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HPRS5905/6905

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MODERN
CHRISTIAN
THEOLOGY

Troeltsch II



TROELTSCH AND SOCIOLOGY

THE TROELTSCH AND SOCIOLOGY

The previous session established Troeltsch's methodological challenge to traditional theology: the principles of criticism, analogy, and correlation collectively produce what he called the homogeneity of history, that is the recognition that no historical phenomenon, including Christianity, can claim exemption from the conditions governing all human development.

This session examines the constructive dimension of Troeltsch's work: his attempt to understand how Christianity has actually existed in history not as a timeless doctrinal system but as a living, socially embedded, culturally diverse movement that has taken dramatically different forms in different historical circumstances.

If Christianity is irreducibly historical, then understanding what Christianity is requires understanding the historical forms it has taken!

THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES (1912)

The 'Social Teaching of the Christian Churches' is probably one of the most ambitious works in the history of modern theology.

Troeltsch's aim is to show that there is no timeless Christian teaching on society, politics, economics, and culture that can be straightforwardly extracted from the tradition and applied to contemporary problems.

What the tradition offers is instead a plurality of social teachings, each reflecting the particular historical situation of the community that produced it.

This pluralism within Christianity is itself evidence of the historical conditioning that Troeltsch's insisted upon in his earlier work.



THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES (1912)

A famous typology (church, sect, mysticism) emerges from Troeltsch's attempt to account for the bewildering variety of social forms that Christianity has taken across its history.

Faced with the contrast between all the different forms that Christianity has taken over its history, Troeltsch asks:

“Are these differences merely accidental variations on a single essential form, or do they represent genuinely distinct and internally coherent types of Christian social organisation?”



THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES (1912)

Troeltsch's answer is the latter, that they represent different forms of Christianity, and they these forms generally fall into three 'types'.

Troeltsch does not declare one type superior to the others or suggest that one is 'truer' than the others, but that they are an analytical tool for understanding the structural logic of different forms of Christian existence.

Each type embodies a different resolution of the fundamental tension between the absolute demands of the Gospel and the relative conditions of our social life.



The Church-Type

The Church-type is defined by its universalism and its objective character and its engagement with the world.

The Sect-Type

The Sect-type is defined by its focus on personal regeneration, moral transformation of the community, and the visible holiness of its members.

The Mystical-Type

- The Mystical-Type is defined by the primacy of individual, immediate religious experience, usually through direct, personal encounter with the divine.

THE CHURCH-TYPE

The church-type is defined by its universalism and its objective character.

The Church aims to encompass the whole of society within its life, offering an objective, institutionally mediated grace that is available to all regardless of the degree of individual moral or spiritual achievement.

Its defining mark is the sacramental system: grace is communicated through rites administered by ordained ministers, and membership in the Church is established by baptism rather than by personal conversion or moral commitment.

This universalism requires a degree of accommodation to the social order. The church-type cannot be too socially radical, because it has embraced the entirety of society, including those who are far from the demanding standards of the kingdom.

THE CHURCH-TYPE

The strengths of the church-type are considerable – by embracing the whole of society, the church-type can shape culture, civilise social institutions, and bring the entire range of human life under the formative influence of the Christian tradition.

Its universalism reflects a genuine theological conviction that the grace of God is not the possession of an elite community of the spiritually advanced, but the gift offered to all humanity in its weakness and imperfection.

But the tensions are equally real: the accommodation to the social order risks the domestication of the gospel, the sanctification of existing power structures, and the substitution of institutional conformity for genuine personal transformation.

THE SECT-TYPE

The Sect-type stands in deliberate and principled contrast to the church-type on every significant dimension.

Where the church embraces all of society, the sect is a voluntary community of committed disciples who have made a personal, conscious decision to follow the demands of the Gospel.

Where the church mediates grace through objective sacramental rites, the sect emphasises personal regeneration, moral transformation, and the visible holiness of its members.

Where the church accommodates itself to the social order, the sect holds itself deliberately apart e.g. refusing military service, refusing oaths, separating itself from the economic and political structures of the surrounding world.

