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# Ferdinand Christian Baur on Religion: A Historicist Approach in an Idealist Context

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**Abstract:** In this article, I consider F.C. Baur's conception of religion. This has rarely been done because Baur is generally regarded as a historical theologian rather than a theorist of religion. Yet I argue that, if we observe Baur's own historical work, we discover there a remarkably original conceptual work on the notion of religion. For Baur, I argue, religion was a key concept, in that it aided him in his attempt to bring together theological, historical, and philosophical work. Yet the concept of religion had to be of a particular kind in order to suit his agenda. Therefore, the identification of Baur's concept of religion will also help ascertain the coherence of his intellectual activity. In the article, I focus on two of Baur's works, his first monograph, *Symbolik und Mythologie (1824/5)* and his magisterial *Die christliche Gnosis (1835)*. I show that fundamental ideas across these two books should be seen as Baur's own (rather than merely borrowed from Schleiermacher and Hegel), and that there is more continuity between them than readers have often found. In a final section, I discuss briefly an essay Baur devoted to the *Begriff der Religionsphilosophie (1837)*.

**Keywords:** F.C. Baur; mythology; Gnosis; religion; philosophy of religion; idealism; Schleiermacher; Hegel

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## 1. Introduction

Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) is arguably the most important German theologian between F. D. E. Schleiermacher and Albrecht Ritschl. In his influential *History of Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, Karl Barth called him 'the greatest theologian since Schleiermacher' (Barth 2001). Baur's main period of activity falls between 1825 and 1855. Over the course of those thirty years, he published a stream of highly original and pathbreaking works, mostly books and lengthy journal articles, which revolutionised biblical studies, the history of dogma, and church history.[1] Characteristic of his work was his insistence that theology had to be based on a strictly historical foundation. At the same time, he firmly believed that historical work would not be satisfactory unless it included thoroughgoing philosophical reflection. 'Without philosophy, history remains to me forever deaf and dumb', he famously wrote in the preface to his first, major monographic publication (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, p. xi).

This insistence that theological, historical, and philosophical work could never be separated, at least not when the object of study was Christianity, is at the root of Baur's significance as a theologian. All major nineteenth-century theologians defined their work in broader disciplinary terms than is customary (and indeed possible) in the twenty-first century. Scholars celebrated as systematicians, such as Schleiermacher, would still also lecture and publish on historical and exegetical subjects (For this, see now Zachhuber (2023), esp. 122–24). Those who are known today mostly as historical or biblical scholars, for example Schleiermacher's sometime Berlin colleague W.M.L. de Wette, would often also write on philosophical or systematic theological topics (On W.M.L. de Wette, see Howard (2006), esp. chap. 1–4). Yet few made the unicity of these discourses the centre of their activity as much as Baur did. Indeed, few could rival his mastery of a huge range of sources

while making a serious claim to synthesise them into a single philosophical and theological vision.

At the same time, Baur's versatility has also contributed to a series of attacks and criticisms of his work which started during his lifetime and has never since abated. This criticism, admittedly, was frequently motivated above anything else by his opponents' dislike of his scholarly conclusions, especially his interpretation of key New Testament texts and tenets which vitiated the orthodox instincts of many of his colleagues and readers.[2] Where those critics were not content simply to dismiss Baur's work due to its departure from traditional assumptions about Christian origins and Christian history, they would resort to the claim that Baur only arrived at those results because he systematically applied the ideas and principles of German idealism to his historical sources.[3]

The notion that Baur was merely a Hegelian theologian subsequently passed into theological historiography and became a commonplace even among those who were not necessarily hostile to his work.[4] It is for this reason, mainly, that, in Peter C. Hodgson's words, Baur remains 'in the Anglophone world [. . .] the most neglected and least appreciated of the major German theologians of the nineteenth century.'[5] It is, therefore, crucially important to move away from this blanket assessment of his thought in order to regain a sense of his significance as a theologian and scholar of religion.

Studying his concept of religion may be a particularly suitable angle from which to accomplish this necessary reframing of his thought. Not much has been written on Baur's understanding of religion.[6] For this, there is a simple reason: only rarely in his voluminous works does Baur directly venture into debates about the definition of religion, let alone offer a fuller treatment of this concept. If someone were to conclude that Baur, whatever his scholarly merits, was not a theorist of religion, this would prima facie be a plausible claim to make. In this paper, I shall, however, argue for a rather different interpretation of the material. I will suggest that for Baur's unique concern to bring together theology, philosophy, and history, the concept of religion is key. This is because 'religion' to him is a category spanning all three disciplines.

According to Baur, religion is an intellectual attempt to overcome (or 'reconcile') the duality of nature and spirit (or mind: German *Geist*) which human beings experience as fundamental in their lives. This can be done in three principal ways: by privileging nature (*Geist* is merely a variety or a manifestation of matter); by privileging spirit (humans' true home is distinct from their embodied state); or by understanding the two as truly one (*Geist* can exist in nature and transform it). These attempts, Baur believed, play out in history and can only be understood in that context. As historical phenomena, however, religions nevertheless need philosophical interpretation. This historical–philosophical approach to religion will, according to Baur, ultimately reveal the unique significance of Christianity and thus provide theology with a firm apologetic basis for its more specific truth claims.

