INTRODUCTION

The history of Christian theology has been punctuated by a long-standing and still-unresolved debate over the legitimacy of general revelation in the construction of theological discourse. In particular, there has been rigorous debate within western academic theology for the past 150-odd years as to the role of history in this constructive task. To what extent can and should history *as such* be used as determinative material for the theologian’s task of reflecting upon and re-configuring doctrine? Certainly, if it is to be done, the internal criteria of being and assessment of both history and theological discourse need to be maintained in their integrity. On the one hand, it is argued that the Church cannot ignore the harsh realities of everyday life and existence in its reflection upon doctrine. On the other hand, how can such temporal realities be incorporated without the foundational premises of the Church’s teaching authority—which are predicated upon divine prerogative rather than historical contingency—being diluted?

In part, the debate was initially driven by an enhanced esteem granted to the discipline of history in the 1800s and the correlative scholarly popularity of the so-called quest for the historical Jesus, begun by people like Hermann Samuel Reimarus in the late eighteenth century and epitomised in Schweitzer’s seminal work. These and other developments led to the growth of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (History of Religions School) of biblical inquiry in the nineteenth century.¹ Leading disputants in the arena at that time included Albrecht Ritschl, Ernst Troeltsch and Julius Kaftan. But the imposing figure of Friedrich Schleiermacher cannot be ignored. According to him, ‘history…is for religion the richest source…’, and the contemplation
of it by the pious mind shows it to be ‘the greatest and most general revelation of the deepest and holiest.’ Given that this issue was evidently ‘in the air’ right throughout the nineteenth century, it is perhaps not surprising that the old Thomistic concept of ‘natural theology’ which allows for divine revelation to be mediated through the created order, was dogmatised by the First Vatican Council in 1870. More recently, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Dietrich Ritschl, Delwin Brown and, to a lesser extent Stanley Hauerwas, have entered the argument.

But perhaps the most memorable single event in the history of the debate was the correspondence between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner in 1934. At a time when Nazism was claiming revelatory significance for itself, Brunner dangerously suggested that ‘the task of our theological generation is to find a way back to a legitimate natural theology.’ Barth’s vehement Nein!, which built upon the utter rejection of natural theology that had been decreed in the Barmen Declaration a few months earlier and which shattered forever his friendship with Brunner, highlighted the divisiveness of this issue as never before. But whereas Barth may well have been right in his day it is, in fact, the results of Nazism, as seen in the Holocaust, that provide the chief challenge to his views. In the light (or, perhaps, the shadow) of the Shoah, it is incumbent upon the Church now to decide how matters of history can become ingredient to the process of theology. There is no going back behind the Holocaust, and so Church doctrine must take account of what has been, arguably, as deep a rupture to Christian thought as the Destruction of the Temple was to Judaism. This paper thus intends to take the matter beyond

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Barth’s narrow rejection of history-as-theology, while still wishing to acknowledge the bravery of his stance during the 1930s-40s.

Traditionally, the argument concerning the role of history in theology has been waged amongst the systematicians. There is sense in this, because the core of the controversy is not so much about history per se but about official doctrine and the way in which it is formulated. Because the Church understands her doctrines to be based upon the accurate reception of the Word of G-d⁵, it is quite understandable that she needs to be as clear as possible as to what might constitute a divine word, or in what form it may appear, at any given time. That is to say, the kernel of the entire issue is, and has always been, the answer to the question, ‘What is revelation?’ With this in mind, it becomes clear why there is little or no sense in trying to discern a disciplinary connection between history and theology, or explore the potential role of history within theology, until the various ways in which the Church has understood the discursive process of formulating and enshrining authoritative doctrine, in the light of the revelation of G-d, have been considered.