THE SECT-TYPE

The sect-type preserves dimensions of the Gospel that the Church-type consistently compromises on: its insistence on personal commitment rather than inherited membership, its refusal to accommodate to the social order, and its effort to embody in community life the radical ethical demands of the Kingdom of God make it a perpetual challenge to the complacency of institutional forms of Christianity.

It too has internal tensions though: by withdrawing from the social order, the sect-type renounces the possibility of transforming it for the better and its perfectionism can generate a harsh internal discipline and a tendency toward schism, something seen all too commonly in Christian history.

THE MYSTICAL-TYPE

The third type in Troeltsch's typology, mysticism or the mystical-type, is structurally distinct from both the Church and the Sect, and in some respects the most revealing for understanding the religious conditions of our contemporary modern / post-modern societies.

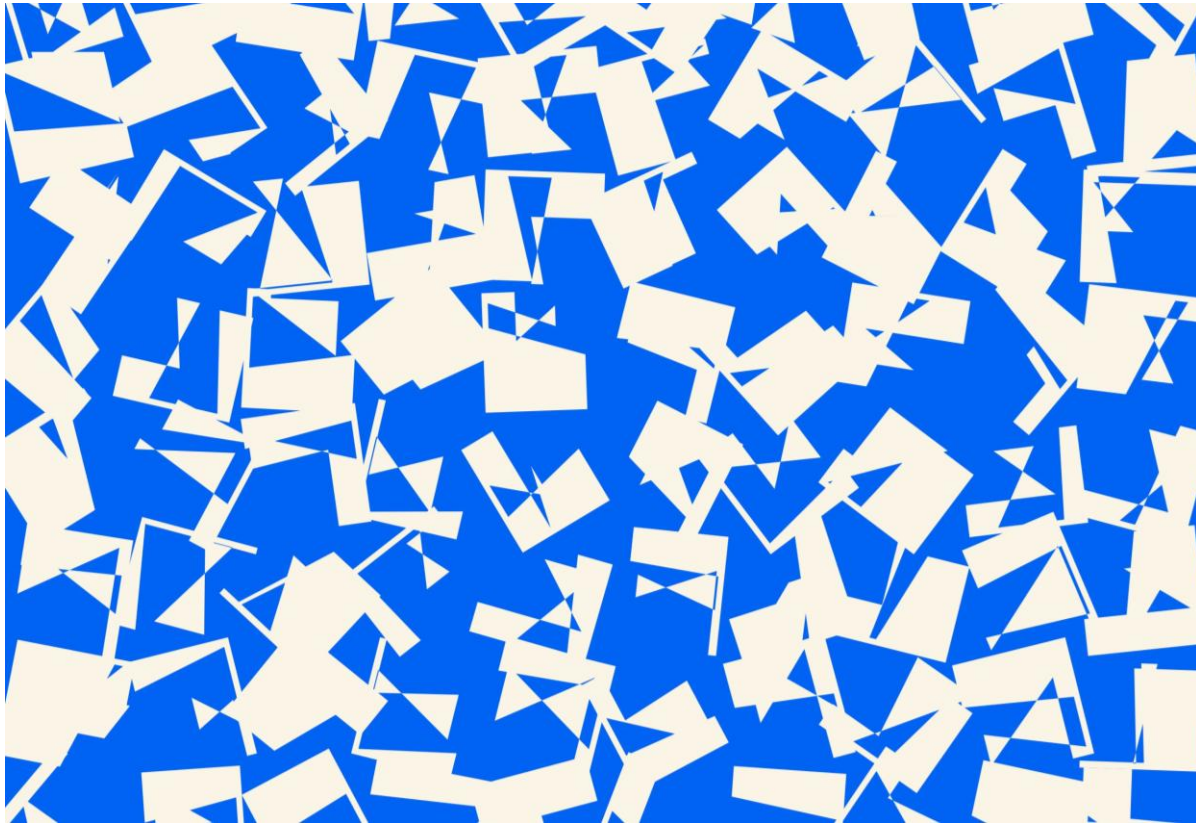
Where both Church and Sect are corporate forms of Christian existence, that is communities constituted by shared doctrine practice and discipline, the mystical type is characterised instead by the primacy of the individual and their immediate religious experience.