This hypothesis will now have to be tested against Baur's own works. In what follows, my account will be centred around two key publications. I will begin by examining Baur's first full monograph, and his only major treatment of the history of religions more broadly, entitled *Symbolik und Mythologie* (*Symbolism and Mythology*, 1824/25). While Baur himself credits Schleiermacher as a major influence on his understanding of religion in this book, I shall argue that Baur's conception is in fact more original than he (and most of his subsequent readers) acknowledge. From there, I will, in a second step, consider *Die christliche Gnosis* (*Christian Gnosis*, 1835), one of Baur's most important works and his authoritative treatment of what he calls the Christian philosophy of religion (Baur 1835). In this book, it is Hegel's influence that is most apparent, but I shall once again suggest that Baur's ideas about religion ought to be considered on their own terms rather than as derivative of the thought of his older contemporaries. In a final section, I will briefly discuss a journal article, *Über den Begriff der Religionsphilosophie* (*On the Concept of Philosophy of Religion*), in which Baur responded to a critical reviewer of *Christliche Gnosis* with an attempt to clarify his own understanding of philosophy of religion and its relationship with theology (Baur 1837).

Ultimately, I shall attempt to show that the concept of religion was of pivotal importance for the entirety of Baur's thought. A full analysis of his concept of religion is, therefore, also a contribution to the continuing effort to show the coherence and the inner unity of his huge and diverse literary corpus.[7]

## 2. Baur's *Symbolik und Mythologie*

Baur's first monograph, published in two volumes in 1824/25 under the title *Symbolik und Mythologie oder die Naturreligion des Altertums* (*Symbolism and Mythology or Nature Religion of Antiquity*) is in some ways an outlier among his major publications. While he ultimately cannot hide his underlying theological concerns, the work is first and foremost a contribution to the history of religions and, in particular, the history of 'early' religions which were read by Europeans at the time via their mythologies.[8] At the time of writing the work, Baur was professor at the Protestant Seminary of Blaubeuren, a boarding school for future theologians, and his task was mainly the teaching of the classics (Lincicum and Zachhuber 2022, pp. 2–3). *Symbolik und Mythologie* clearly grew out of this occupation. This may be the reason why, after his appointment to a chair in theology at Tübingen University in 1826, he never again took up the subject matter which stood at the centre of this early work.

Throughout the monograph, Baur pursues three main, interlocking arguments. First, he analyses the mythical texts extant from classical civilization in order to demonstrate their internal, historical relationship. Second, he interprets mythology in this reconstructed form as the characteristic form in which humanity at an early stage of its development had expressed its deepest philosophical and religious insights. Third, he inscribes this early, mythological world view into a historical succession of religious ideas which ultimately leads to Christianity as its fulfilment.

It is in and through the second and third of these concerns that Baur's understanding of religion comes to the fore with particular clarity. In his preface, Baur explains his fundamental intuition as follows. History in its entirety, he argues is 'a revelation of the Godhead', and for this reason, world history must in one sense be the history of a consciousness.[9] This consciousness, however, cannot be that of an individual—although we need to understand it through this analogy—but is ultimately the 'collective consciousness of humanity, whose living unity is the image and the mirror of the divine spirit itself' (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, p. vi).

By taking this approach, Baur claims, we at the same time address the problem of the unity of history in general. As the unity of the individual can only be conceptualised based on that individual's mind (*Geist*), so the unity of the world's history, too, with reference to its 'living original source from which it has sprung', in other words, from the point of view of the deity (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, p. vi). It is for this reason that no other study reveals the truth and unity of history as much as the study of religion:

> And where should such an attempt, if it is ever to be made, bear more fruit than in the place where the spiritual life in its most immediate and greatest expression (*Äußerungen*) presents itself of its own accord: in the history of religious faith? (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, p. vi).

For this reason, Baur continues, he 'sought to understand the mythology of the nations of antiquity as a world-historical phenomenon belonging to the domain of religion and religious history, one which can only be grasped as a unity' (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, p. vi). In other words, the study of mythology to him really is the study of religion, and his ambition in approaching this subject is nothing less than the proof that only religion, reconstructed through mythology, can make us perceive history in its unity and thus its divine origin.

In studying mythology, Baur believes, he grasps religion in its most primitive stage, as nature religion (*Naturreligion*). The identification of mythology and nature religion is expressed in the book's title, thus indicating its significance for Baur's project. This does not mean, however, that his study restricts itself to a consideration of the earliest historical phase

of religion. Rather, he argues, we can only understand mythology from its 'opposition' to Christianity (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, p. vi). Implicit, then, in any investigation of mythology (as nature religion) is always already the recognition of its relative position towards Christianity as the ultimate goal towards which the history of religion tends. We could not understand mythology as nature religion without an awareness of its place in a history which, ultimately, finds its fulfilment in Christianity:

> Just as Christianity, precisely because it is not a human system but divine revelation, can only truly be appreciated from the highest standpoint of world history, so it seemed that it was only possible to know mythology, or nature religion, in its inner essence by placing it in an appropriate relation to Christianity (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, pp. vi–vii).