Clearly, however, the pre-eminent question that the debate opens up is nonetheless the interface between history and theology. To what extent are the two disciplines intertwined? Or alternatively, to paraphrase Kipling, are they so radically different in content and presuppositions that ‘never the twain should meet’? Is there, in fact, or should there even be, an interface between the two? If the answer is no, then the argument is stifled at its inception. Nothing can be learned by either side from the other. Given the historical particularity of, for example, the early Christian creeds—passus sub Pontio Pilato comes to mind—the Chalcedonian formula by which

the person of Jesus Christ was attested to be true G-d and true man (vere Deus, vere homo), and the Deus dixit, in which adheres an historical ‘here-and-now’⁶, this would surely be a regrettable and somewhat short-sighted resolution. If, on the other hand, the answer is yes, what is the nature of the interface? What would it look like, how would it come about, and what discursive impact might it have? Such are the questions ingredient to the debate. The intention of this paper is to suggest that a critically constructive view of traumatic history in particular—aided by reference to the thoughts of Dietrich Ritschl—may provide some answer as to how the debate can be progressed and, indeed, made valuable in the formulation of theological discourse.

REVELATION AND DOCTRINE: THE NATURE OF THE DEBATE

As already suggested, the question of history as such is, in a very real sense, secondary. Key to the debate is the definition of revelation, and the role it plays in the creation of ecclesiastical teaching. There is a strong, and in fact necessary, relationship between the two. Whether one thinks of the people of Israel throughout the Old Testament, or the Church of the New Testament and beyond, both peoples of G-d have had a self-conscious commitment to the realisation that they exist by, through and on the Word of G-d which ‘upholds them in its mighty power’ (Heb.1:3). On the other hand, the process by which these two communities of faith develop authoritative doctrine on the basis of their reception of the divine Word has not always been so clear or, indeed, consistent. There is not space here for a discussion of the role of revelation or Torah within Judaism. However, we do need to think through the ways in which ecclesiastical—that is,

⁵ With the exception of direct quotes, I have opted to use the Jewish tradition of hyphenating the name of the Creator.
Christian—doctrine is proposed with reference to the revealed Word of G-d (whatever that may be!).

The logic of Church teaching rests upon her ability to receive and then pronounce the revelation of G-d. That is, the integrity of the Church as a teaching institution (ecclesia docens) lies in her integrity as a hearing Church (ecclesia audiens). There can be no authentic doctrine—nor, therefore, any authentic public speech from the Church—if there is no authentic hearing by the Church. Fundamentally, therefore, the Church’s role as a locus of authoritative teaching is predicated upon the belief that she is a receptive subject of divine revelation. She is the vessel in which G-d’s self-revelation is enshrined and the medium through which this revelation is proclaimed to the world.

However, while this may be true in a general sense, it is important to note at the outset that there is a difference between the Roman Catholic and Protestant conceptions of doctrine and its formulation. In his *History of Christian Doctrines*, Louis Berkhof reminds us that according to the Catholic view, doctrine (or dogma) ‘is a truth revealed by God, yet at the same time proposed by the Church for our belief.’ The doctrines thus proposed are, of course, deemed to be unalterable, irrevocable and infallible. For the Reformers, the role of the Church was diminished, yet doctrine was for them nonetheless the result of reflection by the Church on ‘the truths of revelation’ which are found in Scripture alone. The main points of divergence between Rome and the Reformers are therefore that for the latter, doctrine was not infallible, nor is it

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taken from anywhere but Scripture, and finally is authoritative, not by virtue of ecclesiastical pronouncement *ex cathedra*, but by its material foundation upon the (scriptural) Word of G-d.8

Against these differences, however, both Rome and the Reformers are convinced of the pivotal role played by the Church in her reflection upon the divine revelation, and therefore of course, on the centrality of revelation to the formulation of doctrine. Statements from the Second Vatican Council appear to bear this out from the Catholic side, when it is decreed that the ‘infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed His Church to be endowed in defining doctrine of faith and morals, extends as far as the deposit of revelation extends…’9 In other words, the truths of revelation provide the limit of certainty around which the formulation of doctrine takes place. Hans Küng, for one, disputes this limit as he argues in his controversial book *Infallible?* that the Curia has widened the scope of its infallibility beyond the confines of revelation.10 That this may be true is not for discussion here. What is of significance at this point is simply to note that, irrespective of limitation, the Catholic Church sees her teaching authority with respect to doctrine as being based on the reception and safeguarding of the revelation of G-d.

