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# The Suitability of the Tools Provided by Ernst Troeltsch for the Understanding of Twentieth-Century Religion*

HARTMUT LEHMANN

In German religious sociology there are few giants. Ernst Troeltsch, who first taught theology at the University of Heidelberg and later philosophy at the University of Berlin, is one of them. Among his many publications none is more influential and more impressive than *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*,[1] first published in 1912 and dedicated by him to the universities of Greifswald and Breslau which had recognised his scholarly achievements with honorary doctorates in philosophy and law respectively.[2]

In the decades after his early death in 1923 Troeltsch's works were soon marginalised within Germany. While his books were held in high regard outside Germany, and especially in the USA, representatives of German dialectical theology disputed most of his insights and the proponents of the so-called 'Lutherrenaissance' disliked Troeltsch's notion of the medieval character of much of Luther's thought. For them Luther was a national hero whose legacy could help to rebuild German pride after the defeat of 1918. But in Troeltsch's works there was nothing to support such a notion. After 1933 the leading theologians both of the Confessing Church and of the 'Deutsche Christen' were not open to liberal thinkers such as Troeltsch. During the Nazi era, therefore, Troeltsch's legacy survived outside Germany in the countries of the western world from where it was reimported into Germany in the 1950s and 1960s. Among other places, the University of Chicago was a centre of learning where Troeltsch's works were read and studied. It was from Chicago that Brian Gerrish made major contributions towards a better understanding of Troeltsch's works. Among postwar German scholars no one did more to rediscover Troeltsch than Trutz Rentdorff from Munich. At present the huge body of Troeltsch's works is being edited in two projects. One is the Paris project, led by Heinz Wismann, Pierre Gisel and Jean-Marc Tétaz, who have begun to produce a French edition of most of Troeltsch's writings. The first volume of the French edition appeared in print in 1996. The other is the Augsburg project, led by Friedrich Wilhelm Graf and Trutz Rendtorff.

It is in *Die Soziallehren*, a book of almost 1000 pages, that Troeltsch developed his famous distinction between Churches as the institutional representation of organised religion, of sects as the social embodiment of the voluntary principle and of mysticism as the clearest expression of religious individualism. Troeltsch argued that the

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three types gained a predominant influence in three specific historical periods, thus giving each one of these periods a special character. While the Middle Ages were in his view the epoch characterised by 'Churches', the 'sects' exerted most influence in the era after the Reformation, namely the seventeenth century. Religious individualism, finally, was the characteristic trait of the most recent past, that is the nineteenth century, and therefore also of his own time. *Die Soziallehren*, Troeltsch's *magnum opus*, thus offers both a typology and a periodisation; in his work he attempted to make a contribution both to religious sociology and to church history. Furthermore, the three types as well as the three periods in which these types appeared in an almost ideal form rested on a broad vision of the past in which culture was blended with politics, ideas with institutions.[3] In contemporary German religious sociology these distinctions are often referred to as fundamental insights, but they are seldom discussed, and – as far as I can tell – never explicitly refuted. It is the aim of this short paper to revisit Ernst Troeltsch's scientific world. In *Die Soziallehren* he had used his religious typology in order to analyse and describe more than a thousand years of ecclesiastical history, namely the development from the early Middle Ages up to his own time. It is tempting, therefore, to test his tools by confronting them with the religious history of our century. I will do so in several steps.

Anyone familiar with twentieth-century religious experience will be impressed by two phenomena. On the one hand, in most countries of the western world organised religion, including Catholicism, is in trouble. Many people attend church only sporadically; they disregard the teachings of the Churches, and this seems to be true for all segments of society. Christianity in the form of large institutionalised Churches seems to have lost a hold over people's lives. To believe no longer means that one has to belong, if I may use this short-hand description. On the other hand, in the twentieth century voluntary religion flourishes in many parts of Europe, and even more so in the USA, where we can observe expressions of Christian faith which are as intensive and enthusiastic as they are sometimes naïve and intolerant.

