

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10090-8 - Ernst Troeltsch and the Future of Theology

Edited by John Powell Clayton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Part I

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10090-8 - Ernst Troeltsch and the Future of Theology

Edited by John Powell Clayton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1. Ernst Troeltsch's intellectual development

HANS-GEORG DRESCHER

TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL PYE

The beginning of Ernst Troeltsch's intellectual career is marked by his encounter with the person and the theology of Albrecht Ritschl. Troeltsch spoke of Ritschl as a 'personality of great stature and originality' [*GS* IV, 5]¹ and recalled that it was through him that he was really first won over for theology.² In the history of theology Ritschl signified 'the end of the old theology of mediation and the beginning of a new one'.³ Ritschl made a break with the old theology of mediation and the pietistic presuppositions which it still maintained. He worked historically, while orientating himself in matters of faith towards a positively conceived revelation and its renewal in Reformation terms. It is of course problematical as to whether and how far this orientation was itself a barrier to radically historical understanding.

It was precisely this set of problems that the young Troeltsch found himself coming up against, and the first few years of his own intellectual work were mainly characterised by his wrestlings with Ritschl's theology. Ernst Troeltsch, who was born in 1865 and was the son of a doctor, went first to study theology at Erlangen where the faculty of that time was reckoned to be particularly important. But as Troeltsch remarked in retrospect: 'We had a cool respect for the professors and thought of them as antiquities from the time of the German Confederation, relics of the battle between neo-pietism and Enlightenment. Our interests were different, lying partly in the political and social problems of the time and partly in the

¹ *Gesammelte Schriften* IV, 5. References to the *GS* are given in abbreviated form hereafter.

² 'Die "kleine Göttinger Fakultät" von 1890', in *Die christliche Welt* 34 (1920), 282.

³ E. Hirsch, *Geschichte der neuern evangelischen Theologie*, 5 (Gütersloh, 1954), 558ff.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10090-8 - Ernst Troeltsch and the Future of Theology

Edited by John Powell Clayton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

HANS-GEORG DRESCHER

world-view of the natural sciences then current.⁴ So before long Troeltsch left Erlangen and went to Göttingen, above all to study under Ritschl. Others teaching in Göttingen at the time included the theologians Paul de Lagarde and Bernhard Duhm who worked in the perspective of the history of religions and had a lasting influence on Troeltsch. The philosophical authority in this period of his development was Hermann Lotze, who was indeed also an important philosophical guarantor for Ritschl. The decisive set of problems underlying Troeltsch's formation of his own intellectual position lay in the competitive influence of Ritschl on the one side and that of the history of religions specialists on the other side. Ritschl was certainly able to satisfy his critical mind better than the Erlangen Lutherans, but Troeltsch pursued things further, and the direction of his questions was essentially determined by the stimulus of ideas arising from the history of religions. Ritschl impressed Troeltsch through his intellectual clarity, his attention to the historical development of dogma in the elaboration of a systematic theology, and his lively philosophical interest, and in these matters he exercised a lasting influence upon him.

There were above all two points which sparked off Troeltsch's *criticism of Ritschl*. First Troeltsch questioned Ritschl's historical perspective. Did Ritschl understand sufficiently radically the alien character of the middle ages and the changes taking place in the modern world? Secondly Troeltsch became increasingly critical of Ritschlian dogmatics. The central questions here were these: is the isolated reference to revelation and its claim on mankind theologically justified?; what are the presuppositions of such a 'theology of claim' and to what consequences do they lead?

Troeltsch's thesis on 'Reason and revelation in Johann Gerhard and Melancthon' corresponds entirely to Albrecht Ritschl's way of working and thinking in being an exercise in the history of dogma against the background of questions in systematic theology.⁵ It is no longer possible today, he argued, to determine the relationship between faith and reason either

⁴ 'Die "kleine Göttinger Fakultät" von 1890', p. 282.

⁵ *Vernunft und Offenbarung bei Johann Gerhard und Melancthon* (Göttingen, 1891). This work originated as Troeltsch's doctoral dissertation and was subsequently expanded into his habilitation dissertation.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10090-8 - Ernst Troeltsch and the Future of Theology

Edited by John Powell Clayton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Troeltsch's intellectual development*

5

along Reformation lines (Melanchthon) or along orthodox lines (Johann Gerhard). The continuity is broken.

A distinct and stable relationship between reason and revelation, such as the old theologians enjoyed and worked out with great strength and clarity, is something which the new theologians do not have. The former had a settlement of this relationship which altogether satisfied them, with its dualism and its thesis of *lex* and *evangelium*. For all its narrowness and insufficiency its clarity, firmness and trenchancy still fill us with a certain admiration today [*Ibid.* p. 213].