From the Protestant side, the situation is similar, if perhaps slightly more tightly constrained. Here, doctrine is related as a unity to the central subject matter of Scripture, in particular the New Testament, which is the act of G-d in Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, ‘confessions and dogmas are in fact summaries of the central theme of scripture.’11 That is to say that the Church’s dogmas and doctrines are intended to express the revelation of G-d, fulfilled in Christ,

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with the science of dogmatics inquiring into the accuracy with which they do so. In this process of expressing the revelation of G-d, Scripture itself is the touchstone. As Calvin says, Scripture ‘carr[ies] its own evidence along with it’ and is the locus of the doctrine which is the foundation of the Church.12 Or in Barth’s words, dogma is a ‘necessary and relevant analysis of revelation.’ To put it the other way around, revelation is ‘the root’ of doctrine.13

As against Catholicism, in which tradition and Scripture play decisive parts in the formulation of doctrine, there is a privileging of Scripture in the typical Protestant view (although in Barth’s mind the ascription of the status of revelation to the Bible is somewhat more ambiguous).14 Thus, in the words of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Communion, the Church exists as ‘a witness and keeper of Holy Writ…besides the same it ought not to enforce anything to be believed for necessity of salvation.’15 However, in spite of this by no means minor difference, it can nonetheless be stated with some certainty that both Catholic and Protestant theology recognise the central importance of revelation—however that may be defined—and ecclesiastical reflection upon it, in the task of constructing theological and doctrinal discourse.

THE HOLOCAUST: A PARADIGM OF REVELATIONALIZED HISTORY?

Having then established the (not surprising) point that Church doctrine is indeed predicated upon the Church’s own reception and subsequent publication of divine revelation, the question is begged as to what this revelation actually is. Bicknell suggests what at first appears to be a fairly

13 K. Barth, Church Dogmatics I/1, 310. (Hereafter referred to as CD).
14 E.g. GD, 202.
broad definition, when he defines revelation as ‘the uncovering by God of some spiritual truth that man’s [sic] mind may apprehend it.’ There is no content ascribed here other than whatever G-d deems a useful spiritual truth. However, he later reverts to a more orthodox view when he states that the primary spiritual truth G-d wishes to unveil is located in the person of Christ; ‘In Him God’s revelation is final and complete.’ And so while no part of G-d’s revelation can ever become obsolete, none of it needs to be ‘supplemented from outside.’ The fullness of revelation, to which Scripture is a witness, is found in Christ (Col.1:19), to whom the Hebrew Scriptures provide preparatory (but nonetheless still revelatory) illumination.

The quandary, therefore, is obvious: if, at least in the Protestant tradition, no part of G-d’s revelation needs to be supplemented from outside the scriptural witness to Christ, what part is left to history? What, in other words, is the extent to which history as such (as opposed simply to ‘tradition’, or indeed to ‘biblical history’) can be incorporated into the scope of revelation so as to play a part in doctrinal construction? One might, of course, ask why this is an issue in the first place. One answer is essentially pastoral in nature. We have already seen that authentic proclamation rests upon authentic hearing. But it could be argued that if the Church is not hearing that which is truly in the world, then it is arguably not hearing G-d at all. Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt.25), in which he states that acceptability before G-d is determined by the extent to which we care for, or alternatively bypass, those in need suggests precisely the sort of revelational concreteness that may be provided by history. Thus, if revelation is regarded as simply the miraculous in-break of G-d’s presence into, but not of, history, then a great question-mark is placed against the here-and-now relevance of the Church’s

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16 Bicknell, The Thirty-Nine Articles, 133.
public authority. Christologically, one might point here to the necessity of affirming Jesus’ true humanity as a rebuttal of any form of docetism. If, soteriologically, Jesus was necessarily and not simply contingently human-historical, why can this not also apply to a necessarily historical aspect to revelation and thus doctrinal construction?

A fuller response, at least from this author, is derived from the perspective of traumatic history. It is at this point that we need to begin considering the potential utility of the Holocaust as something of a paradigm that may be able to propel the discussion forward.

