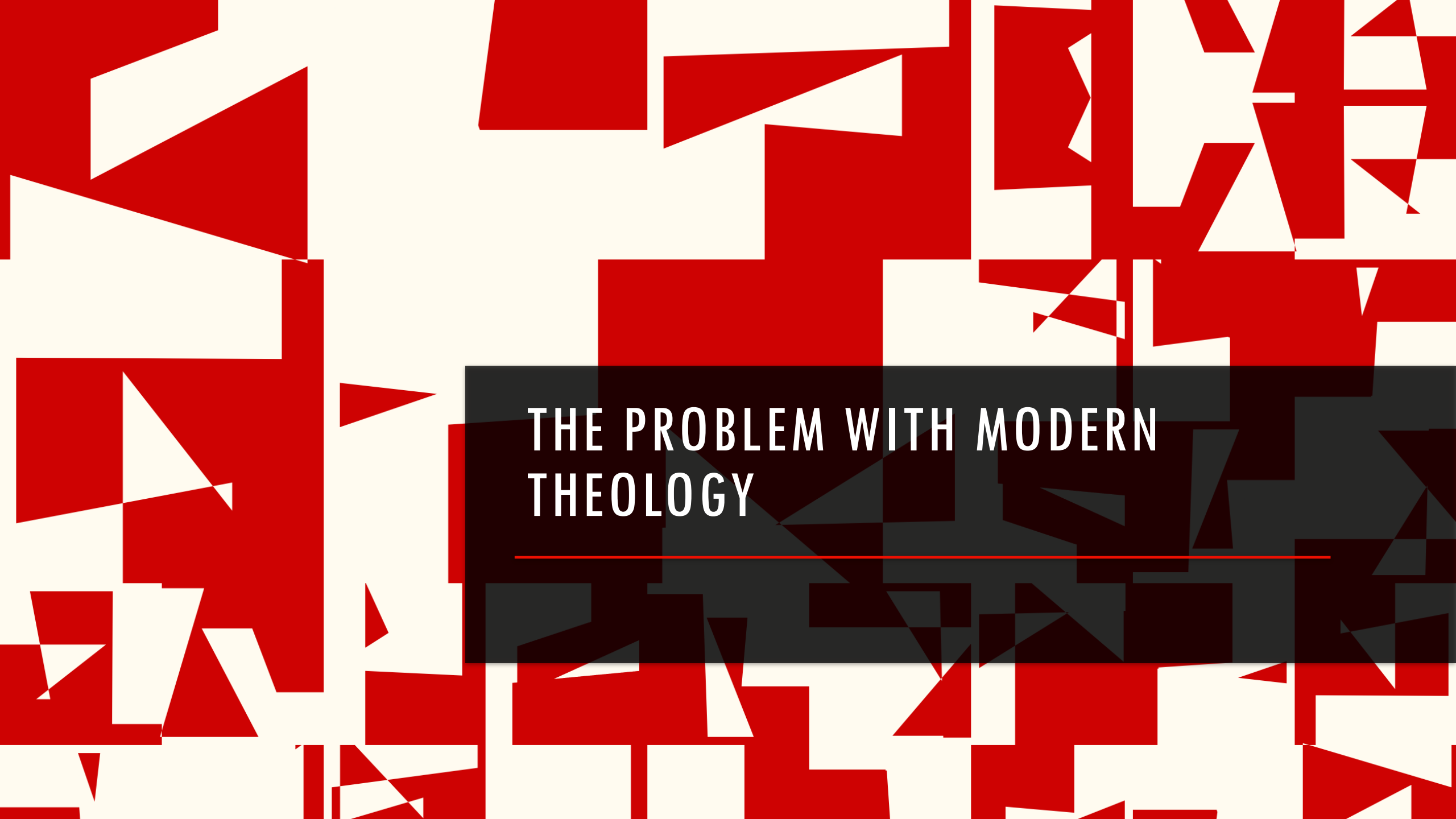




HPRS5905/6905

—
MODERN
CHRISTIAN
THEOLOGY

Troeltsch I



THE PROBLEM WITH MODERN THEOLOGY

THE PROBLEM WITH MODERN THEOLOGY

There is a problem at the centre of modern theology that Schleiermacher finessed, Ritschl tried to outflank, and that Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) refused to evade: the problem of historical relativism.

Every response to modernity examined so far has acknowledged, in some way, that Christianity is historically conditioned – that is that its scriptures, doctrines, and institutional forms etc. emerged in and through particular historical circumstances and bear the marks of their origins.

But acknowledging this in principle while continuing to make absolute claims for Christian revelation is, Troeltsch argued, an unstable intellectual position that cannot be maintained without inconsistency.

THE PROBLEM WITH MODERN THEOLOGY

The application of genuine historical method to Christianity dissolves the categorical distinction between the sacred history of Christian revelation and the profane history of other human phenomena – it makes Christianity just another historical phenomena, that arises because of casual factors and is shaped by cultural concerns, just like the Roman Empire or light up trainers, rather than the expression of the will of God or a reflection of God's nature.

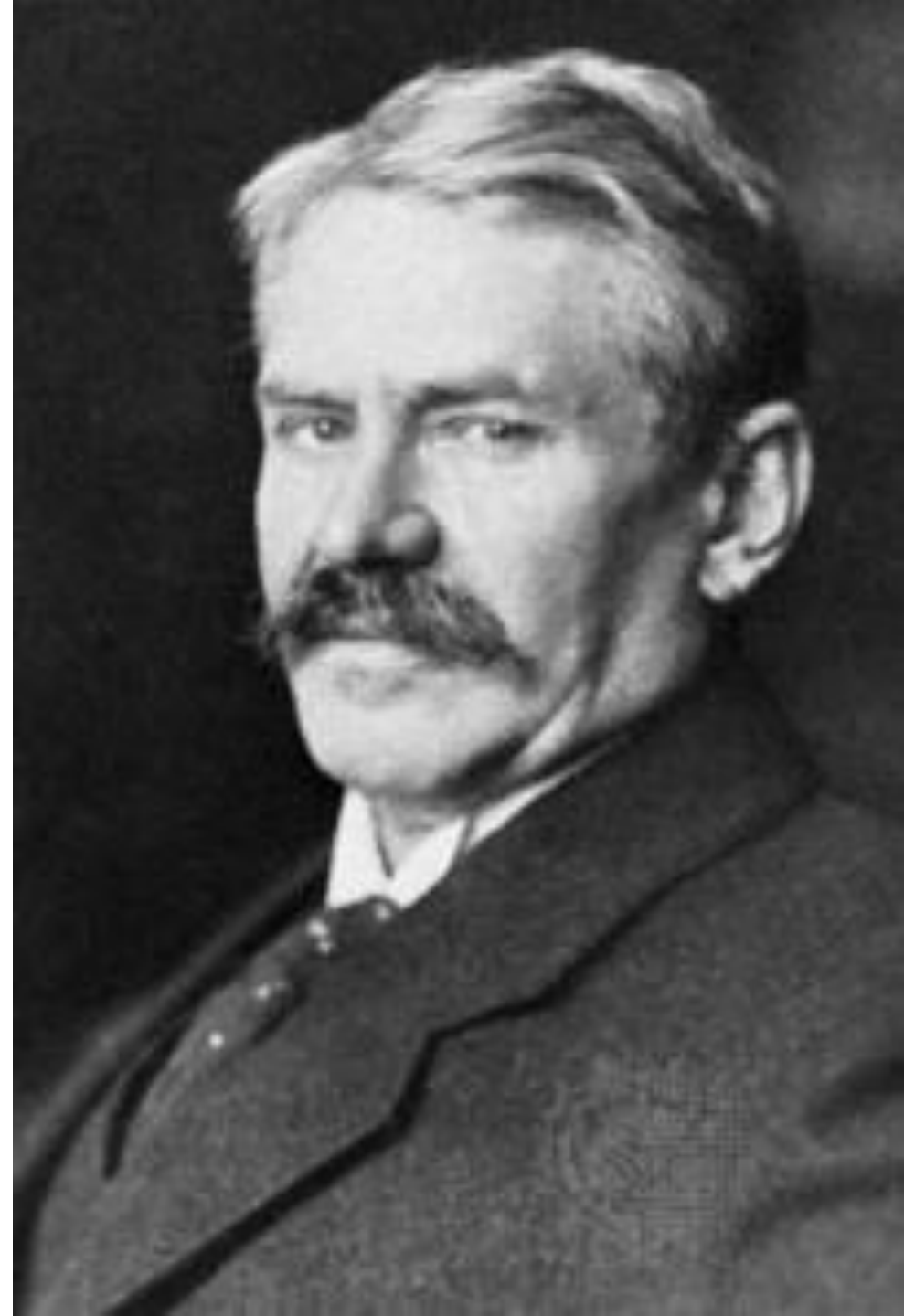
Once that distinction dissolves, the traditional claims of Christian theology to unique, absolute, and universally normative truth are exposed to a relativising pressure from which there is no easy escape.

