

Ernst Troeltsch and the Study of Religion

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Ernst Troeltsch is not one of the more accessible of twentieth century theologians as can be seen from a bibliography of his works translated into English which appears at the end of *Ernst Troeltsch: Writings on Theology and Religion*, translated and edited by Robert Morgan and Michael Pye, Duckworth, London, 1977, £12.50. Whether the translation of the four papers presented in this volume will make him more popular is rather doubtful as he here shows himself at his most heavy and turgid mainly because he writes in abstractions about methodologies. When Troeltsch does discuss issues and authors he is usually concerned with Protestant theology in the Nineteenth Century and it sometimes seems very dated (as in 'Half a Century of Theology: a Review' [1908]). This book, however, aims to introduce Troeltsch to a wider public particularly in Germany where he has never had much impact and this volume, curiously, is a translation of the original German including introductory articles by the English editors. These three articles by Robert Morgan and Michael Pye are tremendously helpful in giving an overall view of Troeltsch and his place in modern theology.

Troeltsch is important, it would seem, mainly as a philosopher of religion rather than as a systematic theologian. He is at his best when discussing theological methodology, but when he tried to do straight theology, as in the article 'The Significance of the Historical Jesus for Faith' (1911), the effect could be disastrous. In this article Troeltsch assumes at the outset that traditional orthodox dogmatics had crumbled by the beginning of this century and that no one who was at all sensitive to modern intellectual sensibilities could accept the doctrine of the incarnation and that Christ had done anything concrete to redeem or save mankind. Salvation, whatever that might mean for Troeltsch, comes directly to the individual from God and, he says, is a matter of personal experience. This is common to all religions and Christianity is not qualitatively different in this respect. Yet Troeltsch realised that a marked individualism and personal isolation had resulted in modern Protestantism and for reasons of social psychology—and for these reasons alone—he thought that the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth was needed as a symbol to pull Christians together and thus pres-

erve the community and the cult. But in no sense did Christ free man from sin, nor should he be thought to be in any sense more than human. Troeltsch would not acknowledge the possibility of having a personal relationship with Christ in the present. He repudiated anyone who would say 'Were it not for Christ I would be an atheist' as denigrating non-Christian religions in which God can be found apart from Christ. He affirmed rather that it is a result of Christianity's intense proclamation of the reality of God that we discover Christ. Consequently he abandoned the doctrinal statements of Nicea and Chalcedon as having anything but symbolic value. Clearly there are many present-day liberal Christians who would find all of this most appealing, but it is not orthodox or catholic and, I would argue, it is not a necessary adjunct of critical theory, for there is a tendency even in Troeltsch to regard critical method as something which knocks down rather than builds up.

Where, then, does Troeltsch's importance lie? First, in his statement of critical-historical method which, although it needs some modification, has permanent value for our time. Unfortunately the relevant article 'Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology' (1898) has not been published here but we are promised that it will be forthcoming. What we do have is 'Religion and the Science of Religion' (1906) in which Troeltsch outlines the methodology needed for a modern science of religion based on "critical idealism". Any modern method would in fact have to be purged of this idealism which allows Troeltsch to speak of "religion as a phenomenon of consciousness" and of "that mental phenomenon which we call religion". This idealism might form a workable starting point for a psychology of religion but it would be disastrous for a critical Christian dogmatics—but then Troeltsch was not too worried about that.