Can we apply Troeltsch's tools in order to analyse these developments? If we take a closer look, we are able to see, I think, that the distinction between 'Churches' and 'sects', to use Troeltsch's terminology, begins to become blurred in the course of the twentieth century. While organised religion continues to attract churchgoers only where pastors are able to incorporate into their work, and utilise, the voluntary principle (and I should add that this seems to be characteristic for many parts of Europe), many of the voluntary religious organisations have grown to a size which forces them to employ bureaucratic measures like institutionalised Churches (something which we can find in the USA). If we want to understand these developments, the notions of 'Church' and 'sect', as defined by Troeltsch, do not give us much help. For Troeltsch, in principle, Churches were always large bodies, and as such the counterpart of political bodies like territories or states; and sects for him were always small. His tools do not enable us to deal with Churches in decline and with sects growing to the size of large bodies. Nor does Troeltsch provide terms, or tools, with which we can comprehend the beliefs and activities of those persons who have cut most, or all, ties with Christian tradition. In order to characterise religious individualism he introduces the category of 'mysticism'. But what about individualism based not on religion but on socialist or communist thought, on atheism or agnosticism, or on social Darwinism or racism? In the course of the twentieth century many people in many countries found such ideas highly attractive; and they did not remain silent, but occupied public space and public time and the imagination of their fellow-countrymen: space, time and imagination which had been determined by

Christian teachings and which had been given a special meaning by Christian rituals ever since the Middle Ages. This leads me to the next step in our examination.

In the last section of *Die Soziallehren* Troeltsch offers an analysis of the recent past. He deplores what he calls the 'radical individualism' of his time, and he predicts that new forms of communal life will develop in the not too distant future.[4] He only briefly mentions socialism and communism as opponents of Christian social teachings, and his remarks remain rather vague. He makes no predictions with regard to the future of individualism, or specifically on the future of individual rights and matters such as religious tolerance. Nor does he discuss social Darwinism or nationalism, not to mention national chauvinism or imperialism. One may wonder in which way Troeltsch would have grasped such 'innerworldly' attempts to shape people's lives with the help of political religion, had he lived a decade or two longer. Would he have joined the Confessing Church? Would he have used his authority to try to stem the tide of the German Christians? Would he have tried to find new terms in order to characterise the strange yet potent mixture of ideology and terror in the Nazi party? As we all know only too well, some of the most depressing, horrifying, morally devastating episodes of the twentieth century were caused by totalitarian regimes: by total warfare, mass-killings, genocide, and the Holocaust. Much of that had already become evident during the First World War; but worse was yet to come. The generations following Troeltsch experienced violence and death on an unprecedented scale. Troeltsch's typology offers nothing which would help us even to approach such phenomena, and I should add that these phenomena did not take place in another world but in a world in which one would assume that Christian groups tried to live up to Christian commands and in which Christians therefore should have responded to what they were able to witness.

Let me point out the various dimensions of this statement. First, the horrors mentioned challenged, or should have challenged, all true Christians. Christian responses to Auschwitz and Hiroshima, to name just two examples, tell us much about the state of Christendom in our times. Second, in many instances nationalism and socialism, and even racism, did not gain influence in opposition to Christian groups; rather, many Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, fervently supported nationalism; many of them believed that nationalism was a genuine expression of Christian values, and that through the support of nationalism they would be able to stem the tide of secularisation. Until a few years ago Christian devotion and racism formed a firm symbiosis among many white South Africans. Third, nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalism made use of very specific elements of the Christian tradition: a national leader was very often conceived of as a Moses, leading his people from captivity through the Red Sea into a brighter future, while God was supposedly punishing their enemies; national renewal was seen in analogy to religious awakening; national exceptionalism was understood as if God had promised salvation to specific ethnic entities.[5]

Any analysis of the religious history of the twentieth century will have to deal with these problems. Crucial examples of a symbiosis of Christian involvement and the exercise of national power can be observed already in Troeltsch's lifetime. But I am afraid we have to note that Troeltsch failed to recognise the potential dangers inherent in the various forms of nationalism. To be quite clear on this: I do not request that Troeltsch should have been a prophet, but I wonder why he did not react more vehemently, for example, when the German army used poison gas on the Western Front at Ypres in 1915. Is it too much to expect that he might have protested against this most terrible way of conducting war?

There are other things which he failed to foresee. Pentecostal spirituality rose to some prominence, and influence, even before the First World War, and so did fundamentalism. In Troeltsch's works we look in vain for some remarks which could help us to characterise these movements. Obviously Troeltsch was so deeply convinced of the progress of science, and of the humanities as supported by religious individualism, that he could not even perceive the possibility of a new orthodoxy based on strict biblicism, such as fundamentalism, or the possibility of renewed Christian enthusiasm in a new awakening which might be shaping and inspiring large numbers of believers, such as Pentecostalism. If we attempt to analyse twentieth-century religion, we do have to try to explain the reasons for the astonishing success of both of these movements. Against all the expectations of a scholar like Troeltsch's friend Max Weber, industrialisation and urbanisation did not inhibit the growth of religion in the case of fundamentalism and Pentecostalism: quite the contrary. This has to be explained. 'Disenchantment', to use Weber's term, seems not to be the logical, inevitable result of modernisation. Rather, there seem to be striking examples showing that 'reenchantment' and modernisation may have coexisted in a way in which both developments reinforced each other.