Clearly, or at least according to Rubenstein, Wiesel, John K. Roth and others, the Shoah has problematised the incorporation of historical events into theological narrative, even more so than it had previously been. At least this historical event cannot now be disregarded when doctrine is under discussion (and if this event, then also others must be open to consideration). If revelation is, as Bicknell has said, the uncovering by G-d of a spiritual truth, then the Holocaust sits squarely within the frame, by virtue of its having uncovered the flimsy fabric that surrounds notions such as election, divine providence and, indeed, ‘G-d-talk’ itself. Such concepts are deeply integral to the traditional corpus of Christian revelation-based doctrine. For them to have been so totally shattered by the Holocaust raises the gravest of questions, not only about the doctrines but also about the notion of revelation on which these dogmas have been based. As the German theologian Dietrich Ritschl puts it, the situation in which we do theology now is one in which, for most people, ‘talk of God’s loving election of humanity is invalid…[and] that in the last resort the world is meaningless and God-forsaken.’ As for our ability to trust in the providence of G-d, while the pious ‘may console themselves with the certainty that they and their loved ones will be seen as righteous’, most people—even many Christians—refuse to defer

that security to the eschaton. Because of G-d’s (alleged) failure during the Shoah, more is 
expected and required of his providential care in the here-and-now; in other words, ‘we are much 
less anxious about God’s future judgment…than about [a] repetition of Auschwitz…’ 18

This is not to suggest that the Holocaust is the only piece of traumatic history that can be 
considered to have posed a challenge to orthodox doctrinal assumptions. Hiroshima and 
Nagasaki potentially throw up the same issues, as of course, do the terrible events of 11 
September 2001. This having been said, however, the Holocaust has, for good or ill, come to 
stand as a cipher for all such inexplicable traumas. As Ritschl has said, Auschwitz stands as the 
‘paradigm of evil and suffering in our time.’ 19 Some scholars have taken great issue with this 
and have argued that the Holocaust was an entirely human endeavour: to attempt to find within 
its scope any metaphysical—not to say divine—lessons is both an easy escape for the 
perpetrators and a blasphemy against the victims. On the other hand is the view that, precisely by 
employing theological motifs such as election and revelation in order to justify its murderous 
intent, precisely by virtue of the ecclesiastical passivity and even endorsement of the regime’s 
program, and precisely by its deliberate targeting of the original Covenant People, Nazi 
Germany transformed its genocidal scheme into an eschatological/theological event. Franklin 
Littell, Alice and Roy Eckardt and the late Emil Fackenheim, as well as Germany’s Dietrich 
Ritschl, rank amongst those who have taken the latter view and thus argued that the Holocaust of 
the Jews was (and is) as much a theological as an historical event. 20 The crucial question, 
however, is how the Holocaust might be considered a theological event. In other words, how

18 Ritschl, The Logic of Theology, 129, 253. 
19 Ritschl, The Logic of Theology, 38. 
20 See for example, F.H. Littell, The Crucifixion of the Jews: The Failure of Christians to Understand the Jewish Experience (Mercer University Press, 1986); A.L. & A.R Eckardt, Long Night’s Journey Into the Day: A Revised Perspective on the Holocaust (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988); E. Fackenheim, To Mend the Word:
may it be read theologically, in such a way that it, and similarly traumatic events in history, can influence the construction of systematic theology in a positive way? In other words, if doctrine can only be constructed on the basis of reflection upon revelation, how then can the Holocaust be read as a moment of revelation?

During the middle decades of the twentieth century, any suggestion of revelation being historically contingent was condemned with significant persuasiveness by the arguments against general revelation that were put forward by Karl Barth. The Reformed systematician G.C. Berkouwer also recognised the dangers latent in the acceptance of a revelation that, independent from Christ, perceives a human knowledge of G-d through the media of creation, providence and, indirectly, history. But Barth went further than Berkouwer’s simple acknowledgment of latent dangers. Famously, Barth rejected for a long time any suggestion that revelatory knowledge of G-d could be acquired through nature, history or any human endeavour at all. Consequently, how can even watershed historical events be translated into theological discourse if one agrees with Barth that, while ‘history is a predicate of revelation, revelation is not a predicate of history’? At least for the Barth of the 1930s (his views were different while he was still under the tutelage of Wilhelm Herrmann and were modified again in the post-World War Two years), revelation does indeed become historical but only in the way that ‘a tangent touches a circle’.

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22 CD II/2, 58. See also GD, 59-61.