At this point of his exposition, Baur includes an explicit acknowledgement of the debt he owes to Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*:

> The more determinedly its brilliant and sharp-witted author presents the specific character of Christianity in this work, the greater are the gains for the reconstruction [*Construction*] of any other form of religion, particularly for the one most immediately opposed to Christianity. But [Schleiermacher's] reconstruction [*Construction*] of the Christian faith itself was, of course, only made possible by considering Christianity from the perspective of the philosophy of religion (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, p. vii).

Baur's understanding of religion in his first work has now become fully apparent. Religion is a form of consciousness or *Geist*, both in the individual person and in the world at large. It guarantees their unity, but this unity does not come at the expense of individual parts. Rather, it is a *historical* unity and thus its development or movement through specific modifications is the one and only way it exists as a whole, as well. Religion therefore must be studied historically, but this does not mean that it is to be dissolved into its constituent parts without considering their coherence. 'Without the idea of religion,' he writes, 'the essence of individual forms of religion cannot be understood' (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, pp. x–xi). The whole comes before its parts both epistemically and ontologically.

Moreover, this 'essence' is not an abstract concept, but it is fully revealed in its perfect form, Christianity. For this reason, Baur's study of mythology is not far removed (from his own perspective) from Schleiermacher's presentation of the Christian faith in the *Glaubenslehre*. Schleiermacher, according to Baur, presents the 'specific character of Christianity' 'from the perspective of the philosophy of religion', and for that reason his work also contributes to the *Construction* of any other form of religion.

In Baur's own presentation, then, his theory of religion at this point is practically identical with the one he had found in Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*. Yet even the most Schleiermacherian interpretation of Baur's early position would have to qualify this assessment.

To begin with, it is unclear that Baur ever embraced Schleiermacher's concept of the 'feeling of absolute dependence' as the basis of religion.[10] For Baur, the fundamental problem religion addresses is less that of our activity and passivity in relation to the world, but rather that of the world's unity and diversity and thus the duality of mind and nature.[11] While both theorists speak of 'self-consciousness' in connection with their theories of religion, the use of the same term masks rather different underlying conceptions.

A second observation is that Baur reverses the thrust, so to speak, of Schleiermacher's theory. While Schleiermacher saw history as the horizon from which to understand the evolution of religion, what interested him primarily was the concept of religion as God-consciousness and its perfect realisation in Christianity (Schleiermacher 2003, pp. 60–80 (§§7–9)). For Baur, by contrast, the study of history was an end in itself. His aspiration was to write a history of religion, and the value of Schleiermacher's theory, therefore, depended for him on its usefulness for this purpose.

Finally, while Baur ultimately shared Schleiermacher's concern with the understanding of Christianity as religion (even where his overt purpose was the exploration of 'nature religion'), in this, too, his emphasis was more strongly on the historical side than was the case for Schleiermacher. For all his emphasis on unity and the 'idea of religion', Baur was, and remained, a historical scholar whose primary work consisted in the critical interpretation of sources. While he adopts the principle that through *Wissenschaft* the 'spiritual life of the nations' must be 'recognised as one great whole' and accepts that this only becomes possible by a philosophical approach to history (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, p. xi), such a perception, to him, had to be the result of historical scholarship and could always be critiqued in light of the critical results of such scholarly work.

In sum, *Symbolik und Mythologie* offers an approach to religion through the study of mythology. Baur understands mythology as representative of nature religion, the most primitive stage of religion. In stark opposition to nature religion stands Christianity as the religion of *Geist*, but this opposition is nevertheless integrated into a historical development which necessarily proceeds from the lowest to the highest and can be perceived as one only from this angle. This approach suits Baur for whom historical, philosophical, and theological interests can never be fully separated.

## 3. Religion in Baur's *Christliche Gnosis*

Baur's *Mythology* was not, as far as one can see, a successful book. Friedrich Creuzer, on whose *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen* Baur had evidently modelled his own contribution, was dismissive about it, and it is unclear that the work left any traces in the extensive contemporaneous debates about mythology and the origins of religion.[12] While Baur continued his research into the broader history of religions, he never again attempted anything as ambitious as he did in his first published book. That said, his underlying concern with religion in its philosophical and historical dimensions remained at the core of his work for at least the next fifteen years. It now became foundational for Baur's extensive writing on the history of Christian doctrine.

The key source for identifying Baur's abiding interest in religion is his remarkable monograph *Die christliche Gnosis* (*Christian Gnosis*, 1835).[13] As in the case of his work on mythology, it is the subtitle that gives away Baur's peculiar approach to his subject matter by informing readers that Baur's presentation of Gnosis was, at the same time, that of 'the Christian philosophy of religion'. However intuitively implausible this identification of Gnosis with the particularly Christian form of the philosophy of religion may seem to be, the title accurately describes Baur's approach in this monograph.

