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# Ernst Troeltsch's Quest for Certainty

Steven N. Goetz

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ERNST TROELTSCH'S QUEST FOR CERTAINTY

BY

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of the requirements for the degree of

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the thought of Ernst Troeltsch, specifically in regards to his attempt to show that Christianity is a superior religion among other world religions. The key to understanding Troeltsch's thinking in this regard is to consider his methodological foundation which was historicist. The problem which Troeltsch sought to address throughout his works but especially in The Absolute-ness, i. e., how to find universal values within relative historical phenomena, was generated out of his desire for religious certainty while at the same time being consistent with historicist methodology.

Although, in his early career, Troeltsch did find a satisfactory balance between these two desires, he ultimately came to a skeptical conclusion concerning religious certainty because of his deepening commitment to consider historical variety, which is an overriding historicist principle. The paper proposes to examine Troeltsch's quest for certainty focusing on three phases of his life represented by three of his most important works.

The first phase is epitomized by his work The Absolute-ness of Christianity and the History of Religions. Here Troeltsch worked out an apologetic based on a comparison of Christianity with other world religions and concluded that,

although not absolute, Christianity was normative among other religions because it brought to flower all the latent potentialities of other faiths and combined them into one.

The second phase of Troeltsch's life is epitomized by his work, The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches. In the course of researching and writing this work, Troeltsch became increasingly impressed with the uniqueness and individuality of Christianity in particular and all religions in general. Consequently, he began to doubt whether religions could be compared in the manner he had employed in The Absoluteness. The extreme diversity and variety of all historical phenomena, Troeltsch felt, precluded such a methodology, and, finally, at the end of his life, he reversed his belief in the normativeness of Christianity. This was spelled out in his work Der Historismus und seine Probleme, which epitomizes the third phase of his life.

His search for some kind of religious certainty and universal value was terminated by his desire to be true to the facts "wie sie eigentlich gewesen sind". His search for validity in History was overcome by his recognition of the overwhelming individual character of all historical/phenomena. The foundation of this defeat can be located in Troeltsch's specifically historicist methodology.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

The story of Ernst Troeltsch's quest for certainty might be characterized as an authentic tragedy. While it is true that he has left a rich legacy for subsequent scholars to draw on, it still remains that he failed to achieve the theory of validation for which he sought. . .The historian Friedrich Meinecke, one of Troeltsch's closest friends towards the end of his life, captured the essence of this intense internal struggle in which his companion had been engaged, in a eulogy written shortly after Troeltsch's untimely death. Here, he likened Troeltsch to "an incarnation of the ideas of Heraclitus and Archimedes: 'Everything is in flux; give me a place to stand.'"<sup>1</sup> This struggle was a result of a somewhat ambivalent factor in Troeltsch's life. He was himself, in many ways, the embodiment of the very problem he sought to resolve. As a historian, Troeltsch recognized that Historicism, a nineteenth century movement in historiography, had radically altered the prevailing Weltanschauung of his time with its overriding emphasis on the individual and particular in historical

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas F. O'Dea, "Ernst Troeltsch", International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (1968), XVI, p. 154.

phenomena. This movement, of which Troeltsch was very much a part, had resulted in "die Historisierung unseres ganzen Wissens und Empfindens der geistigen Welt, wie sie im Laufe des 19 Jahrhunderts geworden ist," meaning that, in considering man's experiences and development, scholarship was making recourse less to dogma, and more to actual historical factors. As a theologian (and a Christian) Troeltsch felt the need for certainty in his faith. He himself admitted to an ongoing search for "a vital and effective religious position which alone could furnish my life with a center of reference for all practical questions and could alone give meaning and purpose to reflection upon the things of this world."<sup>2</sup> The struggle which Troeltsch experienced might have been avoided had he chosen to concern himself only with history or only with theology. If he had concerned himself primarily with writing history, he might have rejoiced in the varieties, the individuality of historical phenomena, as did Dilthey, and never been bothered by this approach's apparent unconcern for an adequate theory of development in which to abstract absolutes. On the other hand, if Troeltsch had concerned himself primarily with theology, as had his mentor Albrecht Ritschl, he might not have been so concerned by the threat of historicism or naturalism. But Troeltsch lived in both worlds, and hence lived with tension and ambivalence during much of his life. Sleigh notes the tension with which Troeltsch contented himself to

