more damaging effects of scientific and historical scepticism on theology. Apologetics certainly did not take the form of justifying or proving the truth of Christianity, but adopted a far more practical tone.

As we shall see through the course of this book, particularly in relation to Berlin and Chicago, churches – together with their theologians – got on with what was regarded as their real business of assisting people in the task of behaving somewhat better than they might otherwise have done, as well as helping them through the more disturbing features of the chances and misfortunes of human life. This meant that for much of the nineteenth century, the apologetic task was better served by the practical utility of theology rather than its truth. Theology became useful in helping churches to understand what they were doing as social institutions in their wider societies. At the same time, the traditional disciplines of theology, especially biblical studies and systematic theology, were historicised, which meant that there was little, if anything, that was distinctively theological about them. This problem, which raises questions about the very identity of theology, eventually became apparent in each of the three cities under discussion, even if it was not always noted at the time.

Eventually, when other institutions proved rather better at safeguarding human welfare than the churches, there was little left for them and their theologians to do in the practical tasks of social amelioration.⁶⁰ This may explain why, as Hensley Henson observed during the General Strike, twentieth-century churches spent so much time absorbed in liturgical reform: ‘Nero’s fiddling was by comparison an act of grave and responsible importance.’⁶¹ Whether there was a way forward for apologetics and the Christian faith after the historicisation of theology is a question I shall raise at the end of the book. In the next chapter I turn to Prussia, to the elevation of the human spirit, to the historicisation of theology, and to the rise of the University of Berlin in the aftermath of Prussia’s political defeat by Napoleon. I focus on Schleiermacher’s theology as probably the most far-reaching and influential theological compromise of the nineteenth century, but one which introduced new problems into a changing theological landscape. I tell the story of how the liberation of the spirit and the historicisation of theology somewhat accidentally resulted in the supreme clericalisation of theology. If it does nothing else, the next chapter at least makes it clear that warfare can sometimes have some somewhat unexpected, but far-reaching, consequences.