In the book, Baur sets himself three principal goals.[14] First, he conducts an historical investigation of late ancient Gnosticism. Second, he seeks to argue that Gnosis, rightly understood, is 'the Christian philosophy of religion'. His third interest follows from the second. Insofar as Gnosis in Baur's specific interpretation is apparently not limited to its late ancient guise, its history extends beyond the early centuries of the Christian era. Baur therefore, devotes a considerable part of his monograph to the subsequent history of the Christian philosophy of religion. This part culminates in a lengthy section on three of Baur's contemporaries, F. W. J. Schelling, F. D. E. Schleiermacher, and G. W. F. Hegel.

Baur's versatility is evident from the different approaches and registers he employs in pursuit of this complex agenda. Where his aim is the reconstruction of ancient Gnosticism, we mostly encounter Baur, the scholar of historical Christianity, who engages both the historical sources available to him at the time and the more recent literature by scholars such as Jacques Matter (1791–1864) and August Neander (1789–1850) (Matter 1828; Neander 1818). In his pursuit of the other two aspects of his work, however, Baur's interest in the theory of religion comes to the fore.

The key question for readers then and now, surely, is why he thinks that Gnosis should be understood as the specifically Christian form of the philosophy of religion. Early on in his book, Baur states his case as follows:

> Among all the peculiarities which present themselves to us in Gnosis, possibly none stands out more clearly, and there is none other that so obviously and to such a profound degree penetrates to its essence, than the relationship it has with religion. Religion is the proper object Gnosis deals with; but not, in the first instance, religion as an abstract idea, but rather religion in the concrete shapes and positive forms in which it historically (*historisch*) objectivized itself at the time when Christianity came into existence (Baur 1835, p. 18).

Baur here does not yet explain what basis in the sources his interpretation has, but his statement is pivotal, nonetheless. What it shows is that Baur continues to think of religion as primarily a historical reality. The Gnostics are philosophers of religion not by virtue of having a formula or definition of religion but by conceptualising religion *within history*. At first sight, this could be read as a delimitation of the specifically Gnostic approach to religion. In this reading, Gnostics were a subset of philosophers of religion insofar as their interest was directed more at the historical manifestations of religion rather than its abstract definition. Yet it is unlikely that this is what Baur has in mind. After all, his argument is that Gnosis is 'the' Christian philosophy of religion. It therefore stands to reason that this peculiarity of the Gnostic approach to religion is, in Baur's view, normative for the approach Christian thinkers ought to take. If so, it indicates that Baur, on this point at least, did not change his standpoint from the one we encountered in *Symbolik und Mythologie*. Philosophy of religion deals with the concrete manifestations of religion and for this reason has to be historical in its approach.

How then is Gnosis the Christian philosophy of religion? To Baur, Gnostics are Christian philosophers and, as such, convinced of the superiority of their own faith. In order to establish this truth, however, they accept that argument is needed, and such argument must ultimately rest on comparison. A comparative treatment of religions, however, cannot be accomplished without a concept of religion. The introduction of the concept of religion is thus from the outset motivated by an apologetic agenda. For this reason, Baur thinks, Gnosis is misunderstood if reconstructed purely as a philosophy:

> Whenever the essence of Gnosis is located in philosophical or theological speculation—as is often the case—this determination needs to be corrected in the following point: the speculative [idea] must not be considered the object of Gnosis in and of itself, [that is,] in the manner in which philosophy is engaged with it; rather, it may only be considered the object [of Gnostic thought] in so far as it is given in the content of the positive religions to which Gnosis relates itself (Baur 1835, p. 19).

The Gnostics are thus engaged with 'concrete' religions in two ways: on the one hand, they deal with religions as historically realised; on the other hand, their concern for the concept of religion can never be detached from the 'content of the positive religions', that is, from specific doctrines with which believers of these religions identify.

This qualification does not mean, however, that Baur has second thoughts about the philosophical character of Gnosis. Quite the contrary:

> Gnosis is only history of religion insofar as it is, at the same time, philosophy of religion, and the characteristic way in which these two elements and tendencies—the historical and the philosophical—have mutually penetrated each other and bound themselves into a whole, also provides us with the proper concept of its essence (Baur 1835, p. 21).

It is evident that Baur ascribes to the Gnostics precisely the approach to religion which he himself believes ought to be accepted by the modern scholar and which he previously applied to the 'nature religion' of antiquity. In the specific way in which he describes the outworking of this principle, however, we can begin to observe subtle changes from his earlier understanding of the matter. He explains the 'Gnostic' understanding of religion as follows:

> The idea of religion coincides for Gnosis with this [idea's] essential and necessary content, which is the idea of the Godhead. For Gnosis, therefore, the history of religion is not merely the history of divine revelations, but these revelations are simultaneously the process of development in which the eternal essence of the Godhead itself goes forth from itself, manifests itself in a finite world and splits itself from itself in order to return into an eternal union with itself through this manifestation and this self-bifurcation (*Selbstentzweiung*) (Baur 1835, p. 22).

Baur had previously argued that the historical and the philosophical approaches to religion among the Gnostics 'mutually penetrated each other and bound themselves into a whole' (Baur 1835, p. 21). Here, he describes the details of how this mutual penetration is to be understood. The history of religions is not merely a succession of religious ideas or divine revelations, but it is ultimately the history of the divine in its finite manifestations and its eventual return to itself.