THE MYSTICAL-TYPE

For the mystical-type what matters is the direct, personal encounter with the divine and the inward experience of divine union divine dependence or divine illumination that constitutes the core of religious feeling.

Institutional structures are at best secondary supports for this immediate experience, and at worst are seen as direct obstacles to it.

The mystical type therefore tends toward a fluid religiosity that transcends the boundaries of explicit confessional communities and regards the specific historical forms of Christianity as some kind of provisional expression of a universal spiritual reality – that might be shared across all religions.



TYPOLOGIES OF RELIGIOUS FORMS

Troeltsch saw in the mystical type both the characteristic religious form of modernity and its deepest spiritual danger.

The drift toward individualised and experientially grounded religion that he observed among the cultured European middle class of his time was, in his analysis, precisely a drift toward the mystical type he identified.

This diagnosis has obvious implications for the evaluation of Schleiermacher's theology: in Troeltsch's typological framework, the theology of feeling that Schleiermacher had developed as a foundation for the reconstruction of Christian doctrine is recognisably an expression of the mystical-type.

TROELTSCH AND THEOLOGY

A crucial feature of Troeltsch's typological analysis that is sometimes overlooked is his insistence that all three types are genuinely rooted in the New Testament and all appear in the history of the Christian tradition.

None of these strands can claim exclusive ownership of the tradition or the scripture as each represents a genuine and legitimate appropriation of aspects of the original Christian witness.

The plurality of types therefore reflects a plurality already present in the tradition itself.

Church-Type

Draws on the Pauline theology of the body of Christ, the sacramental grace of the Eucharist, and the institutional structures of the Pastoral Epistles.

Sect-Type

Draws on the Sermon on the Mount, the call to discipleship, the radical community of Acts, and the prophetic criticism of wealth and power.

Mystical-Type

Draws on the Johannine theology of the Spirit, the mysticism of Paul's letters, and the inward, personal character of Jesus's own relation to God.



TROELTSCH AND OTHER RELIGIONS

THE PLACE OF CHRISTIANITY AMONG THE WORLD RELIGIONS

Troeltsch's engagement with religious pluralism goes significantly beyond just the internal plurality of Christian types that we have covered so far and addresses the broader question of Christianity's relationship to the other 'world religions'.

His essay "The Place of Christianity Among the World Religions" explores the implications of his methodological attachment to both historical consciousness and his acknowledgement of plurality within the Christian tradition, for other religious traditions and their relation to Christianity.



THE PLACE OF CHRISTIANITY AMONG THE WORLD RELIGIONS

In this essay he finds himself unable to maintain the straightforward claim that Christianity is the absolute religion, the final and unsurpassable revelation of God for all humanity.

Troeltsch undertakes careful historical study of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam and argues that this reveals traditions of genuine spiritual depth, moral seriousness, and reflective sophistication that cannot simply be dismissed as inferior preparatory stages for the advent of Christianity.

In acknowledging genuine religious value outside Christianity, Troeltsch explores a boundary that modern theology had approached before (e.g. Ritschl), but rarely crossed.