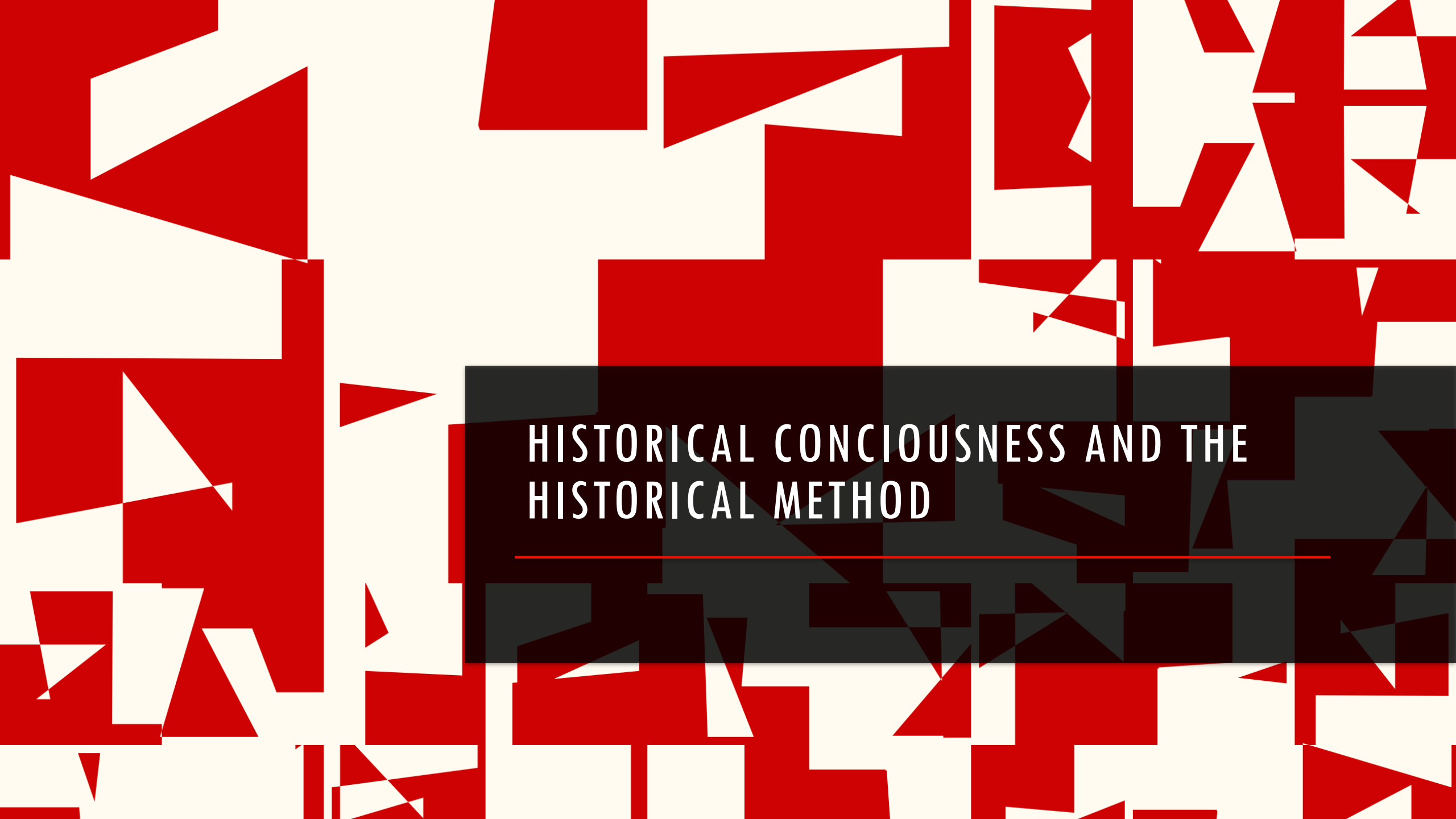
ERNST TROELTSCH (1865-1923)

Trained in theology and philosophy at Erlangen, Göttingen, and Berlin, Troeltsch was deeply formed by the Ritschlian school, whose historical orientation he shared but whose evasions he did not accept.

He was professor of systematic theology at Heidelberg from 1894 to 1914, then transferred to a chair in the philosophy of civilisation in Berlin.

Troeltsch is in some ways the most honest thinker of the liberal tradition, precisely because he pursued its implications further than his contemporaries were willing to go.





HISTORICAL CONCIIOUSNESS AND THE HISTORICAL METHOD

HISTORICAL- CRITICAL METHOD

The application of the rigorous methods of historical inquiry, without special pleading for any, had by Troeltsch's time subjected the entire Christian tradition to scrutiny from which it could not be exempted.

The biblical texts had been shown to be composite, historically produced documents, reflecting the theological concerns of specific communities at specific moments in the development of Israel and the early Church. The early Councils had been shown to formulate their doctrines in response to particular philosophical and political pressures. The history of Christian doctrine had been shown to be a history of development, debate, and sometimes dramatic revision.

None of this proved that Christianity was false, but it did establish decisively that Christianity was historical in the fullest sense.

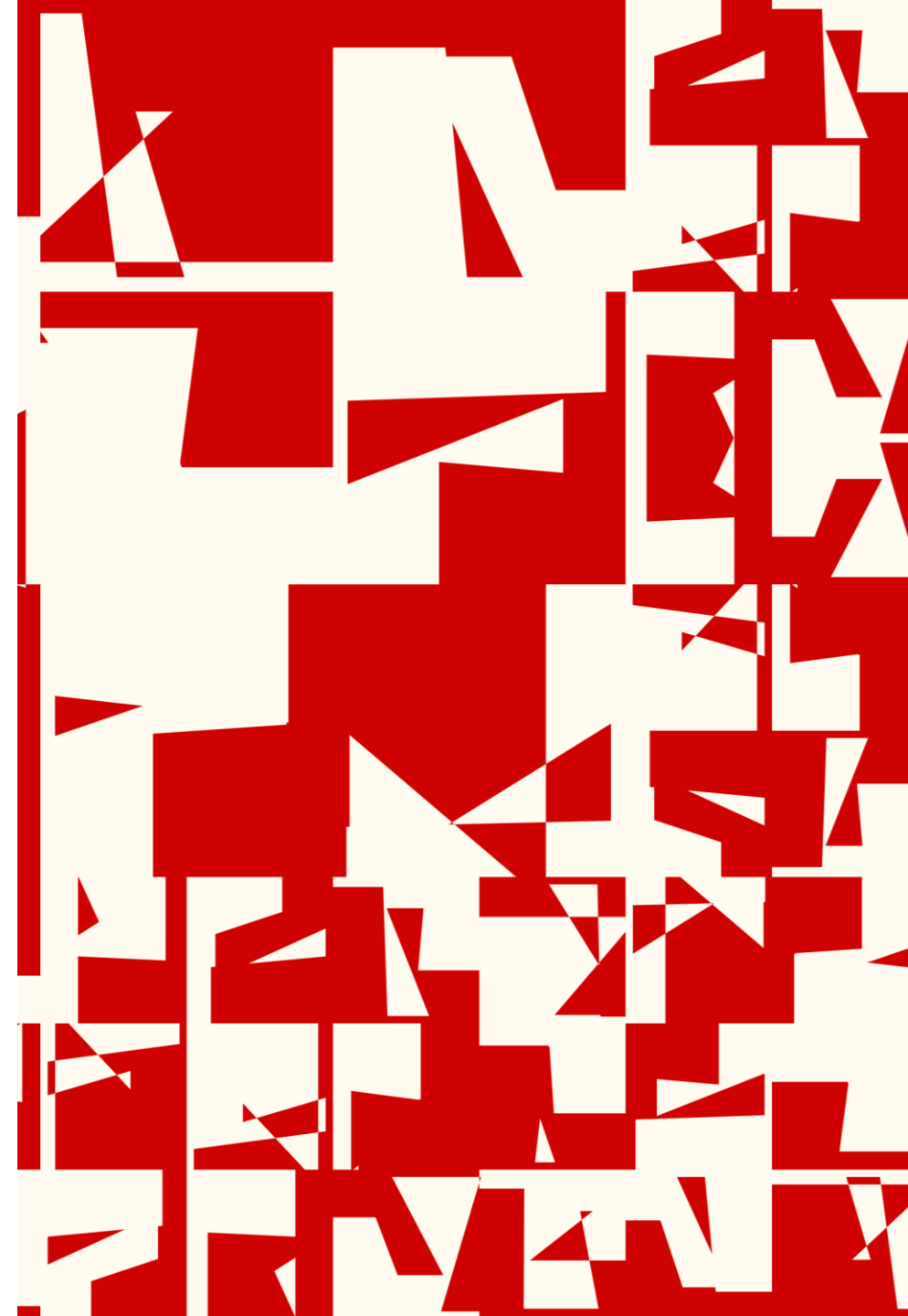
HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Before examining Troeltsch's specific arguments, it is important to be clear on what his problem with previous treatments of historical criticism in theology are really about.

He uses the term 'historical consciousness' to describe the situation he believes we find ourselves in.

For Troeltsch historical consciousness is not simply the awareness that things happened in the past, nor merely the recognition that the present differs from the past.

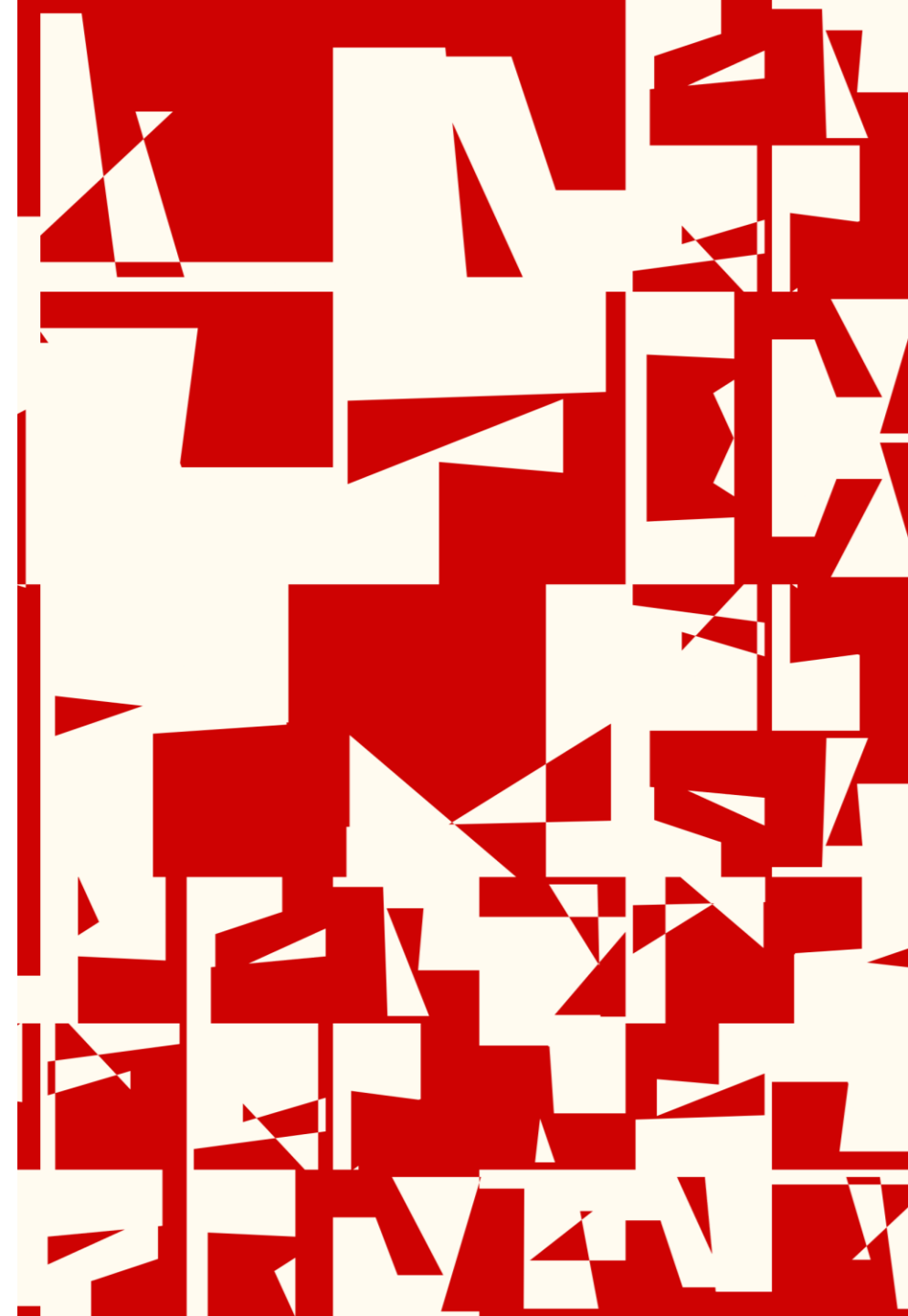
It is the recognition that all human thought, experience, institution, and value is constituted by its historical context.



HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

This means that there is no view from nowhere, no vantage point outside history from which the significance and truth of historical phenomena can be assessed objectively.

Everything that human beings think and believe, including their religious beliefs, are shaped by the particular historical moment in which they think it: by the conceptual frameworks available to them, the social conditions they have experienced, the accumulated intellectual traditions they might be familiar with, and the unanticipated pressures of historical circumstance that press on them.

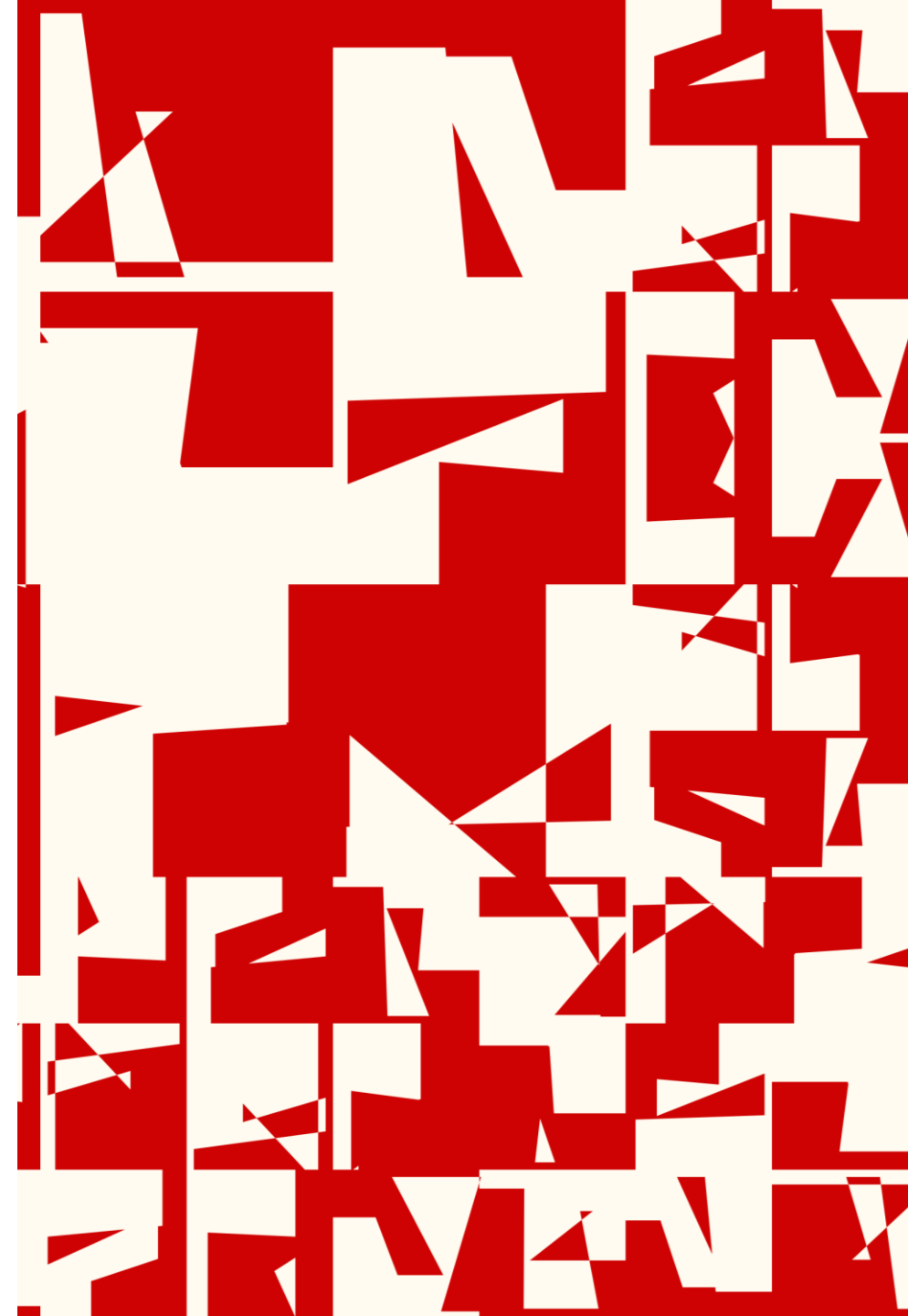


PRINCIPLES OF THE HISTORICAL METHOD

This recognition, once genuinely internalised, transforms the entire intellectual situation of theology and requires a new approach to thinking about Christianity.

Troeltsch's most important work on this methodology, "On Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology" (1898), identifies three principles that define the historical-critical method and that he thinks collectively pose the sharpest challenge to traditional theological claims.

These three principles together constitute what Troeltsch calls the "homogeneity" of history.



Principle of Criticism

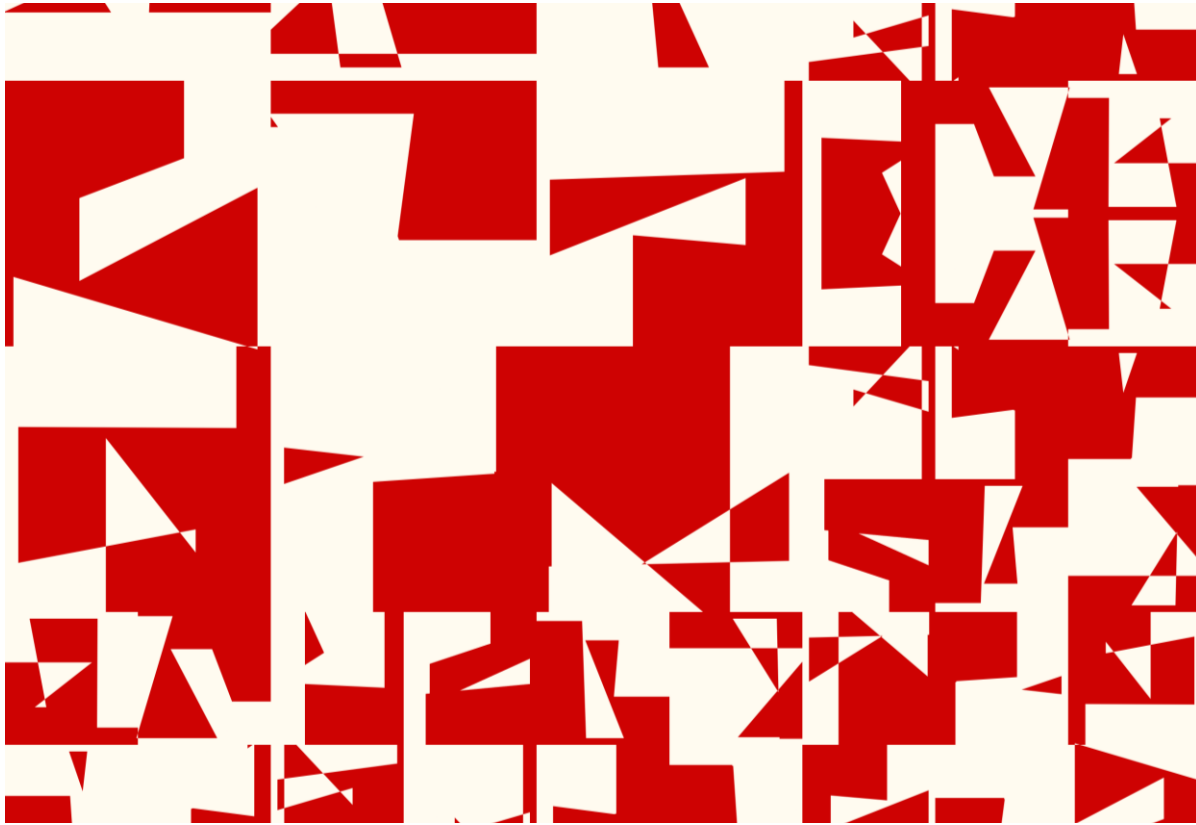
All historical claims are subject to critical scrutiny and can be accorded only degrees of probability.

Principle of Analogy

The primary tool for evaluating reports of past events is comparison with the range of events known from present experience.

Principle of Correlation

All events are embedded in a web of natural causation, such that no event can be properly understood in isolation.