One may find in the rejected alternative the position Baur had originally adopted from Schelling and Schleiermacher. He now advances a further argument, according to which the divine *Geist* is itself historical and only reveals itself through a history that is as much divine history as it is the history of the world. This dual perspective is possible because the history of *Geist* consists in its development from pure simplicity via its self-divestment to its final reconciliation with itself.

It is clear that Baur is here drawing on Hegel's philosophy of religion.[15] Hegel's lectures were only published posthumously in 1832, and there is no indication that Baur was familiar with the ideas influentially developed in this text before that date (Hegel 1832). *Christliche Gnosis*, published three years later, is Baur's first major work in which the influence of Hegel's thinking is brought to bear on his key interests of religion, history, and philosophy. True to form, Baur acknowledges this fact in his preface to the work, albeit in an anonymised reference to the 'most recent philosophy of religion' (Baur 1835, p. viii). For this reason, it has been convenient for students of his oeuvre to consider *Christliche Gnosis* as the point of transition from an earlier period in which Baur was under Schleiermacher's influence to his more mature phase as a Hegelian theologian.[16]

This assessment, however, is problematic, certainly when it comes to Baur's conception of religion. As we have seen, in *Symbolik und Mythologie* Baur's understanding of religion was more independent from Schleiermacher than his own presentation suggested. What we find in *Christliche Gnosis* is that in important ways Baur's approach to the problem of religion has not radically changed compared to his earlier work, despite the fact that Hegel has now replaced Schleiermacher as the theorist whose work Baur cites as his primary inspiration.

I shall have to return to the question of how Baur's account of religion in *Christliche Gnosis* is related to Hegel's theory, but for now I would suggest that Baur's own statements of intellectual dependency have to be taken with a grain of salt. It was Baur's own research that primarily determined the broad outlines of his approach to theoretical and speculative issues, even if one should not doubt that he genuinely felt enriched and even intellectually oriented by the philosophical and theological writings of his older contemporaries.

As we have already seen, Baur's own intuition was twofold: first, religion had to be understood both historically and philosophically because religion as a phenomenon was not 'abstract' but existed only in concrete religions. Second, these concrete realisations could only be conceived as instantiations of religion in philosophical analysis, more specifically an analysis driven by a prior awareness of the concept (*Begriff*) of religion. This intuition becomes immediately intelligible once one takes into account Baur's own academic work as a historical theologian with philosophical aspirations. In other words, he developed a theory of religion that could make sense of the complexities of his own scholarship.

As for the concept or *Begriff* of religion, *Symbolik und Mythologie* used the dualism of mind or consciousness and nature without, however, explaining fully what this meant. Only Baur's claim that nature religion ultimately needed the contrast with Christianity to be properly understood indicated his idea that religions were classified based on the place

they give to this pair of opposites. Here, *Christliche Gnosis* provides further clarification of Baur's views.

According to Baur's analysis, the Gnostics themselves considered the 'religions' they acknowledged in a specific hierarchy: 'Christianity stands above Judaism, while Judaism is granted a certain superiority above paganism' (Baur 1835, p. 25). Paganism is considered the religion of nature, and thus forms the lowest rung of the evolution of religious history. Christianity, by contrast, is the highest religion, the religion of salvation, 'the religion of absolute truth and absolute knowledge' (Baur 1835, p. 25). Judaism hovers in between the two as it is associated with the sharp dualism of nature and *Geist* represented by the principle of creationism (Baur 1835, pp. 27–28).

What is the argument for Christianity's absoluteness? Given Baur's emphasis on the opposition of nature and spirit in the Gnostic approach to religion, it cannot surprise that Christianity has to prove its dignity as the highest and most accomplished religion by bringing these two together. In this way, it can be the religion of redemption or reconciliation, the religion in which spirit is incarnate in nature. Christology is thus the key to the absoluteness of Christianity, and the touchstone for every Christian philosophy of religion must be its ability to explain how this reconciliation came to pass in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (See Zachhuber 2013b, pp. 35–36).

The ancient Gnostics, however, failed badly in this task. As is well known, their Christology was docetic (Baur 1835, pp. 260–65). Their Christ does not 'really' become human. In Baur's analysis this means that Christ ultimately is a spirit figure who only *seemingly* entered a human body. As a result, spirit and nature are not truly reconciled in Gnosticism. Gnostic Christianity remains dualistic; its philosophy cannot conceptualise the unity of spirit and nature which is the truth of religion. Ancient Gnosticism thus, according to Baur, correctly identified the task of the Christian philosophy of religion, but it was unsuccessful in carrying out this task.

This, however, may not have been such a bad thing, as it explains why there is not only a history of religion which, in a sense, comes to its fulfilment in Christianity (Baur has nothing to say about Islam), but also a *history* of the Christian philosophy of religion. Throughout the centuries, Christian thinkers again and again seek to resolve the same difficulty. Baur spends a considerable part of *Christliche Gnosis* charting the subsequent history of Christian philosophers, but his analysis inevitably arrives again and again at the conclusion that their attempts at showing the unity of nature and spirit in the Incarnate remain ultimately unsuccessful. This is even true for the most recent attempts by Schelling, Schleiermacher, and Hegel with which the book ends (Discussion in Zachhuber 2013b, pp. 38–47).