Troeltsch's interest in religion as a personal and social phenomenon has been very influential, of course, and has been a valuable source for the foundation of the phenomenology of religion and for courses in Religious Studies in many of the newer universities in this country. Similarly, though I doubt that many school teachers would recognise it, Troeltsch's influence lies at the bottom of the way Religious Education is now taught in many schools since the pioneering research done by members of Lancaster University for the Schools Council when they recommended that World Religions should be taught rather than a doctrinaire form of Christianity (*School Council Working Paper 36: Religious Education in Secondary Schools*, Evans/Methuen, London 1971). It is hardly a coincidence that the editors of the volume under review used to teach at Lancaster.) Has this influence been a beneficent one? Certainly it has brought a broader perspective to what had been a very narrow field of study at a time when it is no longer possible

to assume that school students have any Christian roots, certainly not in state schools. It was in fact Troeltsch's purpose to drive the theology of his own day out of an entrenched dogmatic and Church-orientated ideology. In practice, however, some universities have become content to study only Christian scripture and ethics and there has been a noticeable flight from genuinely theological problems. In many schools Christianity has been virtually abandoned apart from looking at Christian festivals and the teaching of Jesus in favour of the doubtful relevance of a tourist's inspection of Asiatic religions. This general tendency is also present in Troeltsch. Certainly he did not fail to take account of Christianity; indeed he saw it as the highest manifestation of religion yet, but he does not allow Christianity to emerge as a distinctive and in many ways different form of religion. Hence Troeltsch's abandonment of the central place of Christ in Christianity, for it is precisely orthodox Christology which differentiates Christianity from other religions. I would argue that the study of Comparative Religion or World Religions can only be justified theologically if the distinctive historical and doctrinal facets of Christianity do emerge to distinguish it from other religions without doing violence to those religions. It is because this would happen whenever World Religions is taught properly with a rigorous use of the critical-historical method that in principle we may be happy for it to be taught in schools. But it is not usually taught in this way.

Another of Troeltsch's major achievements (not represented in this book) was that he was the only liberal theologian to incorporate future eschatology into a philosophy of history. Other theologians of his time, like Weiss and Schweitzer, recognised the place of eschatology and the message of the coming presence of God's kingdom in Jesus's gospel, but Troeltsch was the only liberal to uphold its contemporary relevance. The others, when they recognised it, cast it off as a transient form of a primitive First Century consciousness. Troeltsch looked to the ultimate future where the truth of Jesus's message about God and the truth of religion in general would be confirmed. He saw God as the ultimate goal of history and it was because Jesus confined the absolute to the world to come that Troeltsch saw Christianity as the highest form of religion. But the problem here is that Troeltsch failed to see that in Jesus the absoluteness of the future could be anticipated and made present, so that for Troeltsch there was nothing absolute about Christianity as such.

Troeltsch saw himself as a follower of Schleiermacher: the earlier so-called authentic Schleiermacher rather than the later ecclesiastical figure. Hence Troeltsch's idealistic understanding of religion as a phenomenon of the mind; Schleiermacher, it may be remembered, set out to develop a theology of feeling and experience to

prevent it being a mere academic study. Troeltsch aimed to produce a theological methodology which was in tune with modern culture and scientific developments, while avoiding the destructive influence of positivism as he found it in Feuerbach and Comte. Just as Schleiermacher saw that there can be no distinctive Christian hermeneutic, so Troeltsch saw that there can be no peculiarly Christian theological method. In every respect he came at the end of a century long tradition of Liberal Protestantism which was repudiated so decisively by Karl Barth at the end of the 1914-18 war. Barth unfortunately chose to ignore Troeltsch rather than argue with him, which is sad because Troeltsch is in fact immune to much of the criticism levelled at Liberalism. Troeltsch's theology does not contain the bourgeois humanism we find in Harnack, and the outbreak of war in 1914 did not undermine the credibility of his ideas as it did Harnack's. Unlike Ritschl, he was conscious of the presence of evil in the world, he was critical of capitalism and imperialism and, unlike Harnack, he did not endorse German war policy nor did he write speeches for the Kaiser. He did not see the relation of theology to modern culture as one of capitulation but rather as critical response, and it was precisely because he saw the danger of positivism that he fell into the trap of idealism.