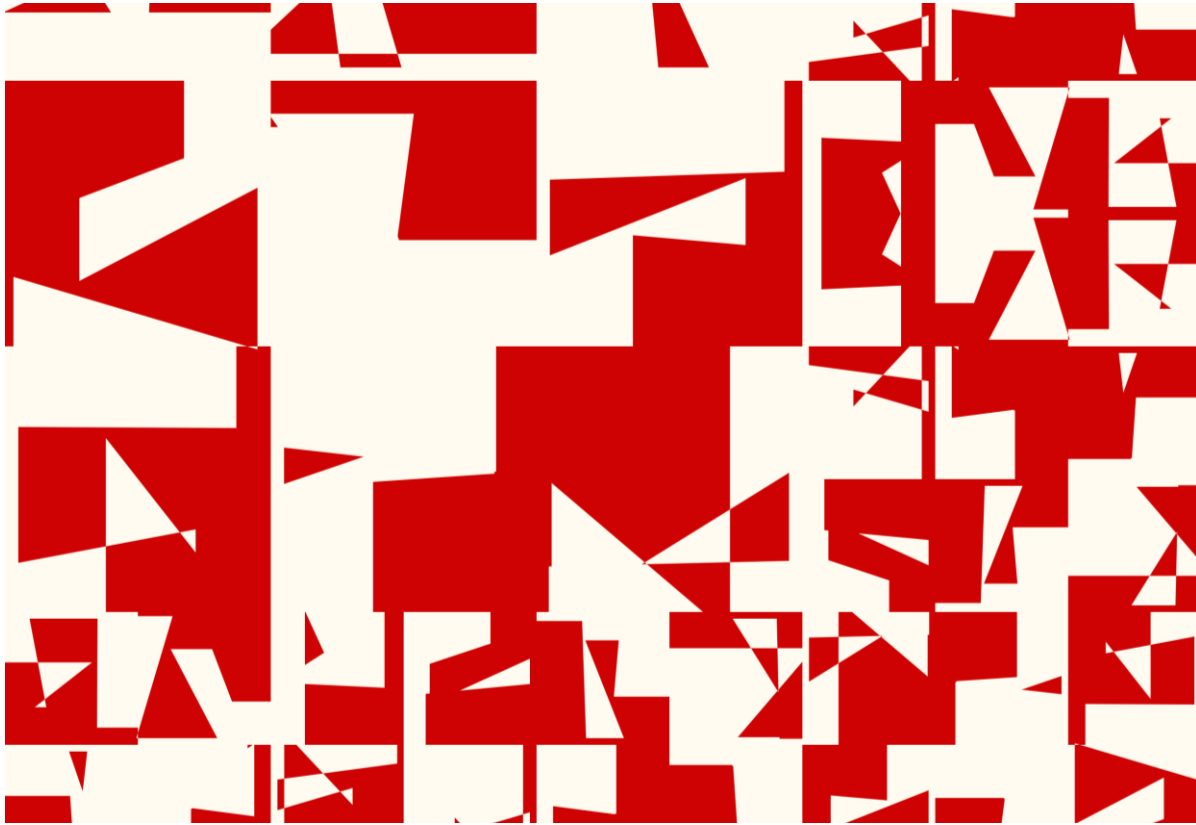


THE PRINCIPLE OF CRITICISM

The first principle that Troeltsch outlines is the principle of criticism – that all historical claims are and should be subject to critical scrutiny.

This means that an appeal outside history cannot be assessed as having historical truth and that historical claims can only ever be accord a degree of probability, rather than absolute certainty. We can say something is very likely to have happened in a particular way, but we cannot know for certain through the historical method.

This means that all historical knowledge is inherently fallible and revisable as new evidence may come to light.

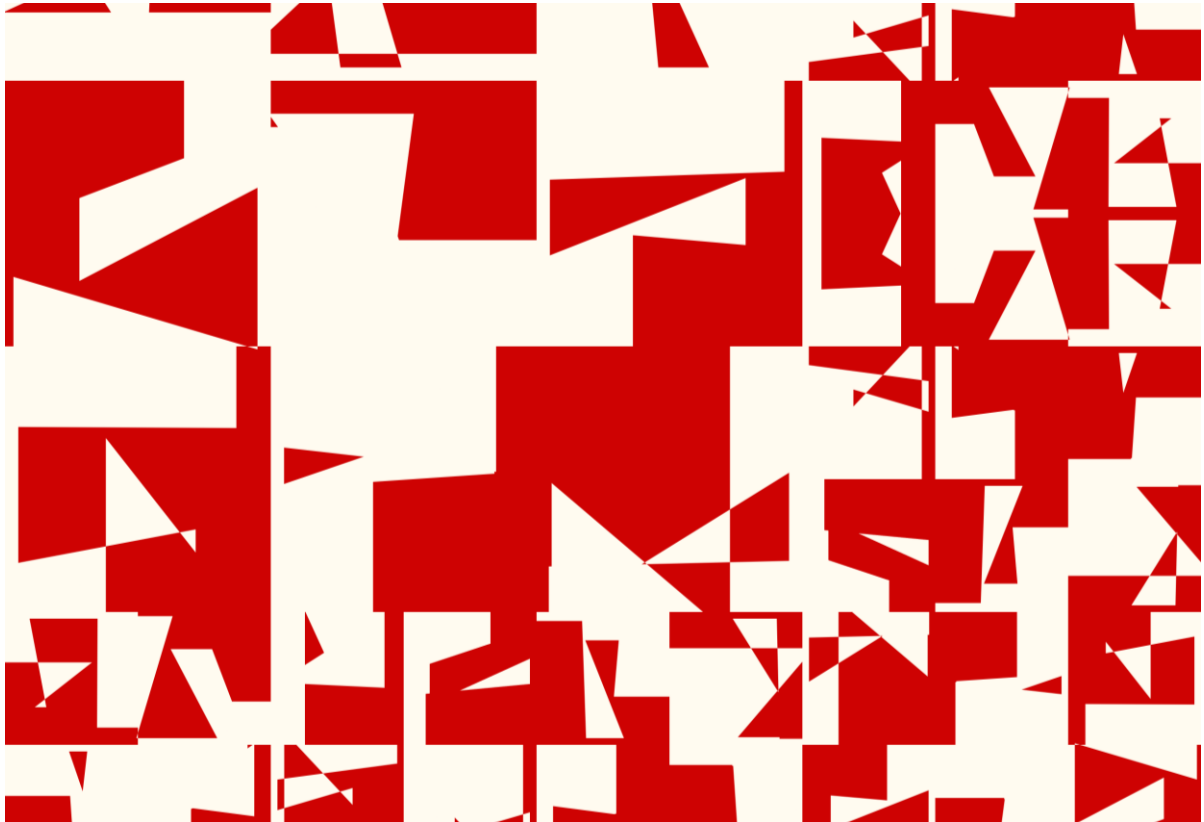


THE PRINCIPLE OF ANALOGY

The principle of analogy directly governs the historian's capacity to assess claims about miraculous or supernatural events.

The historian works by reasoning from the known to the unknown – from the present experience of how events occur, to assessments of how events occurred in the past.

If present experience provides no analogies for a claimed event, the historian therefore has no methodological basis for confirming it as historical.



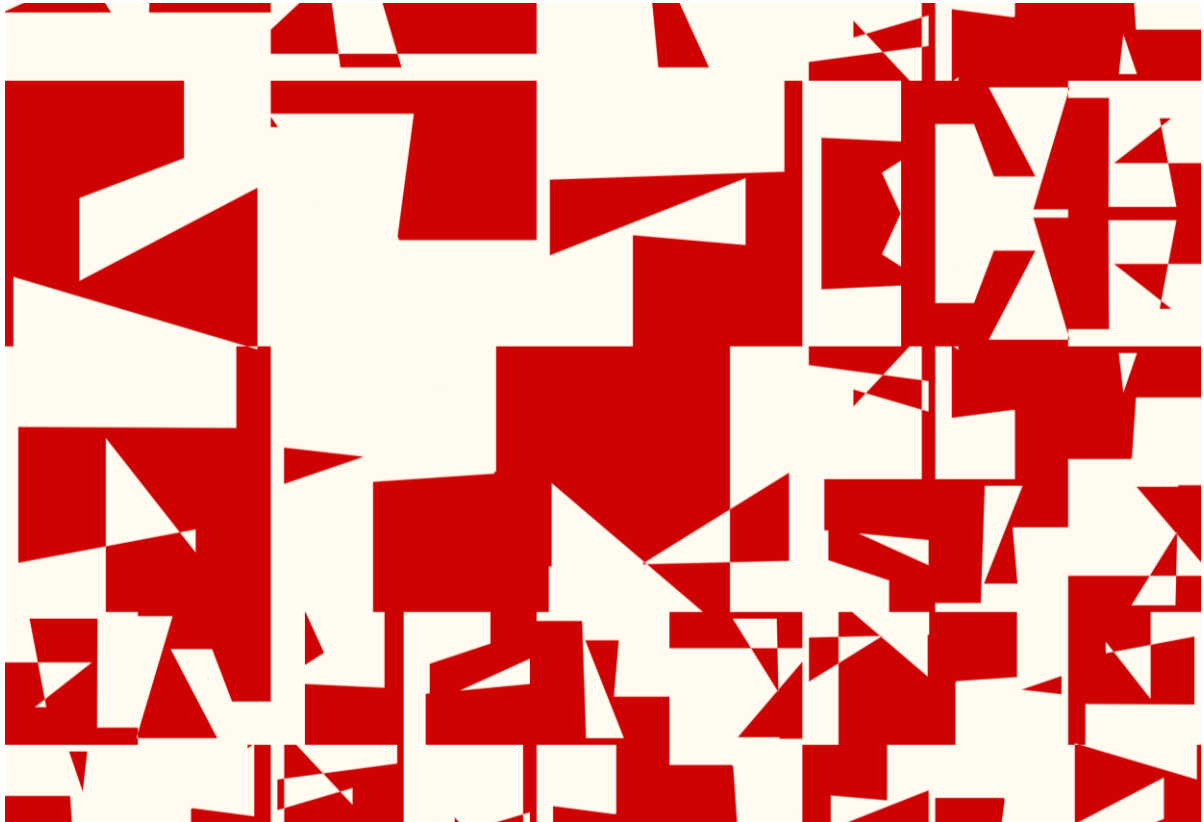
THE PRINCIPLE OF ANALOGY

This does not mean, Troeltsch insists, that miracles are impossible in principle.

Crucially, he is not making a metaphysical claim about the limits of what can occur, but instead he is making a methodological claim about the limits of what historical inquiry can establish with reasonable probability.