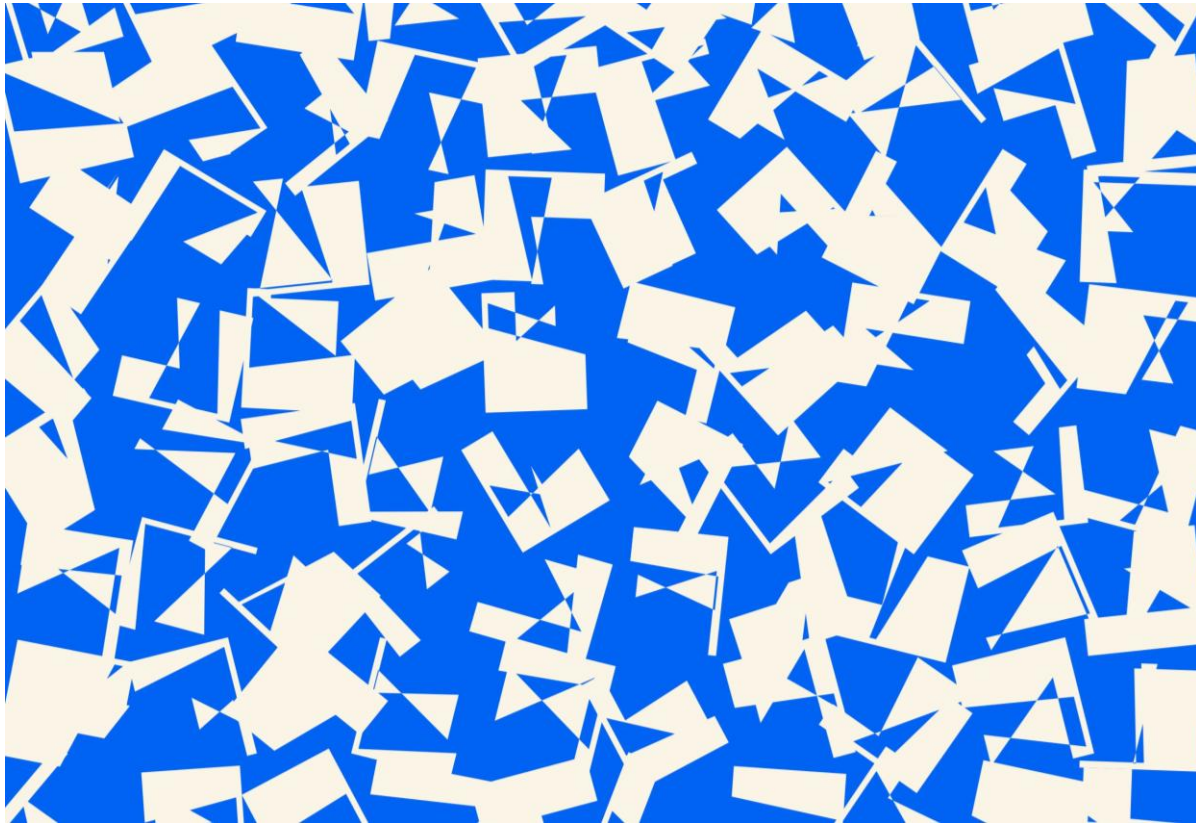


THE PLACE OF CHRISTIANITY AMONG THE WORLD RELIGIONS

In his earlier work, Troeltsch had often qualified his claims about Christian superiority, yet in this late essay (he died before finishing it), he moves toward an acknowledgement that each major religious tradition is the highest available expression of the divine for the culture in which it has developed.

This means that Christianity is the highest expression of the divine for the cultures shaped by its history; Buddhism may be the highest expression for the cultures shaped by its history; and that there is no neutral vantage point from which the relative merits of each can be assessed objectively or without circularity.





THE PLACE OF CHRISTIANITY AMONG THE WORLD RELIGIONS

This is not a simple relativism between all differing religious traditions, as Troeltsch still believes that each tradition makes some form of genuine contact with the divine, but it does abandon the residual Christian exclusivism that had characterised his earlier position.

It says that there is nothing unique about Christianity, that Christianity does not have a special claim to knowledge, and that Christianity is not the only path to the divine.

Quite a position for a Christian theologian!



TROELTSCH AND MODERN THEOLOGY

TROELTSCH AND MODERN THEOLOGY

The problem of normativity is the nerve of Troeltsch's entire project and the point at which it faces its most acute difficulty.

Theology, by its very nature, makes normative claims, because it does not merely describe what people have believed but affirms what is true, what is good, what is the adequate response to the divine reality.

Without normativity, theology collapses into the history of religions, which is an interesting and important discipline, but is not theology.



TROELTSCH AND MODERN THEOLOGY

Yet Troeltsch's historical and sociological analysis consistently dissolves the grounds on which any normative claims have been made or could be made.

- The supernatural uniqueness of Christianity cannot be established by historical method.
- The evolutionary superiority of Christianity cannot be demonstrated without circularity.
- The value judgement that Christ has the worth of God for us (Ritschl) is itself a historically conditioned judgement of a historically conditioned community.

At each turn, the tools of critical historical analysis undermine the normative foundations that theology requires.