23 K. Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1933, repr. 1968), 30.
According to Barth, ‘it is fixed that from the side of revelation itself absolutely everything speaks against the possibility of revelation becoming an event…’24 Of course, revelation miraculously does indeed become an event. However, it does so as ‘God’s own time [and thus as] real time’, in direct contrast to human time.25 So, to even debate the extent to which history may be commensurate with G-d’s time of revelation ‘rests upon a portentous failure to appreciate the nature of revelation.’26 To return to the subject of the present paper, therefore, the Barthian premise (at least of the early 1930s) insists that the miraculous ‘becoming an event’ of revelation may indeed ‘signify that revelation becomes history’ but never signifies that history becomes revelation.27 At least in this respect, Barth is no dialectical theologian; there is no ceaseless to-ing and fro-ing between two fundamentally equal poles (of history and revelation), such as may characterise the so-called ‘complementary dialectic’.28 Rather, even when qualified by the admission of miraculous space-time epiphanies of revelation, there is a radical privileging by Barth of the revelation of G-d over against the historical time of humanity.

It should be stressed, by way of an aside, that this disjunction between the two poles is a logical corollary of Barth’s early Römerbrief period (during which the Kierkegaardian infinite qualitative distinction between G-d and humanity was heavily emphasised over against the Feuerbachian ‘Titanism’ of German liberalism), but which was substantially revised when Barth delivered his ‘Humanity of G-d’ lecture in 1956.29 It should also be noted that it was precisely Barth’s distinction between revelation and history that enabled him to author the Barmen

24 CD I/2, 48.
25 CD I/2, 49.
26 CD I/2, 56.
27 CD I/2, 58.
Declaration of 1934 and thus to issue such a strong voice of protest against the prevailing völkisch theology of Nazism and the Deutsche Christen that self-consciously attempted to integrate the revelation of G-d with the advent of Hitler. In other words, this paper is not wanting to suggest that Barth’s approach was fundamentally flawed—it certainly proved to be a useful paradigm in the context of the Confessing Church’s protest against the Nazi heresy.

The contention of this author, however, is that the Barthian reserve is no longer as necessary as it was in the Hitlerian heyday and that, inherent in the modern theological task, is the finding of a way between the ‘Scylla and Charibdis’ of revelation and history. As was mentioned above, it is increasingly being recognised that at least some history—in our case, the Holocaust and perhaps other events of its ilk—is theologically relevant and perhaps even decisive. Barth may well have been scathingly critical of the old Catholic-Thomistic concept of ‘natural theology’, according to which valid revelation is mediated through such things as the created world and history. In this way of ascertaining its knowledge, he says, Catholicism ‘can recognize itself and God’s revelation in [a] constantly available relationship between God and man…’

Revelation is not, therefore, (only) transcendentally above humanity but is also present in creaturely form and is thus available in at least one of its forms to humanity without the need for special divine intervention.

But is not this ‘constantly available relationship’ precisely what the Church, and the world, now need? In order for the Church to maintain a place of relevance in the new millennium—in order, indeed, for the Church to be able to listen authentically to G-d in the world and thus speak authentically about G-d to the world—there must be a way for the

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29 Indeed, Hauerwas suggests that Barth’s ‘humanity of God’ motif was in fact his Christological recovery of natural theology (but note that the recovery has to be Christological). See Hauerwas, With the Grain of the Universe, 159-161.
Church’s theology to deal adequately with, for example, the events of September 11. Census data and anecdotal evidence revealed quite clearly that Church attendance increased markedly in the months after the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. There was, evidently, a very deep yearning to find meaning and solace. Thus, perhaps the Church’s greatest challenge in these days of uncertainty and security fears is to respond to this search with pastoral and theological integrity; to be a source of relevant solace that goes beyond the traditional platitudes of ‘divine and inscrutable providence.’ (To return to Ritschl, there is no point in trying to ‘make sense’ of such tragedies, but rather to ‘seek the meaning of the future, even if it should consist in accepting hopelessness.’) And so, there are crucial lessons for the Church and her theology which can and must be learnt from the Holocaust and other traumatic historical events. Pastoral and social responsibility indeed insists that Church doctrine be able to make sense of such events. Or at the least, that it be prepared to acknowledge its inability to make sense of them. What the Church cannot do is hide behind naively constructed dogmas that fail to take into account the harsh realities of daily life, and yet still claim moral authority.