In showing the importance of the concept of natural law Troeltsch's examination came to conclusions similar to those of Wilhelm Dilthey. In contrast to Ritschl he determined that 'the continuity of the Lutheran church itself with the past is greater, and that of modern theology with the older theology is less, than one usually assumes' [*Ibid.* p. 212].

Ritschl himself emphasised in his criticism of Melanchthon that the latter, in the Augsburg Confession and his defence of it, followed 'the leading ideas of Luther'. Nevertheless he had maintained the medieval scheme in this theological textbook, the *Loci communes*, and thereby lost sight of the initial Reformation impetus of Luther who had broken clear beyond the confines of medieval theology.⁶ Troeltsch interpreted the matter differently. Above all he took a more positive view of Melanchthon. Melanchthon's contribution lay in the recognition that christian faith needs 'a preparation and a point of connection in natural man'.⁷

Walter Bodenstein's account of Troeltsch's intellectual development [*Neige des Historismus* (Gütersloh, 1959)] ascribes a programmatic importance to Troeltsch's work on Johann Gerhard and Melanchthon, and in this vein he gives the first part of his book the heading 'The initial work of 1891 as an attempt to win independence from Ritschlian theology'. The importance of this first work of Troeltsch is clearly overplayed here. It was less dramatic than that. In the main it is Ritschl's historical appraisal which is corrected. Luther's strong connection with the middle ages comes out very clearly, as also the idea that in the train of a new church a new dogmatic system had to be formed as well, one which could appeal to Luther's

⁶ *Drei akademische Reden* (Bonn, 1887), pp. 17ff.

⁷ In the review of R. Seeberg's *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 2nd half, *Göttingische Gelehrte, Anzeigen* (1901), p. 28.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10090-8 - Ernst Troeltsch and the Future of Theology

Edited by John Powell Clayton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

religious experience and his connection with certain aspects of the development of doctrine up until then (Augustine, mysticism and humanistic theology). In this largely historically orientated investigation Bodenstein tends to perceive the systematic insights which Troeltsch conceived later, though admittedly he already let it be seen here that he believed the rejection of natural theology and metaphysics to be untenable [*ibid.* p. 14]. Troeltsch's conclusion in the first instance was that the Ritschlian theology, framed in terms of an isolated claim to revelation on the part of Christianity, could not be justified by reference to the dogmatic tradition of protestantism. If Troeltsch's argument had already gone as far as Bodenstein seems to think, his further theological development would be difficult to understand.

This can be seen not least in that in subsequent writings, above all in the long essay on 'The christian world-view and its counter-currents' ('Die christliche Weltanschauung und ihre Gegenströmungen'),⁸ he is still operating on the basis of a Ritschlian theology. It is particularly clear from his talk of the 'claim' of Christianity, and the recourse implied therein to a purely factually given revelation with no need of further rational justification. The unbroken link with Ritschl is also clearly visible when Troeltsch distinguishes religion from world-views formed by the combination of various theories and thus takes over Ritschl's distinction between theoretical and practical value judgments [*GS* II, 240]. The connection is also there in terms of philosophical perspective, for Troeltsch, like Ritschl himself, was strongly influenced by the philosophy of Lotze and defined the relationship between mind and nature in the same way as Lotze, namely in terms of the priority of mind [*GS* II, 242, 246f.].

At the same time however a *new influence* now makes itself felt. Troeltsch recognised more and more the importance of the work of the history of religions and perceives the effect which it has on theology. To think in the categories of the history of religions is bound to put a question mark against christian theology's claim to exclusiveness, because analogies to christian spirituality are to be seen on all sides. Faced with this set of

⁸ *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* (1893/4), III and IV (hereafter *ZThK*), reprinted in *GS* II, 227–327.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10090-8 - Ernst Troeltsch and the Future of Theology

Edited by John Powell Clayton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Troeltsch's intellectual development*