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<sup>2</sup>Thomas F. O'Dea, "Ernst Troeltsch", p. 153.



live, stating that:

Certainly no man in Germany before the war so keenly appreciated the tendencies which in his judgment were making for catastrophe in our European civilization, and no one more urgently desired and insistently sought to give a Christian orientation to the thought and life of our Western World. How to resolve the eternal conflict between Christianity and civilization was his sleepless task.<sup>3</sup>

Troeltsch's struggle was certainly a personal struggle beyond simply intellectual interests, but he was also concerned for Western culture as a whole. He was aware that he was witnessing a "crisis of values" in his own times, the demise of the enlightenment dream for a unified field of knowledge. The eighteenth century philosophes with their supreme confidence in man's rational capacities, believed that ultimately a comprehensive Weltanschauung would emerge which would embrace and integrate all knowledge from all times and all cultures. It was this belief in a comprehensive Weltanschauung which was under attack in Troeltsch's day. That is why Troeltsch criticized G. F. W. Hegel's methodology in attempting to show Christianity's superiority. Such systems, depended more upon the rational speculation of the philosopher, than upon the actual phenomena of history, and functioned as "procrustean beds" whereupon the individual was sacrificed to the confines of an inadequate system. It was historicism, according to Troeltsch, which had precipitated this crisis in Western Civilization. Calvin Rand notes:

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<sup>3</sup>R. S. Sleigh, The Sufficiency of Christianity (London James Clarke and Co., 1923), p. 24.

In the first part of the 19th century the German historical Weltanschauung was a profound and progressive view of the world; but by the end of the century it had degenerated, according to Troeltsch, into a skeptical and enervating outlook, largely through the relativistic consequences of interpreting all things historically. By 1920, Western culture had been so permeated by these harmful results that its Weltanschauung or historicism, itself, could be called in a state of crisis. Troeltsch's dilemma, never to be successfully resolved, hung upon his general affirmation of historicism and his realization of the consequences to which it had led.<sup>4</sup>

Troeltsch was intimately aware of the danger to himself and his culture. J. L. Adams has described Troeltsch as, in some ways, "the harbinger of contemporary existentialism in this struggle for a place to stand and further notes that "his struggle was a passionate one against meaninglessness."<sup>5</sup> The intensity of this struggle is illustrated dramatically in Walter Koehler's description of Troeltsch's dynamic entrance upon the intellectual scene, where he appears almost as a prophet to his own culture. Koehler writes:

It was in 1896, at a gathering of theologians in Eisenach, that Ernst Troeltsch dramatically burst upon the intellectual scene. One of the most respected of Germany's theological scholars, Julius Kaftan, had just completed a learned, somewhat scholastic lecture on the meaning of the Logos doctrine. With the opening of general discussion there leaped with youthful elan to the rostrum a young professor who began his statement with the words: 'Gentlemen, everything is tottering.' Then he went on to outline with large, firm strokes a picture of the situation which was to confirm his

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<sup>4</sup>C. G. Rand, "Two Meanings of Historicism in the Writings of Dilthey, Troeltsch and Meinecke", Journal of the History of Ideas, 25 (Oct-Dec., 1964), p. 512.

<sup>5</sup>James Luther Adams, "Ernst Troeltsch as Analyst of Religion", Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Oct. 1961), p. 512.

judgment. The older scholars were appalled. When their spokesman (Ferdinand Kattenbusch) in turn took the floor, he rejected Troeltsch's line of reasoning as "paltry theology" at which Troeltsch got up and left, slamming the door behind him.<sup>6</sup>

It is the undying energy manifested by Troeltsch in his attempt to solve the "crisis of values" of his own time, which in many ways marks his quest for certainty as particularly tragic. The farther Troeltsch proceeded in his quest, the more he began to realize that he was approaching a "dead-end". . . . Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in his last writings, five essays which he prepared for delivery at Oxford, where he began to hint at his inability to move beyond his impasse. It was not from lack of energy or effort that Troeltsch failed to achieve his ends, but from his method of seeking to derive absolutes from history while maintaining the methodology of historicism. From our own perspective today we can see that failure was built into this methodology yet from the perspective of his time he appears as an intrepid pioneer among theologians. In the end, Troeltsch himself saw the impasse he was rapidly approaching as Baron von Hugel notes in the preface to his posthumously published Oxford essays:

Let me ask, in all grateful, regretful simplicity, how, in view of that excessive individualism, which all but completely mastered him in recent years, it could be otherwise. Midas died of hunger from his fatal gift of turning all he touched into gold; so also Troeltsch, our vehement individualist, finds himself incapable of deriving spiritual force and

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<sup>5</sup>Wilhelm Pauck, Harnack and Troeltsch: Two Historical Theologians, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 66.

food from those entrancing historical perspectives which everywhere arise under his magical touch.<sup>7</sup>

#### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This research paper proposes to examine the theological and historiographical thinking of Ernst Troeltsch, through a survey of his written works, especially The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions, The Social Teaching of the Christian Church, and Der Historismus und seine Probleme, in order to understand the meaning and significance of his ideas for his own day and ours. In seeking to accomplish this primary purpose, the paper has a secondary purpose, that of demonstrating the development of Troeltsch's thought, as it is reflected in the works surveyed, from a general optimism regarding the superiority or normativeness of Christianity, to a more pessimistic impasse from which position he stated at the end of his life:

If there is any solution at all of these riddles and problems, with their conflicts and contradictions, that solution is certainly not to be found within their own sphere, but beyond it, in that unknown land, of which there are so many indications in the historic struggle of the spirit upwards, but which itself is never revealed to our eyes.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, in seeking to accomplish the secondary purpose, this paper proposes to identify and explicate certain elements in Troeltsch's methodology which account for this development

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<sup>7</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Christian Thought: Its History and Application, ed. Baron von Hugel (New York, Meridian Books, 1957), p. 24.

<sup>8</sup>Thomas F. O'Dea, "Ernst Troeltsch", p. 154.

in his thinking.

## JUSTIFICATION OF THE PROBLEM

There are several reasons why a consideration of Troeltsch's life and work are important. First, there is the important place Troeltsch holds in the development of both theological thinking, and historiographical thinking. Adams cites Troeltsch as the "outstanding philosopher-theologian of German Protestantism in his period,"<sup>9</sup> and Benckert notes: "Troeltsch wurde nun der Historiker der Geschichtsauffassung des 19 Jahrhunderts und vor allem der Philosoph des Historismus."<sup>10</sup> In this place alone then, Troeltsch needs to be understood, if we are to gain an adequate picture of the subsequent development of theology from his time. However, this leads to a second reason why this study is justified. Troeltsch's work is not to be simply the object of antiquarian interest for he has influenced many of the leading theological minds of our own day. Such men as H. Richard Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr, and others have acknowledged their debt to this man. Thirdly, within many of the areas in which he wrote, Troeltsch laid ground work which cannot be ignored. For example, in the area of Church history and historiography, he demonstrated an alternative to the common way

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<sup>9</sup>James Luther Adams, "Ernst Troeltsch as Analyst. . .", p. 98.

<sup>10</sup>H. Benckert, "Ernst Troeltsch", Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Handwörterbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft (1962), VI, p. 1046.

of interpreting Christianity "as the unfolding of an idea,"<sup>11</sup> using rather a more historical sociological approach. Today this method is used by many religious studies departments in universities. Finally, as Reist notes:

He who would understand the history of the Christian ethic and massive challenge of the social front persistently facing Christianity in all its forms must begin here. . .one cannot stop with Troeltsch, but the road beyond him lies through him.<sup>12</sup>

The recognition of Troeltsch's importance for today has been borne out by a resurgent interest in his work on Christianity and culture, seen in periodical literature, new books, increasing translations of his works<sup>13</sup>, and a recent symposium held in Britain in 1975 devoted entirely to a consideration of Troeltsch's importance for our own day.<sup>14</sup> In addition, as

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<sup>11</sup>James Luther Adams, "Ernst Troeltsch as Analyst. . .", p. 104.