The question remains, however, how this is to be done in such a way as to maintain both the historicity of the historical events being considered, and the theological integrity of the revelation concept. In other words, if the finding of a bridge between the two disciplines of history and theology is to be achieved, the internal criteria of both must be retained. History must remain thoroughly grounded in the contingencies of the ‘here-and-now’ (or ‘there-and-then’) events and not be allowed to dissolve into metaphysical abstraction. Similarly, theology must retain its emphasis on divine causality and prerogative, and not become manipulated by a
Feuerbachian anthropological impetus. The key to the resolution lies in an examination of the locus of ecclesiastical authority and of the premise upon which that authority is based.

FROM HISTORY TO REVELATION: A MODEL OF TRANSFORMATION

The possible incorporation of historical event into the construction of doctrine impacts upon the authority on which doctrinal discourse is based. Fundamentally, and as has been stated above, the Church’s role as a locus of authoritative teaching is predicated upon the belief that she is a receptive subject of divine revelation. This is the logic alluded to before that lies behind the epistemological and proclamative move from audiens to docens. She is the vessel in which G-d’s self-revelation is enshrined and the medium through which this revelation is proclaimed to the world. Insofar as she is this receptive subject she is also the ecclesia docens, to which the ‘notes’ of the Church—her unity, catholicity, apostolicity, perpetuity and infallibility—are validly ascribed.\(^\text{32}\) Thus, any critical revision of the Church’s teaching authority (her magisterium, in Catholic terminology) must come to grips with its foundational premise, the role of divine revelation in constructing the Church’s decrees.

There have been long and vitriolic debates within professional theology about the extent to which the nature and role of revelation in doctrinal construction sanctions a legitimate perception of revelation in history. These arguments do not need to be reconsidered here. However it can be said that, regardless of the accuracy or otherwise of the Catholic view of revelation, it is surely not inconsistent to suggest that, according to this paradigm, certain revelational truths can be seen within the historical domain. And so why not the Holocaust? Is it

in fact possible that the Shoah exists within theological discourse, not only because of the credibility crisis it poses to Christianity, but much more so because it does indeed reveal certain—perhaps negative?—religious truths about both the Church and her G-d? The Holocaust would thus become a crucial ingredient to any post-modern, post-Auschwitz natural theology. As Ritschl puts it, it is no longer possible to do theology after Auschwitz ‘to the exclusion of this fundamental wound.’

We are faced, then, with the prospect of transforming the Holocaust and the like from ‘mere’ history into something that has revelational import, in its own right, in the construction of theological discourse (although without, of course, surrendering the historical actuality of the Shoah-event). How can this be done? Dietrich Ritschl has offered a novel way in which this transformation might occur, with explicit reference to a redefinition of revelation. Revelation ‘in the traditional sense’, he says, ‘should be avoided in theology… [because] it is a construct produced from a complicated combination of concepts which have become autonomous and which can only be used responsibly and without risk of serious misunderstandings in connection with detailed explanations.’ Moreover, and as this paper and others have argued, revelation needs reconsidering so as to include more naturally key events that fall outside the scope of Scripture but which nonetheless must be made able to inform doctrinal discourse.

Given, therefore, the need for a redefinition, Ritschl prefers the employment of the concept of ‘rediscovery’ as a way of explaining revelation. It is only rarely that the words of Scripture—that is, the written word of (or better, witness to) revelation—make a direct impact upon the believer that then translates into action. More commonly, he argues, there is a

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33 Ritschl, The Logic of Theology, 128.
34 Ritschl, The Logic of Theology, 103
‘rediscovery’ or verification of scriptural truth through a ‘process of inductive knowledge by which a present problem area or task is connected with elements latent in the memory of the church.’

For example, war, dispute and reconciliation can be the rediscovery—in either a positive or negative sense—of the prodigal son story. Likewise, hatred, envy and greed can lead, negatively, to a rediscovery of a central message of the Hebrew Scriptures, simply because they deny so clearly the key concerns of the Tanakh. Such rediscoveries, embedded as they are within the concreteness of practical life, Ritschl terms the ‘occasions of revelation’.

It seems evident that traumatic history—on both the small and large scale—could easily, by this paradigm, be seen as an occasion of revelation, because it would negatively verify many of the revelational truths within the Scriptures, such as covenant theology, philadelphic praxis, the problem of evil, and so on.