7

problems Troeltsch attempted, by contrast with Ritschl, to delineate 'the spirit of Christianity' which would be 'comprehensible and alive even without its first historical formation' [GS II, 239]. For the historically disciplined view must see the anthropomorphic character of biblical and ecclesiastical supernaturalism which 'is merely one particular case of the understanding of the world and of nature common to antiquity' [GS II, 247]. These are indeed new notes which no longer harmonise with the basic conception of Ritschlian theology. They demonstrate the power of historical thinking and the problems which it raises for theology. In the long run Troeltsch found the idea of ranging Christianity within the history of religions inescapable. With this idea came the question about the absoluteness of Christianity. Methodologically considered, the whole problem arose as a result of the uncompromising recognition of the historical method. In the essay, 'The christian world-view and its counter-currents', Troeltsch was essentially still trying to solve these questions by means of the theology of Ritschl. This writing is therefore eloquent testimony to the transition from a Ritschlian viewpoint to a theology conditioned by the history of religions. Ritschl's 'theology of claim', which saw Christianity as filled with the claim 'to be the perfect religion beyond the other types and stages',⁹ was the basis of his conclusion that only Christianity could count as religion in the full sense of the word. Over against Christianity there was only that deficient mode of religion, the non-christian nature religion, whose inadequacy lay in its lack of intellectual and moral refinement. Thus Ritschl substantially failed to take account of the objective significance of the history of religions because he was dealing on a conceptual rather than a historical level and reserved the concept 'religion' in its true fulness for Christianity. So when Troeltsch emphasised that Christianity was 'the purely intellectual and moral world religion' [GS II, 321] he was still thinking in agreement with Ritschl. He took this purely intellectual and moral character of Christianity to be its special quality as a religion.

Troeltsch's own history of religions approach at first ran

⁹ *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*, reprint of the first edition (Gütersloh, 1966), v, 13.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10090-8 - Ernst Troeltsch and the Future of Theology

Edited by John Powell Clayton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

parallel to these ideas but gradually went beyond the Ritschlian starting point until it brought about a change in his theological thinking. Christianity cannot be isolated from the general history of religions. The meaning of Christianity is only to be perceived in the context of the development of religious life in general. Therefore the idea of a 'ready-made' redemption which only requires to be accepted by man cannot be made the starting point of theological reflections. Troeltsch attempted to convey this new perspective in his essay, 'The autonomy of religion' ('Die Selbständigkeit der Religion'), in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* (1895/6) v and vi. In response to a critical comment by Julius Kaftan he justified and developed his position once again in an essay entitled 'History and metaphysics'.¹⁰

Troeltsch's reply was based on the conception that religion is an independent area of spiritual or mental life. Over against modern immanentist views and the rapidly proceeding historicisation of thought in general it is necessary to justify and develop religion's own right to exist. The content of religious statements cannot simply be logically deduced, and they also cannot be traced back to fundamental moral attitudes. It is above all Schleiermacher's position which we see in the background mediating a decisive influence.

But it is only by bringing the idea of development into the picture that the liveliness and fulness of religious life truly appears. We have then an enquiry into religion, freed both from rationalising constructionism and from any reduction to moral concepts. It was Hegel's merit to have taken up the idea of development and linked it together with an appreciation of the driving ideas of history. Troeltsch's criticism of Hegel was that the latter understood the development of religion as a purely human intellectual movement. Nevertheless it is clear that Schleiermacher and Hegel were necessary to make possible the position in the philosophy of religion now unfolded by Troeltsch. He saw the philosophy of religion not as a philosophical treatment of religious objects but as coming to terms with living religion itself. This had the consequence that the philosophy of religion must concern itself with the psychology of religion and the history of religions. As an

¹⁰ *ZThK* VIII (1898), 1–69.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10090-8 - Ernst Troeltsch and the Future of Theology

Edited by John Powell Clayton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Troeltsch's intellectual development*

9

autonomous area of life religion proffers a sphere of its own for psychological investigations, and in so far as the contents of this area are articulated within historical movements one is brought to look at things from the perspective of the history of religions.

The psychology of religion sees religion and its moorings in the human consciousness as a complicated specific case of a fundamental human function. The task of the history of religions is to seek out 'laws and connections in the historical varieties of religion, and the basis of a criterion for the evaluation of these varieties' ['Selbständigkeit der Religion', *ZThK* v, 370]. The intention is to seek a solution to the question of the criterion for evaluating the development, not from outside, as for example by a dogmatic decision, but from inside, that is, from within the development of the history of religions itself. One must strive to recognise the driving ideas of the development of the history of religions and on that basis solve the question of a criterion for judging the historical multiplicity of forms. Troeltsch saw both the psychology of religion and the history of religion as having a bearing on the question of truth in religion. The psychology of religion seeks the locus of religion in the consciousness and thus also the origin and meaning of religion. Thus it 'alone can make clear what can indeed be worked out about the question of truth in religion' [*ibid.*]. As to the history of religions, this seeks out laws and connections in the multiplicity of history and works in this way for a criterion to appraise the historical varieties.