For example, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, has no analogy in present experience; therefore, the historical method cannot confirm it as a historical event in the straightforward sense.

What consequences this has for the theological significance of the resurrection is a further question that requires very different answers to those that have gone before.

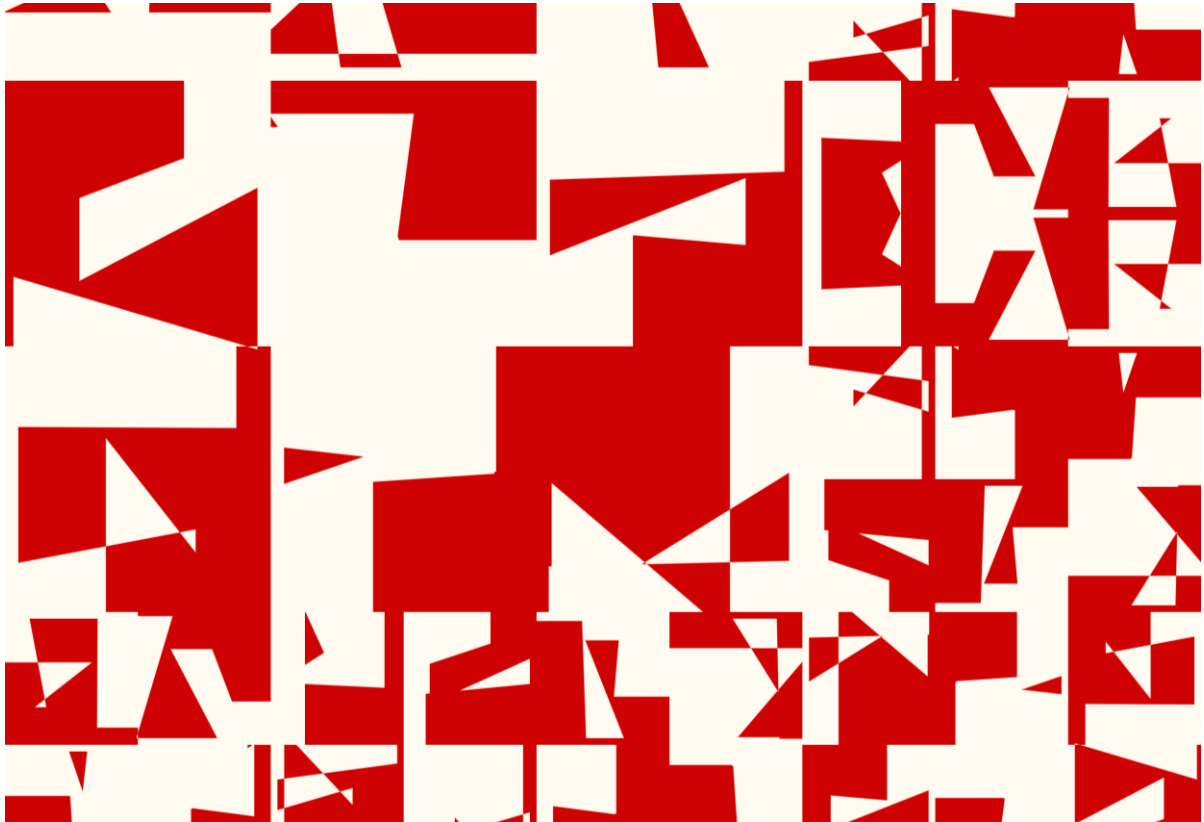


THE PRINCIPLE OF CORRELATION

The principle of correlation is that all historical events are embedded within a web of natural causation.

This means that no historical phenomenon, including the historical phenomenon of Jesus of Nazareth, can be understood as standing outside or above the causal-historical nexus that connects all other events.

Jesus must be understood in relation to his cultural, religious, and social context, for example, his relationship to Second Temple Judaism, or to the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, or to the Greco-Roman cultural world in which early Christianity developed.



THE PRINCIPLE OF CORRELATION

This contextualising of Jesus is not necessarily an act of sceptical hostility toward Christian faith, but it is what the honest application of historical method requires.

However, it does mean that the kind of absolute uniqueness traditionally claimed for Jesus, such as his status as a being who stands outside the ordinary conditions of human historical existence, who is not simply one figure in the flow of religious history but the definitive and unsurpassable revelation of God, cannot be established or proved by the historical method.

CHRISTIANITY AS HISTORICALLY CONDITIONED

The cumulative implication of the three principles is Troeltsch's central and most unsettling claim:

Christianity is, in all its forms, thoroughly historically conditioned.

This applies not only to the incidental features of Christian history, but to its core theological content.

The doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation were formulated in specific philosophical contexts using specific conceptual resources.

The canon of Scripture was constituted through a historical process shaped by community decisions, cultural pressures, and contested authority.

The understanding of Christ's saving work has taken radically different forms in different historical periods, none of which can straightforwardly claim to be the simple expression of a timeless divine truth.

Even the experience of faith — the sense of redemption, of grace, of encounter with the divine — is shaped by the cultural and historical formation of the person who has it.

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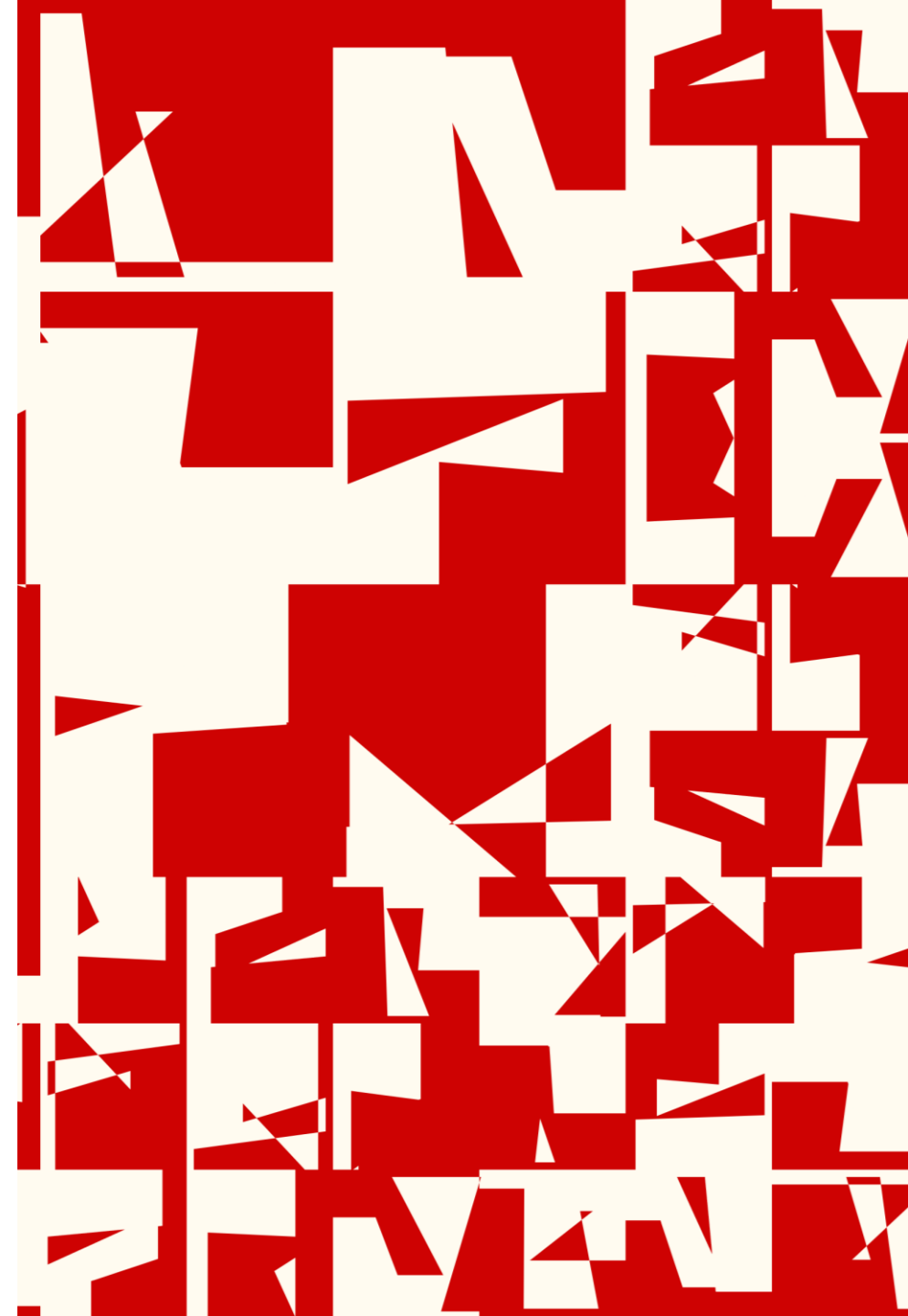
THE ABSOLUTENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

THE ABSOLUTENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

The question that Troeltsch made the central problem of his theology is stated with characteristic precision in the title of his most influential early work: *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions* (1902).

Can Christianity claim to be the absolute, final, and universally normative religion given the historical consciousness that reveals it to be one historically conditioned religious tradition among others?

The book is an extended and honest attempt to answer this question and its conclusion is among the most searching in modern theology.