Troeltsch's best known and most questionable contribution to the study of religion was his suggestion that in man's perception of the world there is present a religious *a priori*. Just as man sees reality within a perspective of space and time (as Kant said) and within a moral, logical and aesthetic perspective, so man has a natural and in some ways predetermined religious understanding of the world. Again this view (also present in a non-rational form in Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, 1917, and in Paul Tillich's 'Religion as a Dimension in Man's Spiritual Life' in *Theology of Culture*, 1959) is pervasive in Religious Studies as it can be found in many secondary schools and in some universities where man is seen as a natural religious being whether in the Hindu form or the Buddhist form or the tribal form or the voodoo form or the Erich von Daniken form or the Christian form—without any essential differentiation made between them. Troeltsch soon realised that his original description of man's religious *a priori* could not be maintained and he readily abandoned it without quite giving up the general idea behind it. It is, moreover, quite extraordinary that this idea of man's innate religiousness should be so influential at a time when western man is showing that he can get on well enough without religion. Or is western man a peculiarly decadent and perverse creature?

The theological problem here is that Christian theology is based on a religious *a posteriori*. That is, the nature and truth of Christianity is determined by an historically contingent manifestation of the divine reality in Christ. A religious *a priori* theory

shows the truth of religion to be determined by the human spirit and Troeltsch found traditional Christology so problematical because it forces one to consider the possibility of a God who acts in human history, taking the initiative in finding man rather than leaving man to find God.

In the Nineteen Thirties and Forties Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in their different ways launched a devastating attack on 'religion' in the peculiar sense in which they each use the word. Barth summed up his position on the nature of religion in the following dogmatic statement:

The revelation of God in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is the judging but also the reconciling presence of God in the world of human religion, that is, in the realm of man's attempts to justify and sanctify himself before a capricious and arbitrary picture of God. The Church is the locus of true religion, so far as through grace it lives by grace.¹

Religion is, for Barth, a human achievement which is good in itself but which cannot lead man to God. It can only make him aware of his own limitations and sinfulness. In this respect Barth is following a pattern laid down by Paul in *Romans* where he says that man cannot justify himself through works of charity or piety or devotion, but only by abandoning all attempts at self-justification and by relying on the generosity of God in an act of faith and trust. In the same way, Barth says that man cannot reach God through his own efforts but can only allow God to reach him through the revelation of his Word which is to be identified, in the first place, with Christ himself.

While revelation can be found in the Christian Church and only there, it is at one level itself a religion. Insofar as Christianity is a product of cultural history, a development of Judaism and pagan Hellenistic religion, a human agency of moral and political transformation and an expression of man's religious needs, it is a religion. Theology, worship, community, morals, poetry, art, social and political activity are dimensions of the Christian religion. They are not in themselves bad, but they do not come from God. As human achievements they stand under the judgment of God and are "active idolatry and self-righteousness". From his narrow Calvinist position, Barth could see Christianity being ruled by revelation and freed from religion only in the early Church and the Protestant Reformation to which he wanted to return. He writes,

Our basic task is so to order the concepts of revelation and religion that the connexion between the two can again be seen as identical with that event between God and man in which God is God, i.e. the Lord and Master of man, who Himself

¹ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, translated by G. T. Thomson, Edinburgh 1956, 1.2 page 280.

judges and alone justifies and sanctifies, and man is the man of God, i.e. man as he is adopted and received by God in His severity and goodness. It is because we remember and apply the christological doctrine of the *assumptio carnis* that we speak of revelation as the abolition of religion. (Ibid. p. 297.)

Barth did not use this idea as a means of denigrating non-Christian religions, for he found the closest parallel to Protestantism as a religion of grace in the Yodo religion of Thirteenth Century Japan (unlike Catholicism which he did not consider to be a religion of grace when he wrote the first volume of his *Church Dogmatics* in the early Nineteen Thirties). What differentiates Christianity from Yodo religion, according to Barth, is not grace but the name of Jesus and the fact of the incarnation, the twin points which Troeltsch said were not at the centre of Christianity.