What may be concluded about the contribution of each of these to the question of truth, and how the relationship between the psychological and the historical criteria of evaluation is to be seen, seem to remain not quite clear. Troeltsch tried to get over this by linking the two ideas: he brought the psychological and the history of religions aspects of the truth question together by pointing out that the psychology of religion ought to pursue not an abstract, individualistic method, but a historical or socio-psychological one. He felt that the main questions lay in the historical field and required to be solved through a philosophy of history aligned with a metaphysics of mind. But if the philosophy of religion is a philosophical treatment of the historical development of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10090-8 - Ernst Troeltsch and the Future of Theology

Edited by John Powell Clayton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

religion as it exists in living fact, then the philosophy of religion can be defined as the philosophy of the history of religion. In that sense the philosophy of religion is linked both with the psychology of religion and with the history of religion. According to Troeltsch the psychology and the history of religion can also be understood as subordinate disciplines of the science of religion. Troeltsch did not always commit himself to one terminology on this matter. He was more concerned about the problems and the implications of the content than about a consistent terminology. Thus he speaks sometimes of the two great leading problems of the science of religion as being that of the psychology of religion and that of the history of religion [*ZThK* VI, 71f.]. Yet it is clear that he could also speak of them as sub-disciplines. Furthermore the science of religion can also be referred to as the philosophy of religion, though with this difference, that the use of the latter term pushes more strongly to the foreground the problem of the criterion for evaluating the multiplicity of religious developments. In this sense, the philosophy of religion tends to become a philosophy of history for religion, giving a metaphysical interpretation to the concept of development and assuming a motivation within history towards the unfolding of ultimate meaning.

Eckardt Lessing attributes encyclopaedist intentions to Troeltsch during this stage in his development, and speaks of him as presenting an 'outline of a system of the sciences'.¹¹ referring particularly in this connection to the essay, 'History and metaphysics' ('Geschichte und Metaphysik'). Troeltsch himself showed here that as his position developed on the basis of religion, and the problems in the philosophy of religion and the philosophy of history arising out of it, there was a need for a comprehensive scientific treatment and justification for it. He did this in response to Kaftan's attempt to reproach him here for inconsistencies and inadequate scientific reflection.¹²

¹¹ E. Lessing, *Die Geschichtsphilosophie Ernst Troeltschs* (Hamburg, 1965), p. 17.

¹² E.g. thus: 'Either empirical analysis and then at the right place a transition to a standpoint in the ideal, that is, to personal conviction, to faith, – or a doctrine of religion in the sense of a metaphysics; there is no in-between. And that is why it comes to be as declared above: Troeltsch attempts an impossible standpoint and falls between two stools. He has not carried his scientific reflection through as far as the problem demands.' J. Kaftan, 'Die Selbständigkeit des Christentums', *ZThK* VI, 391.

Troeltsch's intellectual development

11

Troeltsch was concerned to meet a reproach of this kind by demonstrating the extent to which he was conscious of the demands of science. Nevertheless his whole response consisted of hints about interconnections, indications of where the problems lie and suggestions about where the solutions are to be sought, rather than aiming at the real outline of a system. Troeltsch expressed himself on these matters very aphoristically and contented himself with declaring a basic position in the form of a rejection of supernaturalism, with advocacy of a historical, that is, of a history of religions approach in theology, and with the resultant set of questions and tasks. With that occasional perspicacity of an opponent Kaftan did in fact strike a weak point in Troeltsch's presentation, namely its lack of terminological strictness and its aphoristic brevity instead of more persistent and more theoretically scientific reflection.

In spite of this Lessing remains true to his idea that Troeltsch was a systematic thinker, even though he himself was to take note of difficulties which arise in the course of his account.¹³ He holds to his scheme with a determined consistency, which however becomes dubious when it refuses to yield even to Troeltsch himself.

In his consideration of the development of the history of religions Troeltsch emphasised that one should presuppose faith in the reason running through the historical development, understanding this developmental process not merely as the effects of human activity but seeing it as the consequence of divine impulses. In this sense, then, Troeltsch could speak of the divine humanity of the history of religions. The objective basis of history is thereby presumed and declared to be a divine basis. Taking account of the driving ideas of history Troeltsch took it to be beyond dispute that Christianity can finally be recognised as the highest form of religion. 'The inner dialectic of the religious idea' [*ZThK* VI, 200] points in the direction of Christianity. As a perfectly spiritualised and moralised religion Christianity is the deepest and richest product of the religious idea itself.

One can of course ask whether Troeltsch distanced himself sufficiently with this kind of justification from the Ritschlian

¹³ Cf. Lessing, *Die Geschichtsphilosophie Ernst Troeltschs*, p. 17 and pp. 51f.; or when Lessing has to say with respect to psychology that Troeltsch 'has merely developed a few principles of this psychology', *ibid.* p. 52.