<sup>12</sup>Benjamin A. Reist, Toward a Theology of Involvement, (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1966), p. 25.

<sup>13</sup>A recent publication ed. by Robert Morgan and Michael Pye, entitled "Ernst Troeltsch: Essays on Theology and Religion" (Boston, Duckworth: London and Beacon Press, 1976), contains in translation: "What does 'essence' of Christianity mean?" (1903) and other essays, and a forthcoming publication edited by James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense will contain twenty-four of Troeltsch's articles in translation including "Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology" (1900), "On the Question of the Religious a priori" (1909), and "My Books" (1922).

<sup>14</sup>This particular colloquium was sponsored by the department of religious studies at the University of Lancaster in 1975 and was attended by scholars from Canada, Germany, Holland, Ireland and the United States as well as Great Britain. A book resulted from this colloquium edited by John Powell Clayton and entitled Ernst Troeltsch and the Future of Theology.

Pauck notes, there have been "a considerable number of doctoral dissertations in the U.S. and abroad written on him."<sup>15</sup> The interest does not appear to be declining.

#### DELIMITATIONS

In considering Troeltsch's work, we are immediately confronted with the vastness of his concerns, which Benckert characterized as "ungewöhnlich umfassen des Schrifttum."<sup>16</sup> He wrote prolifically on subjects ranging from "religious and intellectual history and the philosophy and sociology of religion and culture, to historiography and the philosophy of history, metaphysics, theology and social ethics."<sup>17</sup> Although Troeltsch has been characterized as the systematic theologian of the Religions Geschichtliche Schule by some,<sup>18</sup> he is not quite systematic in the true sense of the word. Most of his writing appeared in journal articles, book reviews, encyclopedia articles or published lectures and as Troeltsch himself noted one year before his death:

Ich habe kein eigentliches System, und dadurch unterscheide Ich mich von den meisten anderen Deutschen Philosophen. Zwar schwebt mir natürlich ein solches als Prakonzeption vor, allein doch nur um es aus der Einzelforschung heraus fortwährend zu

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<sup>15</sup>Wilhelm Pauck, Harnack and Troeltsch. . ., p. 45.

<sup>16</sup>H. Benckert, "Ernst Troeltsch," p. 1044.

<sup>17</sup>James Luther Adams, "Ernst Troeltsch as Analyst. . .", p. 98.

<sup>18</sup>H. R. Mackintosh, Types of Modern Theology, (London; Fontana Library, 1969), p. 177.

berichtigen. Ich kann also das System nicht in solchem Zustand der unfertigkeit zeigen, sondern nur die Reihenfolge meiner Bucher erläutern, die bei einem systematisch gerichteten Menschen ja auch eine Art System ist.<sup>19</sup>

In the light of all this, one must limit oneself to only the most important of Troeltsch's writings. Of course, what is considered important must be judged in the light of the stated purpose, i.e., showing Troeltsch's development from the growth of his methodology to its ultimate failure. Accordingly, this study will only deal extensively with three major works of Troeltsch, The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religion, The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, and Der Historismus und seine Problem. These three works fall into three distinct levels of Troeltsch's development and are thus particularly useful in showing his development.

#### DEFINITION OF TERMS

##### Historicism:

Although this word can have a variety of meanings, its use in this paper will be confined to mean: the nineteenth century movement among historians which combined elements of Romanticism and positivism into a philosophy of history which interpreted man's present position in terms of his past activities and experiences. Following the positivists, (and

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<sup>19</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Aufsätze zur Geistesgeschichte und Religions-Soziologie, Herausgegeben von Dr. Hans Baron (Tubingen, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck, 1966), p. 3.



opposing the Romantics), it sought increasingly more exact methods of apprehending past events "wie sie eigentlich gewesen sind." Conversely, following the Romantics (and opposing the Positivists), it made a place for das Gefühl of the historian in reconstructing the past.

#### Absolute:

The term "Absolute" is used in close connection with God's revelation to man in Christ and subsequently the Church. Absolute revelation, for example, is a revelation devoid of contingent and particular elements, and therefore immediate to God. It was in this sense that Troeltsch rejected Christianity as an "absolute" religion.