Christianity can be a religion, then, but insofar as it is transformed by the revelation of God in Christ, it overcomes and abolishes religion. "In religion man bolts and bars himself against revelation by providing a substitute, by taking away in advance the very thing which has to be given by God"; and yet paradoxically when Christianity is ruled by revelation Barth calls it "the true religion"

Bonhoeffer called Barth's criticism of religion his greatest achievement. Bonhoeffer was clearly influenced by Barth, but when he wrote of the need to develop a religionless interpretation of Christianity and the Bible he was using the word in rather a different sense from Barth. Bonhoeffer saw religion as a garment of Christianity which could be put off without embarrassment and without any violence being done to it. He likened the Age of Religion to the Age of Chivalry which is now a part of the past and spoke of man having "come of age", having grown up and become independent of religion as one does a parent—at least in the sense that Bonhoeffer understands religion. The signs of religion for Bonhoeffer are a God who is conceived as a tutor and moral guide, with a Church and clergy which sees itself as the agency of that tutelage; and a God who is seen as a *deus ex machina*, a sort of benign fairy godmother who waves a magic wand when things begin to get difficult. Religion, he says, is individualistic and relies on metaphysics. Religion exists on the margins of human existence in questions of conscience, guilt and death. It grants privileges to the "chosen" or the "saved". Bonhoeffer wanted to abandon religion in this sense so that Christ could be discovered at the centre of life, but he also thought that this would involve Christians suffering at the hands of a guilt-ridden world as Christ had suffered and as Bonhoeffer was himself suffering in prison. Even though man had come of age and could no longer be subjected to an authority and guide, it did not follow that man had become mature. Man was independent but, Bonhoeffer realised, he was quite capable

of making a total mess of things as most of his fellow Germans had been doing in the Nazi years. When Bonhoeffer wrote his letters from prison in 1943 and 1944 he believed that one could only find genuine human maturity in a relationship with Christ at the centre of one's life.

If Barth and Bonhoeffer are correct in looking for the essence of Christian revelation outside human religion, it is certainly fatuous of so many clergymen to bemoan the fact that few people seem to be responding to religion and that the Church is failing to satisfy the religious needs of a minority who look to the Church. As Barth said, the crisis of religion is not that so few people respond to the Church as a religious institution; the crisis of religion comes when revelation in the form of Jesus Christ breaks in to challenge the assumptions of religion and to judge it as a form of unbelief and idolatry. Bonhoeffer in his rather different perspective considered that one could now be religious only if one was particularly shortsighted or culpably insincere. Either way there seems to be a straight theological choice between Barth and Bonhoeffer on the one hand and Troeltsch on the other.

In reality it is not as simple as that. Troeltsch had already criticised Ritschl for advocating a scientific study of religion while isolating Christianity from critical examination. It seems that an appeal to 'Christian revelation' can have two senses. It can either illegitimately isolate Christianity and refuse to submit its claim to truth to critical questioning, and Troeltsch rightly criticised Ritschl for this and anticipated the more problematical side of Barth. Or an appeal to revelation can emphasise the need to bring out the individuality and essence of Christianity. Bonhoeffer certainly aims at the latter as, I think, does Barth—though this point is arguable—and Bonhoeffer is particularly conscious of the *historical* development which has taken place in Christianity which a strictly phenomenological study of religion would ignore. The paradox is that the individuality of Christianity can only fully emerge and the plausibility of its claim to reveal God can only be upheld in the context of the 'objective' scientific study of religion which Troeltsch proposed and tried to establish.

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theology. There has been no protest from the hierarchy and none, so Mintoff assures us, from the Vatican. In the days when Mintoff was fighting for the rights of workers he was excommunicated and people were told that to vote for him was mortally sinful; now that he is casting aside his socialism his relations with the Church officials seem a lot easier. This has worrying implications far outside the tiny island of Malta.

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