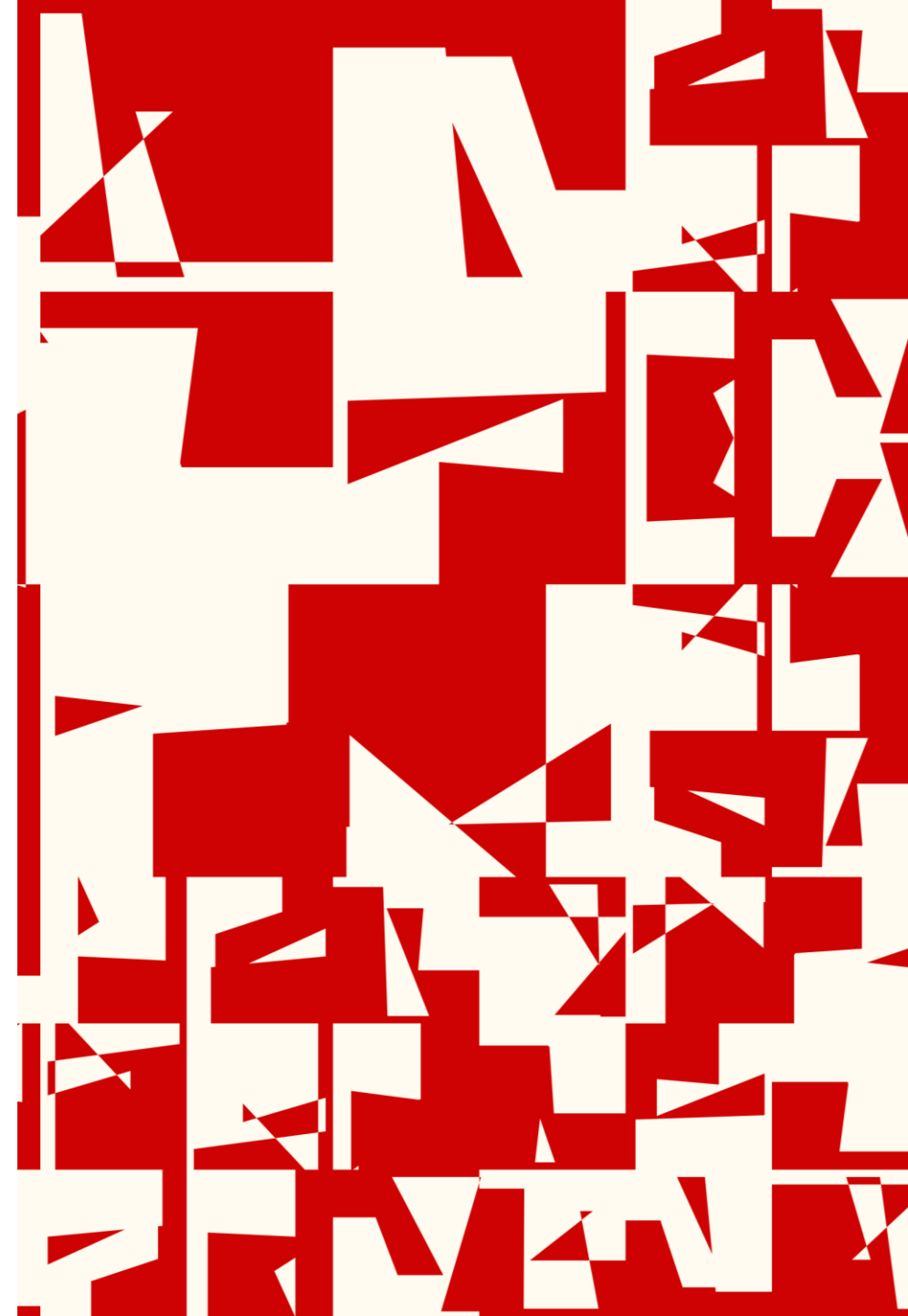


THE ABSOLUTENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

Troeltsch identifies and rejects what he calls 'naive supernaturalism' as the first and most obvious way of securing Christianity's absolute claims: the assertion that Christianity is absolutely unique and superior to all other religions because it really rests on a supernatural divine revelation that transcends the ordinary course of historical development.

To appeal to a supernatural ground of absoluteness that stands outside the reach of historical inquiry is not to answer the question but to refuse it.

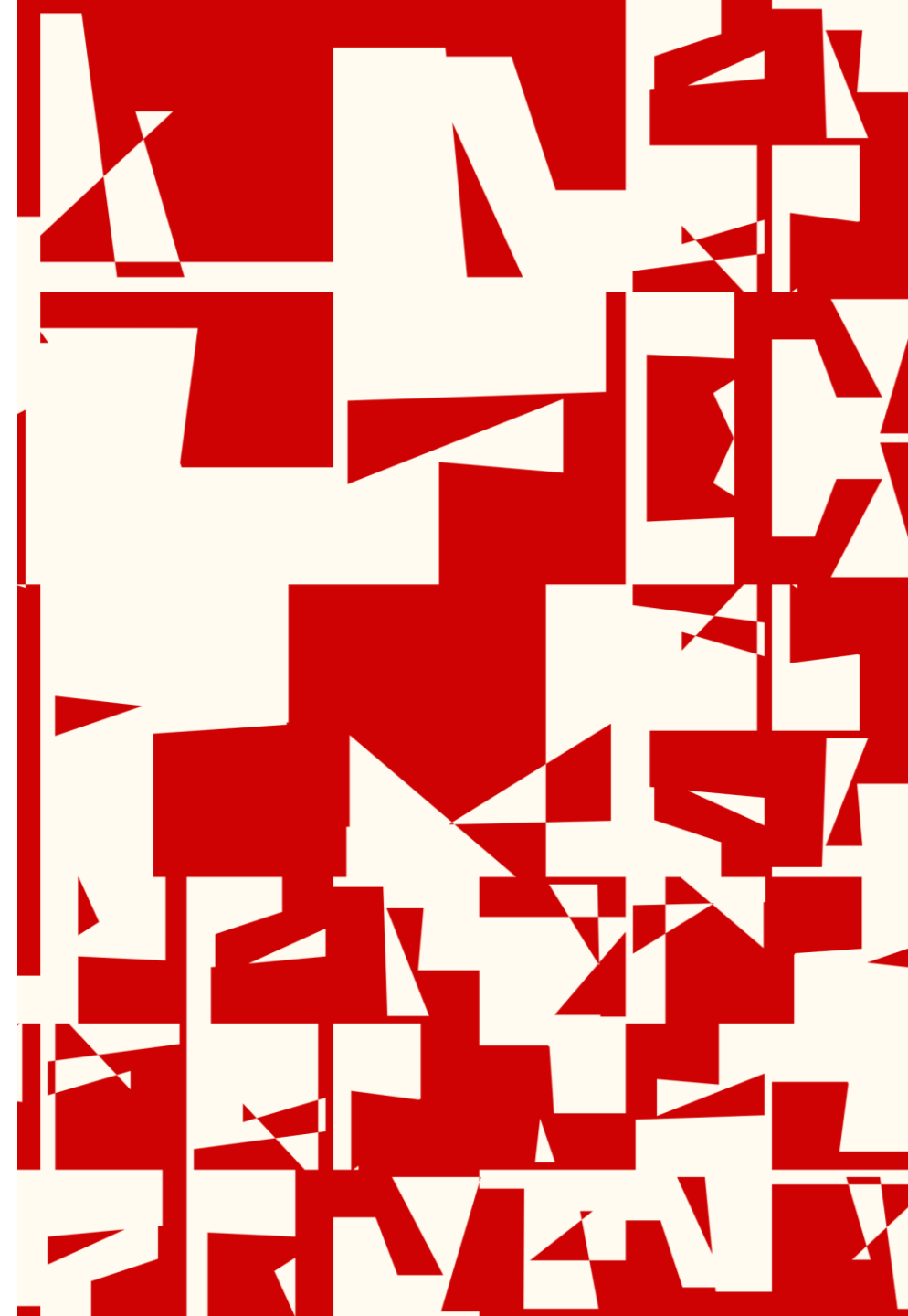
This does not mean the claim is false; it means it cannot be established by the methods and on the terms that modernity requires.



THE ABSOLUTENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

A second way of securing Christianity's claim to absoluteness is the evolutionary approach: the argument that while Christianity is indeed historically conditioned, it represents the highest and most developed form of religion in the evolutionary history of human religiosity, and can therefore be regarded as the normative goal toward which all religious development has been moving.

This approach, associated with various forms of nineteenth-century thinking, has the advantage of taking historical development seriously while still preserving a normative claim for Christianity.



THE ABSOLUTENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

But Troeltsch finds this answer similarly inadequate.

The evolutionary ranking of religions assumes that there is a single developmental trajectory along which all religions could be placed in ascending order.

Moreover, the claim that Christianity stands at the apex of religious evolution is itself a historically conditioned judgement made from within the Christian tradition, and cannot be established from a neutral historical vantage point.

The evolutionary approach secures Christian absoluteness only by smuggling in assumptions it cannot justify.

THE ABSOLUTENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

Troeltsch's own proposed solution to the problem of absoluteness in 'The Absoluteness of Christianity' is subtle, qualified, and ultimately unstable.

He argues that Christianity can be acknowledged as the highest value in the history of religions (e.g. the form of religious life that, within the trajectory of Western religious development, offers the most adequate orientation toward the divine), without claiming that it is the absolute and final truth for all humanity in all times and places.