That said, Baur is here clear that Hegel's version is the most accomplished to date. Schleiermacher is reconstructed as the theorist of subjective religion who cannot explain how the stages of intra-mental conceptualisation are related to the external history of religion. Hegel's theory of absolute *Geist*, by contrast, offers the means for overcoming the duality of subject and object.[17]

Despite the place of honour Baur grants to Hegel's philosophy of religion in his own account of *Christliche Gnosis*, it is far from clear that in his theory of religion he follows in Hegel's wake. For Hegel, religion was one stage in the history of the absolute spirit characterised by knowledge of *Geist* in the form of representation (*Vorstellung*).[18] For Hegel's own understanding of the evolution of religion (as well as its eventual transformation into philosophy) the tension between the true content of religious knowledge and its ultimately insufficient pictorial form is crucial. While this is too brief and superficial a sketch of Hegel's concept of religion, it should suffice to show that it is rather different from the understanding of religion underlying Baur's argument in *Christliche Gnosis*.

This result merely confirms the earlier impression that Baur's regular claims to follow in his views on religion the theories of one of his famous, older contemporaries, have to be taken with a degree of scepticism. Baur was, in fact, more original than he gave himself credit for. While his views on religion evolved and changed, and while he is no doubt

right to acknowledge that the publication of works such as the *Christian Faith* and, later, Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* impressed and stimulated his own ideas, there are assumptions underlying Baur's work on religion that he retained with remarkable persistence for a considerable part of his intellectual career. These principles should be considered as Baur's own, original concept of religion.

## 4. Baur on the 'Concept of the Philosophy of Religion'

In the final part of this essay, I will consider a piece of writing by Baur that has hardly found any attention among Baur scholars or, indeed, among those studying religious thought under the influence of German idealism. It is a fifty-page-long article with the title *Über den Begriff der Religionsphilosophie* which Baur wrote in 1837 (Baur 1837). The essay responds to some early reviews of *Christliche Gnosis* and is thus directly connected with Baur's major publication on the philosophy of religion. It is remarkable that Baur published the article in the *Zeitschrift für speculative Theologie*, an influential organ of the Hegelian School edited by Bruno Bauer. It is Baur's only publication in this journal and perhaps an indication that, at this point, he hoped to be more recognised among the members of the school.

The chief criticism to which Baur responds in his article is this. If defining philosophy of religion involves the assessment of all the crucial truth claims of religion; if, in particular, key doctrines such as the Christological dogma are included under the purview of the philosophy of religion, what room is left for theology? As one of Baur's reviewers, Friedrich Rudolf Hasse, put it:

> There must also be an immanent knowledge of Christianity, i.e., one which knows Christianity from the perspective of the inmost point of its own interior, without having mediated itself through reflection on other forms (*Gestalten*) of religion. Now, this is precisely what is understood as theology in a higher sense of the word (Quoted in Baur 1837, p. 370).

Baur, characteristically, rejects this view:

> Immanent knowledge of Christianity in this sense, I believe, must be denied. If Christianity is to be known from the perspective of the inmost point of its own interior, it can only be known as the absolute religion; however, Christianity will not be known as the absolute religion based on itself [alone], but only based on the idea of religion (Baur 1837, p. 371).

There is, in other words, no space for a fideist withdrawal from the world of critique and speculation. Christians have no right to think of their own faith as unique *without* the intellectual effort of showing this from a comparative perspective. This perspective, however, has to be philosophical. Nevertheless, Baur accepts that the precise definition and delimitation of philosophy of religion is something in need of further elaboration. He therefore offers a threefold division of possible interpretations:

In the first, he writes, philosophy of religion signifies

> [. . .] all that was otherwise counted as part of so-called natural religion, or natural theology: the development of the concept of religion and of those doctrines that were commonly differentiated from the positive content of Christianity as knowable by reason, such as doctrines about God, freedom, and immortality (Baur 1837, p. 368).

He associates this approach to philosophy of religion with Christian Wolff, whose *Theologia naturalia* rested on the assumption that it was 'possible to draw a determinate dividing line between the natural and the supernatural, between the rational and the supra-rational.' (Baur 1837, p. 368). The reader of Baur's earlier work here recognises the 'abstract' concept of religion from which Baur always sought to distance himself.[19]

His main objection to this approach here, however, is not that this is an abstract understanding of the discipline, but that it presupposes a hermetic distinction between

the ideas of natural theology and the principles of revealed religion. Wolff's approach therefore became untenable where the division between reason and revelation was no longer considered as categorical. The consequences for the philosophy of religion were far-reaching:

> There then seems to be no reason why the concept of the philosophy of religion should not also include whatever must by reason be recognized as belonging to the essential content of revealed religion. Consequently, the history of the philosophy of religion would also have to extend itself to include the whole series of efforts by which reason or philosophy from the earliest times on sought to arrive at a clear articulation of the teachings of the Christian faith (Baur 1837, pp. 368–69).