Furthermore, some of the most complicated and troublesome aspects of twentieth-century Christian experience were not even touched upon by Troeltsch. Let me give just a few examples. In *Die Soziallehren* Troeltsch explored the virtues of asceticism much the same way as Max Weber had done. The ethical and moral consequences of affluence he does not mention, nor the consequences of mass poverty. Thus he offers no help if we want to understand the moral effects of consumer societies and if we are to attempt to interpret the social and economic differences within western societies as well as the differences between the so-called First World and the Third. To take another example: in *Die Soziallehren* culture is one of Troeltsch's favourite topics. War he does not discuss. He thus leaves us without guidance if we want to look into the history of Christian legitimation of violence and war, or – and this may be equally important – into the story of Christian pacifism.

If we look at twentieth-century religious history through the lenses provided by Troeltsch, then, important topics escape our attention. One such topic, for example, is Christian involvement in the wars of liberation and decolonisation, both on the side of the oppressors and on the side of the oppressed. Another is the whole subject of Christian existence in the shadow of totalitarian rule, involving twentieth-century Christian collaborators and twentieth-century Christian martyrs. As a result, crucial elements for an analysis of the effects of twentieth-century dictatorship may escape our attention; nor do we comprehend the pseudo-religious fascination of the rituals staged by twentieth-century dictatorships; nor do we give credit to the inner core of religious convictions which motivated those who resisted the dictators, and who often, by doing this, risked their lives.

In trying to be fair to Troeltsch, I should add that much of what I have outlined would demand a better understanding of what really happened in the course of the twentieth century than we possess even at the very end of the century. We are just beginning to grasp, scrutinise, analyse and put into perspective the various elements which seem to have shaped the course of the twentieth century. It remains to be seen whether the factors which I have used in order to rest Troeltsch's tools, namely the radicalism of nationalism and the immoral use of mass violence, will stand the test of historical scholarship with the consequence that historians of future generations will use these phenomena in order to characterise twentieth-century history. One could also ask to what degree the three types and the periodisation Troeltsch proposes are

suited to an understanding of the consequences of the expulsion and migration of millions of people all over the world since the time of the First World War – and I should add that many of the uprooted understood what happened to them in religious terms.

Furthermore, it is necessary to make an attempt to look at the two sides of Troeltsch's story. On the one hand there can be little doubt that his religious typology is rather simple and that his typology does not give us much help if we want to understand phenomena such as the 'völkisches Christentum' of the 'German Christians' or the success story of Pentecostalism. Moreover, in retrospect it is quite clear that Troeltsch was, above all, a representative of Wilhelminian Protestant 'Bildungsbürgertum', the well-to-do and well-educated upper middle class, and it is also quite evident that his religious typology was completely dominated by elements drawn from his own personal experience, thus representing at best the views of only a small segment of Wilhelminian society.[6] Troeltsch had no understanding of, and completely underestimated, the role of Christians in countries such as Great Britain and the United States. Christian experience in Africa, Asia and Latin America had no place in his picture.

On the other hand, Troeltsch's scholarly achievements should not be underrated. By defining three types of religious social expression, Troeltsch invites us to develop a more complex typology in which the actions and limitations of various sizes of Christian groups can be compared.[7] A task for the future is to combine insights of religious sociology with insights of historians by developing not only special types but an interpretation in which these types are perceived in a historical perspective. In distinguishing between the epochs of 'Altprotestantismus' and 'Neuprotestantismus', as he does in *Die Soziallehren*, Troeltsch explicitly states that there has been no continuous development over the past few centuries, and he thus draws our attention to the need to interpret the discontinuities of our own time. Also, by giving religion a pivotal role within the history of European culture, he challenges us to come to an understanding of the achievements and failures of Christian forces in our own century. Finally, at least within the German context, the story of most of the leading theologians of the generation following Troeltsch also serves to give some credit to him. Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, Emanuel Hirsch and many others were obsessed with the notion of the German people in a war of survival: they speculated about the awakening of this people, and about a new leader who would show the way, a Luther or a Moses reborn. These were simplistic religious models indeed and the effects of these teachings were disastrous:[8] Hitler came to power with the support of Protestant voters, including the pious and orthodox groups.[9] By contrast, despite the serious shortcomings of his work, Troeltsch appears as an example of a more subtle and a more sophisticated approach to religious and political history: he acknowledges historical differences and relativises historical achievement; in short, he historicises religion, even though he wrote a work on how to overcome historicism.[10] He thus prepares us to master the task of coming to a better understanding of religions in Europe in the twentieth century. In this sense, the multi-volume editions of his work may yet serve a very useful scholarly purpose, just as did the new editions of the complete works of two of his most resourceful contemporaries, Georg Simmel and Max Weber.