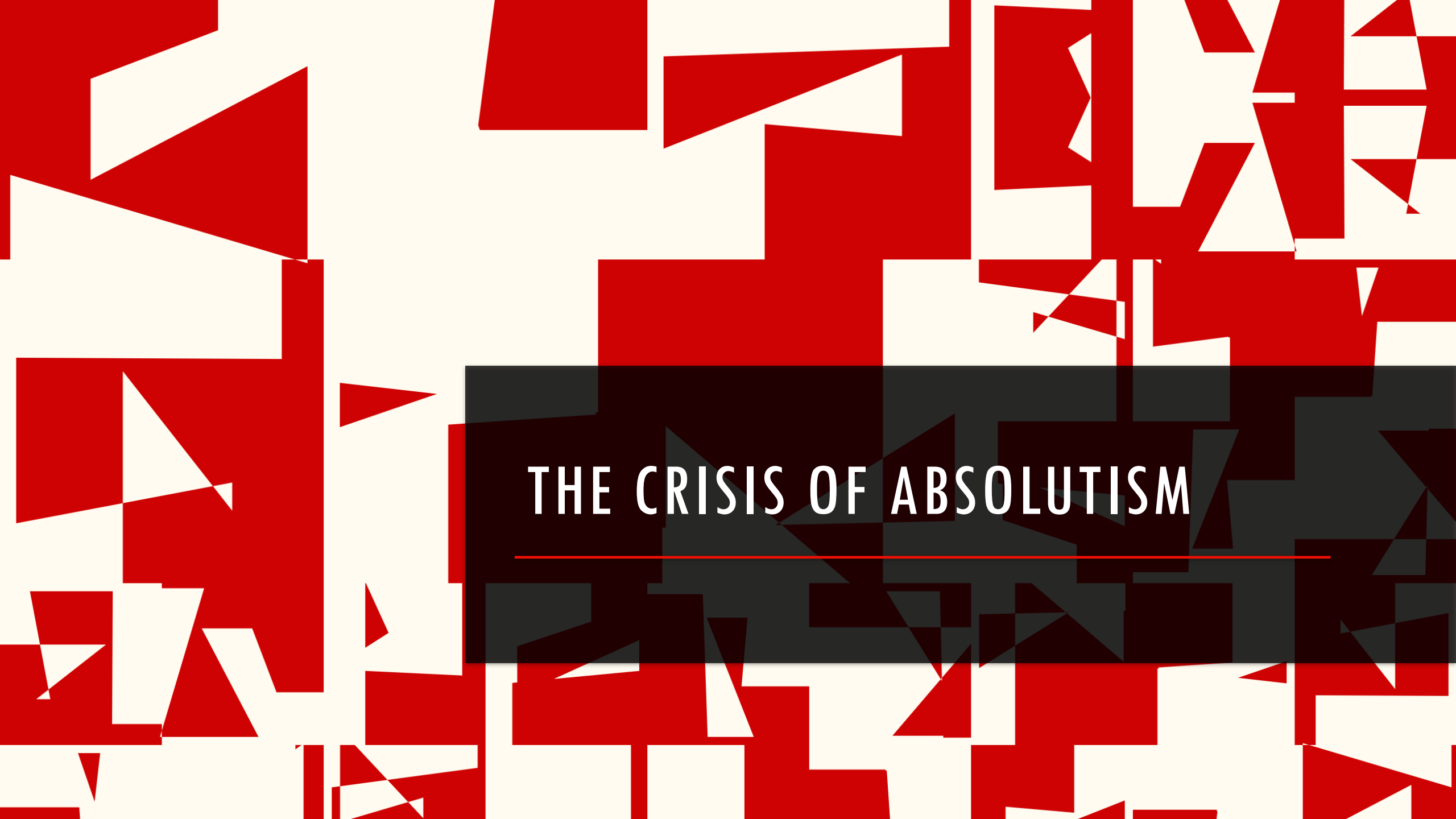
This is a claim of **relative superiority** within a historically bounded horizon rather than a claim of absolute, supra-historical **normative superiority**.

THE ABSOLUTENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

It affirms Christianity's unique significance for the community formed by its history, while acknowledging the genuine spiritual value of other religious traditions for other communities formed by them.

Troeltsch presents this as a middle path between dogmatic absolutism and simple relativism, but the question is whether it can sustain the full weight of Christian theological belief.

Is a Christianity that acknowledges itself as the highest value within Western religious history, rather than the absolute truth for all humanity still recognisably Christianity?

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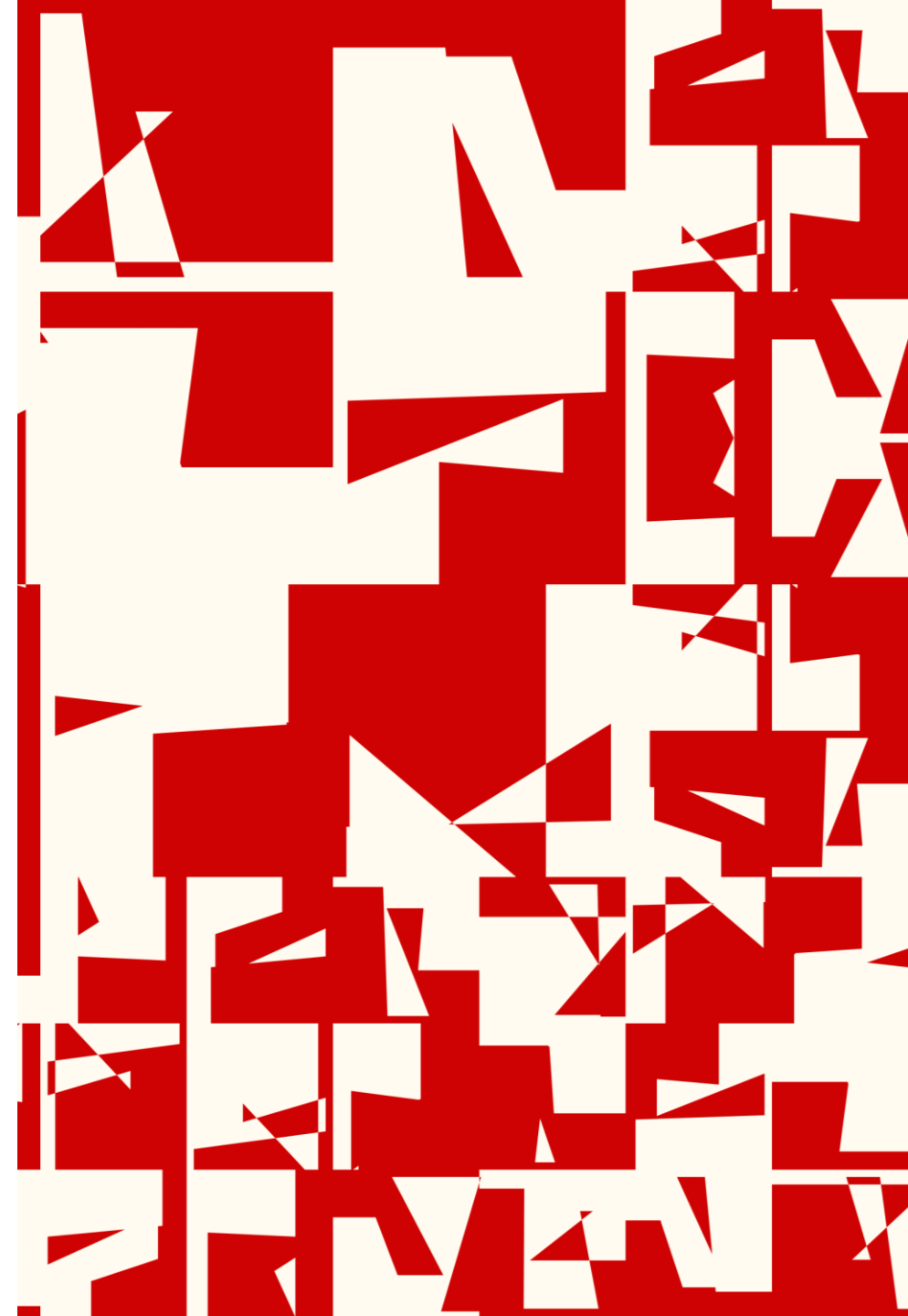
THE CRISIS OF ABSOLUTISM

THE CRISIS OF ABSOLUTISM

The contrast between Troeltsch and his contemporary Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) is, I think, instructive for understanding the range of positions within modern theology at its high-water mark.

Both were committed to the historical-critical study of Christianity; both rejected the supernaturalist apologetics of confessional orthodoxy; both affirmed the centrality of the historical Jesus for Christian faith.

But, where Harnack confidently identified an essential kernel of Christianity (the fatherhood of God and the infinite value of the individual soul, according to him) as a timeless religious and moral truth, Troeltsch insisted that there is no such kernel.

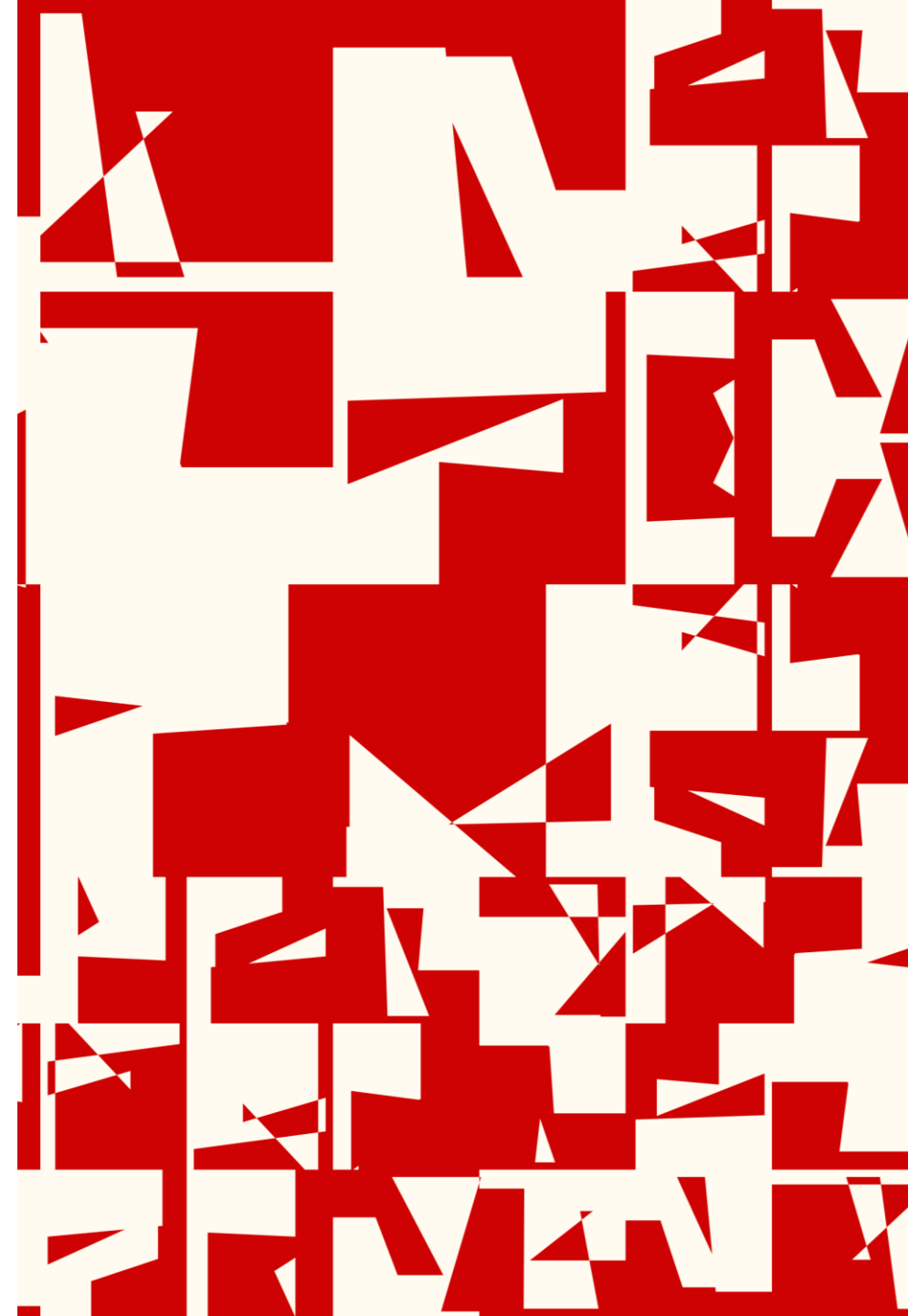


THE CRISIS OF ABSOLUTISM

For Troeltsch, everything is husk.