This, it would seem, is precisely what Baur himself proposed in *Christliche Gnosis* and elsewhere: an understanding of philosophy of religion that would include doctrines such as Christology within its purview. Here, however, Baur chooses a more cautious approach. He argues that it would be 'an inappropriate, overly vague determination of the concept' to understand it in such a broad sense that it includes 'by far the largest part of the so-called History of Dogma' (Baur 1837, p. 369). Instead, he proposes the following division:

> [T]here [is] every good reason to delimit the domain of philosophy of religion more narrowly, and accordingly assign to Christian philosophy of religion only the Christian religion as its object, just as Christian theology in the strict sense can only have Christian dogma for its object (Baur 1837, p. 369).

As soon as we use the term 'Christian religion', Baur maintains, we adopt the comparative perspective and are, consequently, in the domain of the philosophy of religion. This philosophy, then, has the task of determining the essence of Christianity insofar as it is religion:

> What else then is the Christian philosophy of religion in its most proximate and most immediate concept than the reflection on the relationship between Christianity and the two religions preceding it, paganism and Judaism, as well as the determination of this relationship on the basis of the concept of religion, which is individualized in the positive, historically given religions, and which, in them, divides itself into the moments that were contained within the concept in themselves, in order thereby to realize itself? (Baur 1837, p. 370).

With this statement, it seems, Baur has restated his understanding of the Christian philosophy of religion as he developed it in *Christliche Gnosis* on the basis of his own earlier work in *Symbolik und Mythologie*. And yet, there is a difference which Baur, however, seems unwilling to acknowledge. His insistence that religion can only be studied in and through 'positive' historical religions would seem to imply that the content of these religions, their specific ideas, mythologies and, where applicable, theologies, are the object of their comparative historical–philosophical investigation. In fact, he expressed himself to this effect in *Christliche Gnosis*, where he observed that the Gnostic philosophy of religion was always conducted based on the 'content of the positive religions' (Baur 1835, p. 19).

Here, however, he seeks to draw a dividing line between the philosophical approach aimed at the concept of religion as historically manifest in a particular religion on the one hand, and dogmatics (including the history of dogma) on the other. How is this distinction established? How is it justified? The truth is that Baur's arguments are hardly more than pragmatic. He concedes that 'the particular history of Christian dogma also has a very close relationship indeed with the philosophy of religion', but asks the following:

> How much would the history of the latter have to lose sight of its actual task if it were to follow in their entire progression all theological disputes and negotiations which might offer something of significance to it? (Baur 1837, p. 372).

In the end, Baur's essay, which is his only explicit treatment of the 'concept' of the philosophy of religion does not offer much that goes beyond his earlier, historical mono-

graphs. In response to the critique that his understanding of the philosophy of religion would leave no room for theology, he merely concedes a division of labour for practical purposes without, however, addressing the substantive questions arising from his own, expansive concept of the philosophy of religion.

## 5. Conclusions

On one occasion, Baur made the concept of the philosophy of religion the main topic of a publication. It is telling that this text is among the less informative with regard to his understanding of religion and the philosophical approach to its study. Baur worked best when he addressed historical topics. It is his engagement with historical material, whether it is the pre-Christian mythology or ancient Gnosis, he finds himself stimulated to reflect on broader, methodological, and even speculative questions, as well. Baur's neglect as a theorist of religion is thus, in a sense, understandable. The genre in which today's scholars of religion expect such concepts to be developed, the thematic or systematic treatise, is hardly to be found among Baur's writings, and where it may exist, it can easily disappoint.

I have nevertheless argued in this essay that Baur has extremely interesting, albeit controversial, things to say about the study and the conceptualisation of religion. In order to discover his ideas and insights, it is, however, necessary to follow Baur into his own historical explorations. While investigating historical phenomena, he develops, along the way, so to speak, his most stimulating and most original reflections on the topic of religion. In fact, I have argued that the originality of his own reflections is often unduly downplayed by his habit of trumpeting his most recent philosophical or theological influence. His readers cannot be entirely blamed for drawing the conclusion that Baur's theoretical framework was borrowed—initially from Schleiermacher and later from Hegel—given that he himself seems keen to create this impression.

Closer scrutiny can, however, reveal that Baur's conception of religion in its outlines is both relatively stable and, arguably, the product of his own scholarly and intellectual intuitions more than has often been recognised. This is not to deny that Baur was genuine where he wrote of the impression Schleiermacher's or Hegel's publications had made on him. His mind was highly receptive, and he was eminently gifted in his appropriation of external stimuli to the furtherance of his own work.

Still, there is good reason to believe that the foundations of Baur's understanding of religion are his own. To him, it was clear that such study had to be conducted both historically and philosophically. The concept of religion gained its significance in this connection, or so I have argued, as embracing these dimensions. Baur felt that a truly historical study of Christianity had to embed it in the world of religions, but in order to do so, a concept was required that held this entire field together, rather than isolate Christianity from its religious environment.

This concept was 'religion', but Baur saw it not only as a useful cultural universal, but rather as a speculative term which, in philosophical interpretation, revealed the history of religions as eminently meaningful. In and through the study of this history, Baur believed, the world with its duality of nature and spirit (*Geist*) could become intelligible, as would humanity's place in it, and its ultimate source in God. In religion, human beings seek to reconcile nature and spirit. Religions therefore always tend towards the unity of those two principles, but their reconciliation was only fully accomplished in Christianity.