The implications of this redefinition are startling to any orthodox Barthian. In his Göttingen Dogmatics, Barth had insisted that the ‘content of revelation is God alone, wholly God, God himself.’ This contention was repeated in Article I of the 1934 Barmen Declaration, according to which ‘Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scriptures, is the one Word of God [eine Wort Gottes]…’ In both Göttingen and Barmen, Barth insists on the uniquely divine specificity of revelation. There is no content in revelation outside of G-d. Even Pannenberg, who wishes to counter Barth’s unyielding stance by positing the option of revelation as an indirect communication by G-d ‘as a reflex of his activity in history’, nonetheless maintains that the content of the revelation is G-d.

But if we take Ritschl’s idea and apply it to history, it becomes possible to think of revelation as revealing things not only about G-d but also about us and the

35 Ritschl, The Logic of Theology, 76.
36 Ritschl, The Logic of Theology, 76.
37 GD, 87.
world. If, as Pannenberg might say, the acts of G-d in history that are indirectly revelatory are indeed acts of G-d, then G-d—and our ‘G-d-talk’—are likewise susceptible to devastating critique. By this paradigm, history—in our case, the Holocaust—is enabled to reveal truths about ourselves, our world, and our G-d. And surely, in an age when the Church, more than ever, needs to be an authentic voice in the human situation, this model of ‘revelation-as-critique’ is crucial to effective proclamation and doctrine.

Of course, perhaps the major correlative question would be: what might the re-configured doctrines (of election, providence, G-d…) look like as a result? The aim of this paper is not to outline the specifics of any such doctrinal changes—that task that would require an entirely separate discussion. Rather, the aim here is simply to suggest a paradigm within which such changes could be made. It is, however, nonetheless possible to provide some pointers.

With respect to the doctrine of election, for example, it seems no longer possible to endorse the traditional assumption that divine election is an election ‘to life’. The Holocaust suggests, perhaps, a more ambiguous view: that, like Jesus, election is first and foremost to death (and if to life, only through and after death). As Mother Judith puts it in André Schwartz-Bart’s The Last of the Just, ‘When will God stop miracling us that way?’ The view that there is something uniquely and positively special in being the elect of G-d, the ‘Chosen People’, is challenged to the extent that not being elect may be seen to be a better alternative! Such a thought cuts across every assumption that has traditionally underpinned both Jewish and

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38 Pannenberg, Revelation as History, 14.
39 Richard Rubenstein would caution us against taking this analogy too far for, as he quite rightly notes, there was a higher divine purpose of salvation in the Christian view of Jesus’ crucifixion—something singularly lacking in the murder of the six million. See Rubenstein, After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 167.
Christian self-consciousness, and serves to show how disruptive the Holocaust potentially is, when used in a critical reconstruction of orthodoxy.

Of even greater significance, for it is the bedrock of every other doctrine, is the way in which our ‘G-d-talk’—our understanding of G-d—is disrupted. The basic reason ingredient to the disruption of election is that the Holocaust forces us to choose between three objectionable alternatives regarding G-d. Either, election is effectively a subjection to undeserved punishment, in which case the electing G-d is capricious and malevolent—in fact, the very opposite of the biblical picture; or, G-d is unable to intervene to stop human atrocities; or, the victims of the Holocaust were indeed deserving victims. Since the last of these alternatives would revitalise the age-old vilification of the Jews that fuelled the Holocaust in the first place and, therefore, could act as a legitimating factor in further assaults upon them, it must strenuously be rejected. The two remaining alternatives force us to reconsider the character of G-d. If the Nazis’ victims were innocent, then we are seemingly left with a choice between the following: that G-d is either maliciously unjust, or powerless. As John Pawlikowski says, ‘the paradigm of an all-powerful God who will intervene to halt human and creational dysfunction is simply dead after the Holocaust…’

The immediate problem with these reformulations of doctrine, of course, is the extent to which they fulfil Ritschl’s notion of a revelational rediscovery. In what ways are scriptural truths verified? Is the veracity of the scriptural claims about G-d and divine election not, on the contrary, challenged? It would be fair to suggest that, while Ritschel allows for a certain degree of doctrinal reformulation, he does not advocate such a radical departure from orthodoxy as the above examples set out.