## Notes and References

[1] Please note the abbreviation of the title of Troeltsch's work in the English translation,

published in two volumes (London and New York, 1931): *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches.*

[2] The book was published as volume one of Troeltsch's *Gesammelte Schriften* (Tübingen, 1912), (3rd edn, Mohr, Tübingen, 1923). On Troeltsch's *Soziallehren*, see Friedrich Wilhelm Graf and Trutz Rendtorff (eds), *Ernst Troeltschs Soziallehren: Studien zu ihrer Interpretation* (*Troeltsch-Studien*, vol. 6, Mohn, Gütersloh, 1993); Michael Murrmann-Kahl, *Die entzauberte Heilsgeschichte: der Historismus erobert die Theologie 1880–1920* (Mohn, Gütersloh, 1992), pp. 378–85; see also Ernst Troeltsch, 'Epochen und Typen der Sozialphilosophie des Christentums', in Hans Baron (ed.), *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4 (Mohr, Tübingen, 1925), pp. 125–27, 155–56.

[3] See Horst Renz and Friedrich Wilhelm Graf (eds), *Protestantismus und Neuzeit* (Gütersloh, 1984), especially Volker Drehsen's contribution, 'Die Normativität neuzeitlicher Frömmigkeitsgeschichte: zur aktuellen Bedeutung der klassischen Religionssoziologie Ernst Troeltschs (pp. 257–89); Manfred Wichelhaus, *Kirchengeschichtsschreibung und Soziologie im 19. Jahrhundert und bei Ernst Troeltsch* (C. Winter, Heidelberg, 1965), pp. 95–139; Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Mystik und Askese im Leben mittelalterlicher Frauen: einige Bemerkungen zu den Typologien von Max Weber und Ernst Troeltsch', in Wolfgang Schluchter (ed.), *Max Webers Sicht des okzidentalen Christentums* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M., 1988), pp. 355–82.

[4] Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren*, p. 967.

[5] See William R. Hutchison and Hartmut Lehmann (eds), *Many are Chosen: Divine Election and Western Nationalism* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1994).

[6] See Volker Krech, 'Zwischen Historisierung und Transformation von Religion: Diagnosen zur religiösen Lage um 1900 bei Max Weber, Georg Simmel und Ernst Troeltsch', in Volker Krech and Hartmann Tyrell (eds), *Religionssoziologie um 1900* (ERGON, Würzburg, 1995), pp. 313–49; Gangolf Hübinger, *Kulturprotestantismus und Politik: Zum Verhältnis von Liberalismus und Politik im wilhelminischen Deutschland* (Mohr, Tübingen, 1994).

[7] See Theodore M. Steeman, 'Church, sect, mysticism, denomination: periodical aspects of Troeltsch's types', *Sociological Analysis*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1975, pp. 181–204; William R. Garrett, 'Maligned mysticism: the maledicted career of Troeltsch's third type', *ibid.*, pp. 205–23; Paul M. Gustafson, 'The missing member of Troeltsch's trinity: thoughts generated by Weber's comments', *ibid.*, pp. 224–26; Benjamin Nelson, 'Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, Georg Jellinek as comparative historical sociologists', *ibid.*, pp. 229–40; Roland Robertson, 'On the analysis of mysticism: pre-Weberian, Weberian and post-Weberian perspectives', *ibid.*, pp. 241–66.

[8] See Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985).

[9] See Hartmut Lehmann, 'Hitlers evangelische Wähler' in *Protestantische Weltsichten* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1998), pp. 130–52.

[10] Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Überwindung*, F. von Hügel (ed.) (Pan, Tübingen, 1924; 2nd edn, Aalen, 1966); see also Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3 (Mohr, Tübingen, 1922).