Christianity, for Baur, is absolute religion, but because of the unique position it holds in the world of religion, it can only be appropriately studied in a philosophical and historical key. For this reason, the Christian philosophy of religion emerges right at the historical origin of the religion, in ancient Gnosticism. No Christianity without philosophical reflection—Baur certainly believed that, even though he also recognised the ambivalence of this insight. Philosophical reflection of the Christian faith held the promise of its rational affirmation as absolutely true, but it could also go awry, as in fact it did in ancient Gnosticism as well as in other, later forms Baur studied. Nevertheless, there was no alternative to it.

It is this complex and inevitably problematical understanding of religion which Baur develops in the context of his historical work, but which also, arguably, forms the lynchpin of his historical studies.

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## Notes

1 A full bibliography in Lincicum and Zachhuber (2022, pp. 214–20). The most important existing portrayal of Baur in English remains Hodgson (1966). The fullest account in German of Baur's life and works is Fraedrich (1909). Cf. also Scholder (1961); Geiger (1964); Harris (1975); Zachhuber (2013b); and the studies collected in Bauspieß et al. (2017).

2 These attacks intensified with the publication of Strauss (1835–1836). Baur, as Strauss' teacher, was dragged into the controversy and publicly attacked. See Lincicum and Zachhuber (2022), chap. 14.

3 See Baur's own eloquent complaint about this kind of criticism in Baur (1841–1843), 1:iv–xxiv. English translation in Lincicum and Zachhuber (2022), pp. 78–87.

4 See Hodgson (1966) pp. 2–4 for a summary of this view (which the author himself criticises).

5 Peter C. Hodgson, 'Translator's introduction', in Bauspieß et al. (2017), p. v.

6 But see now Murrmann-Kahl (2021). The whole work may be consulted for debates about the concept of religion among German theologians in the nineteenth century. For the earlier debate see Stroumsa (2010). The most extensive history of debates about religion remains Feil (1986–2007).

7 Murrmann-Kahl (2021, pp. 399–400) argues that Baur in his final decade adopted a fundamentally altered understanding of religion that was more influenced by Kant than by his earlier idealist conversation partners. This interesting claim will need further investigation, but is not examined in the present paper.

8 For the early nineteenth-century interest in and study of mythology, see Williamson (2004, chap. 1–4).

9 Baur (1824–1825) vol. 1, p. v. All English translations are taken from Lincicum and Zachhuber (2022) unless otherwise indicated. They can be easily identified there from the pagination of the original German. Cf. here also Schelling (1978), p. 211: history is the 'progressive, gradually self-disclosing revelation of the Absolute'.

10 For Schleiermacher's definition see Schleiermacher (2003, pp. 32–40 (§4)). Baur's presentation of the *Begriff* of religion in chapter two of *Symbolik und Mythologie* (104–8) takes up Schleiermacher's language from the *Glaubenslehre*. Thus, religion is defined 'in its most general meaning' as 'the consciousness or feeling of dependence on God' (104). Carl E. Hester has, however, observed that 'the first chapter of *Symbolik und Mythologie* was already complete before Baur had read Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre*': Baur (1993), p. 154.

11 It is arguable that Baur here draws on F.W.J. Schelling's philosophy of identity: Zachhuber (2013a).

12 Creuzer (1837). Creuzer inserted the following statement into the third edition of his work: 'Das gleichmäßig betitelte Werk von F. Chr. Baur erschien bald nach der zweiten Ausgabe des meinigen. Es würde mir wenig anstehen, die Lobsprüche zu wiederholen, die er ihm besonders in der Vorrede ertheilt, und ich muss selbst den ablehnen, dass es in 'ächtphilosophischem Geiste' geschrieben sey (Vorrede S. VIII), hingegen aber auch seine Ausstellungen auf sich beruhen lassen; wobei er mir aber auch verzeihen wird, wenn ich sein aus den Schriften von Karl Ritter und den meinigen über ein Schleiermachersches Fachwerk aufgebautes System zu künstlich finde.' Creuzer (1837), vol. 1, p. xv.

13 On this work, see O'Regan (2001); Simuț (2015); Drecoll (2017); and Peter Hodgson, 'Editor's Foreword' in Baur (2020).

14 On Baur's argument in *Die christliche Gnosis*, see Zachhuber (2013b), pp. 25–50.

15 On *Selbstentzweiung* in particular, see Inwood (1992, pp. 35–38).

16 On Hegel's influence on Baur, see Wendte (2017).

17 According to Baur, therefore, the Christian philosophy of religion has been 'perfected' or 'perfectly realised' in Hegel: Baur (1835), pp. 720–21. See Zachhuber (2013b), pp. 42–43.

18 On Hegel's philosophy of religion, see Hodgson (2007).

19 Note in particular Baur's comment in Baur (1835), p. 555, n. 5. 'There hardly is a greater antithesis to Gnosis than Wolff's natural philosophy. While it *wants* to be philosophy of religion also, its God is merely the abstract, rational concept of the *ens perfectissimum* . . .' (My own translation).

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