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But perhaps we are faced with an understanding of G-d that is not so radically different from Scripture, even if it is a clear departure from doctrinal orthodoxy. In other words, if Pawlikowski argues that the Holocaust shatters the paradigm of an intervening all-powerful G-d, perhaps this paradigm was illusory in the first place, and the Holocaust simply forces us back to a view of G-d that is more consistent with both Scripture and history. Does Scripture imply an omnipotent, but impersonal, Deus ex machina whose interventions into the historical world may indeed be as trustworthy and regular as clockwork, but which are singularly lacking in any sense of communion? If this was the case, then indeed G-d would be censurable for the apparently powerless lack of intervention on the Jews’ behalf during the Holocaust, because it would have been entirely out of character. Or, do the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures teach a rather more circumspect view? Not one, of course, in which G-d is both impotent and distant, but perhaps one in which divine automated intervention (an attribute of G-d which, if He has, must logically negate His freedom and make Him a prisoner of His own character) is replaced by a recognition of mutual responsibility. This alternative—often spoken of as co-creatorship—would naturally suggest that the maintenance of the world, its history and its inhabitants, is the responsibility of both G-d and humanity. And so, while the omnipotence of G-d is not challenged, the happy-go-lucky way with which we can defer our ethical praxis, on the flawed assumption that G-d will do it in our stead, is radically and forever overturned. G-d cannot be counted upon always to intervene, and so the duty of creational care falls squarely back upon humanity.

This idea seems to be what Pawlikowski is suggesting. To what extent is it consistent with Scripture? Again, this paper is not an exercise in biblical studies, and so a fuller treatment of the question must be done elsewhere. However, Genesis 1:28 and 2:15 are evident injunctions to be careful stewards of creation, and even Matthew 16:19 implies a certain level of jurisdictional authority. In other words, the seeming powerlessness of G-d during the Holocaust has forced a revision of the paradigm of an omnipotent interventionist G-d, in favour of a view that raises human responsibility to the level of co-creatorship. Moreover, if the Holocaust has thus become a Ritchlian ‘occasion of revelation’, then the content of the ‘rediscovery’ has been, this paper argues, certainly a rejection of the orthodox paradigm of G-d’s power
but—in the true spirit of rediscovery—simultaneously a return to a more consistently scriptural view.

Evidently, by making use of specific events of traumatic history directly relevant to theological discourse and construction, precisely because such events are in and of themselves revelatory, the consequences for traditional doctrines are staggering. What is perhaps most significant about this framework, though, is that the two crucial criteria—of divine prerogative on the one hand, and historical concreteness on the other—are retained in their integrity, with the integrity of magisterial authority thus also being retained. Historical particularity is affirmed because, for Ritschl, it is precisely in their historical given-ness that specific events illuminate doctrinal or scriptural tradition and thus become occasions of revelation. But divine prerogative is also affirmed, as ‘one [cannot] plan in advance what events can become occasions for rediscovery…’ 42, with the moment of illumination thus relying on the activity of G-d in the individual.

The basic question of this paper, therefore, has been to ask how the Church can make accurate confession and theological proclamation in light of traumatic historical realities, without surrendering her internal criteria of being and assessment. One way around this impasse has been to suggest that the definition of authentic Church hearing, upon which authentic proclamation is based, be re-drawn so as to include events like the Holocaust in the language of theology and revelation. It has been argued that this can be done by referring to a Ritschlian reformulation of St. Thomas’ paradigm of natural theology, which seems clearly to allow for historical events to be media of revelational truth. History becomes revelational—not in and of itself, or even as such, but through the illuminating work of G-d that uses history to

42 Ritschl, The Logic of Theology, 76.
verify, positively or negatively, the truth-claims of Scripture. Moreover, revelation is enabled to reveal more than just G-d. If traumatic history in a broad sense is thus transformed into one such medium of revelation, history is thereby enabled to offer a critique of doctrine, but crucially, as a revelational event itself, can do so without the internal dynamics of the teaching authority being upset. Pastorally necessary institutional confession and proclamation could therefore be made, on the basis of revelation and history, without disturbing the validity of the teaching office, or the internal integrity of the disciplines.

It remains to be seen whether or not this process is viable. But this author, at least, suspects that an attempt in this direction needs to be made, so as to enable the Church’s teaching to meet the realities of an increasingly insecure and traumatic world.