Or rather: according to Troeltsch, what Harnack called the kernel is itself a historically conditioned interpretation, reflecting the assumptions of late nineteenth-century liberal Protestant culture rather than expressing some kind of transhistorical divine truth.

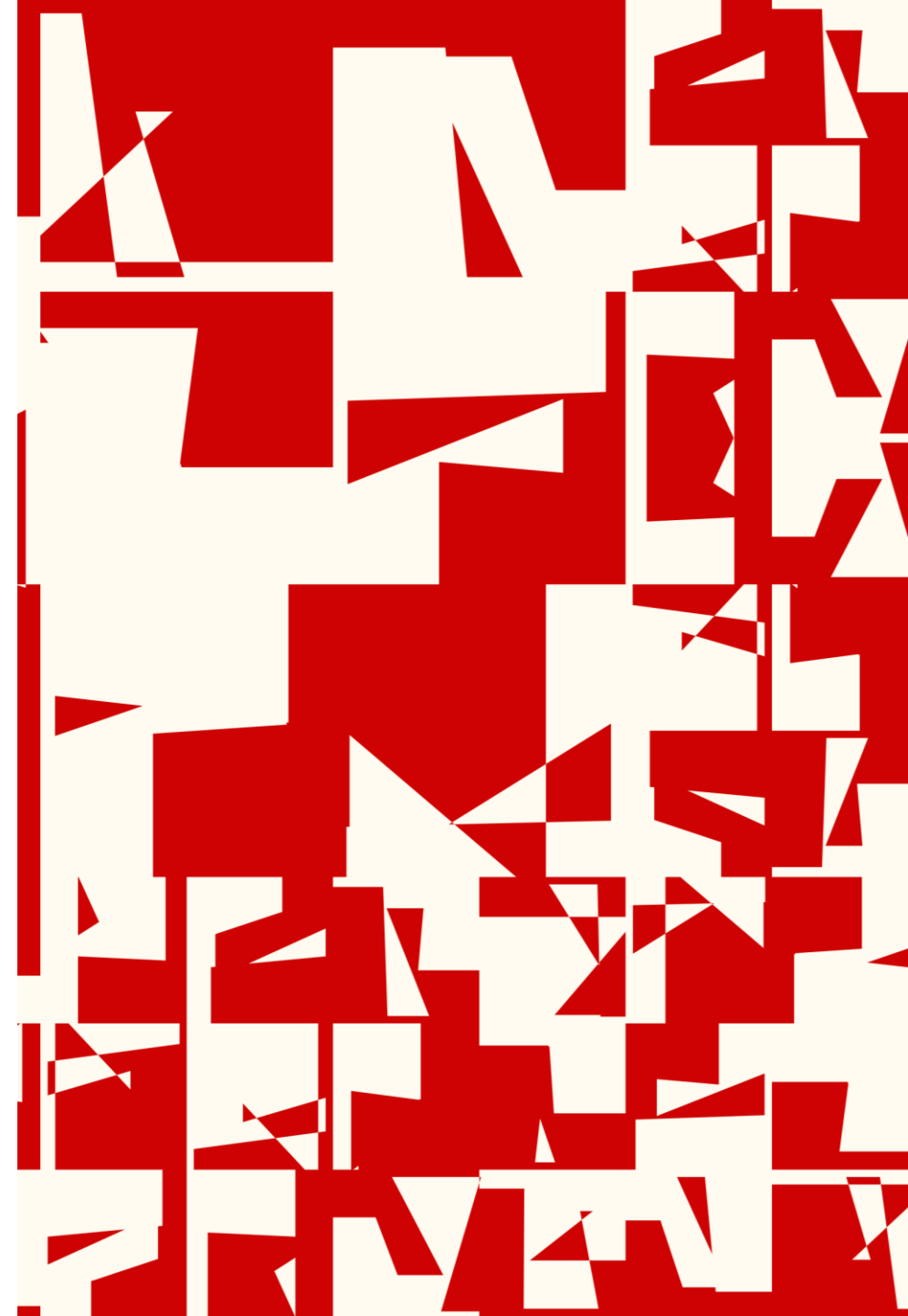
The difference between them is not one of temperament or really even of position, but of methodological rigour – who was willing to follow their methodological assumptions through to their uncomfortable / eventual conclusions.



THE CRISIS OF ABSOLUTISM

The phrase “crisis of absolutism” names the condition in which Troeltsch’s application of historical method leaves Christian theology: the condition in which the traditional claim that Christianity possesses the absolute, final, and universally normative truth about God and human destiny can no longer be maintained in its traditional form, but in which theology also cannot simply abandon all normative claims without ceasing to be theology.

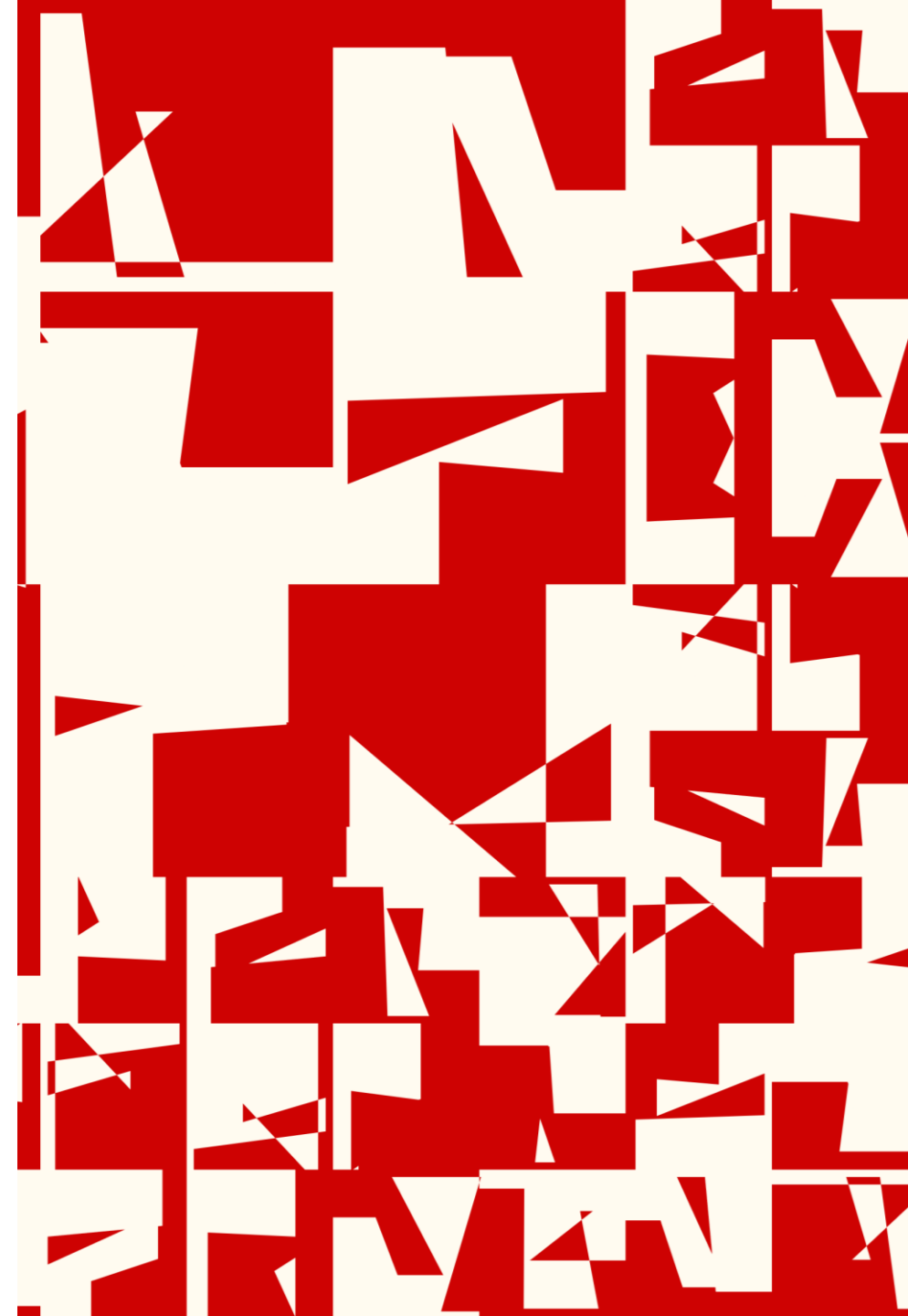
This is a genuine crisis, not merely an intellectual puzzle, because the normative claims of Christianity are not peripheral decorations on its surface but constitutive of its identity as a specific form of religious life.



THE CRISIS OF ABSOLUTISM

A Christianity that acknowledges itself as merely one historically relative religious option among others has, arguably, dissolved the very thing that makes it distinctively Christian.

Yet a Christianity that simply reasserts its absolute uniqueness in defiance of historical consciousness has paid the price of intellectual integrity.



READINGS

Ernst Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions* (1902), trans. David Reid (London: SCM Press, 1972), Introduction and Chapters 1–2, p. 45–106.

Coakley, Sarah, 'The Nature of Troeltsch's Relativism', *Christ without Absolutes: A Study of the Christology of Ernst Troeltsch*, Clarendon Paperbacks (Oxford, 1994)

Good physical readings:

Troeltsch, E. (2008). *Religion in history*. Fortress Press, p. 11–32

John Powell Clayton, "Introduction", in *Ernst Troeltsch and the Future of Theology*, ed. John Powell Clayton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 1–38