TROELTSCH AND MODERN THEOLOGY

The question of whether and how theology can sustain normative claims after Troeltsch is one of the most pressing in twentieth-century theology, and the range of responses to it defines the landscape of the discipline in its modern and postmodern phases.

Barthian

Post-Liberal

Pluralist

Each response represents a different assessment of what Troeltsch's challenge actually requires.





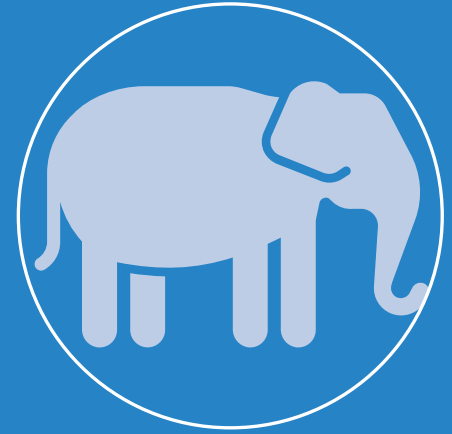
Barthian

Normative theology is possible not because historical method can demonstrate Christianity's superiority but because the Word of God breaks into human history with sovereign authority that does not depend on historical verification.



Post-Liberal

Associated with the work of George Lindbeck and Hans Frei. Seeks to locate normativity within the cultural-linguistic community formed by the Christian narrative, refusing the demand for external validation that Troeltsch's historicism imposed.



Pluralist

Largely developed by John Hick and others in the theology of religions, and attempts to build a theology that affirms the genuine saving significance of multiple religious traditions without privileging any one of them.



TROELTSCH AND MODERN THEOLOGY

Troeltsch represents, in a very precise sense, liberal theology at its very limits.

The defining commitment of liberal theology – in all its Schleiermacherian, Ritschlian, and Harnackian forms – was to conduct theology in honest dialogue with modernity: to acknowledge the force of historical criticism, to accept the standards of critical reason, and to reconstruct theological understanding on foundations adequate to the intellectual conditions of the day.

Troeltsch honoured this commitment more rigorously than any of his contemporaries and in doing so he exposed the self-contradictions toward which it was always tending.



TROELTSCH AND MODERN THEOLOGY

The liberal project needed history to ground its Christology, but history proved unable to sustain the normative claims that Christology required.

It needed experience to ground its religious epistemology, but experience proved too individual and too diverse to secure the corporate, historically transmitted identity of Christianity.

It needed reason to demonstrate Christianity's superiority, but reason proved unable to adjudicate between traditions without circular appeal to the tradition it sought to vindicate.

At each point, the liberal programme's own intellectual standards defeated its theological ambitions.



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SUMMARY

THE SELF-CRITICAL TURN

Perhaps Troeltsch's most important and underappreciated contribution to modern theology is the model he provides of theology as a self-critical discipline.

Traditional theology had characteristically proceeded by affirming the unique, divinely given character of its sources and methods and deriving its conclusions from within this circle of affirmations – God exists, because he tells us he does.

Troeltsch insists that theology must subject its own sources, methods, and presuppositions to the same critical scrutiny that historical consciousness applies to all human thought. This means that theology must be willing to acknowledge the historical contingency of its own categories, to recognise the ways in which its normative claims are shaped by the social and cultural conditions of their production, and to engage in genuinely open comparison with other religious and philosophical traditions.



THE SELF-CRITICAL TURN

This model of self-critical theology – theology that interrogates its own foundations rather than simply deploying them – is one of Troeltsch's most important legacies, and it anticipates a great deal of contemporary theological thinking.

Troeltsch arrived at a frontier that liberal theology had been approaching throughout its development but had consistently avoided crossing with full honesty: the recognition that historical consciousness, when consistently applied, leaves Christianity unable to sustain its traditional claims to absolute, uniquely normative authority, while the abandonment of all normative claims leaves theology unable to be theology.



READINGS

Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, vol. 1, trans. Olive Wyon (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), Introduction, p. 23–34

Gavin D'Costa, "Theology of Religions," in *The Modern Theologians*, 3rd ed., ed. David Ford with Rachel Muers (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 626–644

Wilson, B. R. (1959). An Analysis of Sect Development. *American Sociological Review*, 24(1), 3–15.