#### Normative:

Something is normative when it is assumed to share norms indigenous to a given group of things or phenomena. Among religions, for example, there are concepts or principles (norms) which are common to all, such as ideas of God, ideas of sin, etc. Strictly within this definition then, Christianity is normative, being classed with all other religions. As normative, it is superior to all other religions, but, because it is historical, according to Troeltsch, it cannot be absolute.

### STATEMENT OF PROCEDURE

The basic procedure to be followed in this paper will be: Chapter 2, A biographical account of Troeltsch's life followed by a consideration of his intellectual development.

Special attention will be focused on outstanding men and movements which seem to have impressed him the most; Chapter 3, An extensive consideration of The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions; Chapter 4, A transitional chapter considering the impact of Max Weber upon the thought of Ernst Troeltsch, in writing The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches; Chapter 5, An examination of the work The Social Teachings. . ., with attention to methodology, content and result; and finally, Chapter 6 which will conclude the paper with a consideration of Troeltsch's failure to come to grips with the problem of relativism, as charted in the work Der Historismus und seine Probleme. Unfortunately, the last mentioned work, Der Historismus. . . was not readily available so that recourse had to be made to secondary works. The other two works, The Absoluteness. . . and The Social Teachings. . . were consulted in their translated form.

## Chapter 2

## TROELTSCH'S LIFE AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT

Early Life: In the Home and at the University.

Ernst Troeltsch was the first born son of a German medical doctor who was of Swabian and Bavarian stock. He was born on February 17, 1865 near Augsburg where his father had his practice.<sup>20</sup> As a young boy growing up in the house of a doctor, Ernst developed an early appreciation for science, especially in the area of theory. Later, he wrote: "Für die Naturwissenschaften sorgte das Elterhaus, das Haus eines Arztes, der mich gern zum Mediziner machen wollte und frühzeitig in naturwissenschaftliche Beobachtung und Sammlung hineintrief."<sup>21</sup> It was this appreciation for science and scientific method in research that caused him to look at the world, even in the areas of history and philosophy, with a scientific mind. This was of great importance for the work which he was to later do as he wrote:

So kam es, das Ich von Anfang an alle historische kulturphilosophischen Probleme im Rahmen eines naturwissenschaftlichen Weltbildes sehen lernte und die Ineinanderfassung beider Welten als ein

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<sup>20</sup>H. Benckert, "Ernst Troeltsch", p. 1044.

<sup>21</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Aufsätze zur Geistesgeschichte. . ., p. 3.

brennendes theoretisches und praktisches Problem zugleich empfand.<sup>22</sup>

Early in his life, Troeltsch became interested in the study of history. There were several influences in his life which strengthened this interest to pursue historical studies, as he noted:

Mein Erkenntniswille war von fruher Jugend an auf die historische Weltgerichtet, ganz ahnlich wie bei Dilthey, Von der Schule, einem bayrischen humanistischen Gymnasium alten Stiles mit wundervoll wenig Unterrichtsstunden, wurde durch einige tuchtige Lehrer dieser Drang mit Stoff und Nahrung versehen.<sup>23</sup>

From his early upbringing, then, Troeltsch derived a strong impulse towards scholarship, but scholarship based on the scientific method.

Upon coming to the university in 1884, Troeltsch was faced with the problem of selecting an area of study. Though the study of history had fascinated him, his interest in historiography was more on a speculative rather than a technical level. At the same time, Troeltsch felt himself drawn to the general area of metaphysics. He began to cast about for an area in which he could combine these two major interests, and after considering the areas of medicine, law, classical philology, and philosophy, he finally decided upon theology. Later he wrote:

In der Theologie hatte man damals so ziemlich den einzigen Zugang zur Metaphysik und ausserst spannende

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<sup>22</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Aufsätze zur Geistesgeschichte. . ., pp. 3-4.

<sup>23</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Aufsätze zur Geistesgeschichte. . ., p. 3.

historische Probleme zugleich. Und Metaphysik und Historie, das waren nun einmal die beiden spannungsreichen Probleme, diemich von Hause aus Gleichzeitig und im Zusammenhang reizten.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the influences of Troeltsch's early upbringing converged with his own interest in history and speculative philosophy to bring him to the study of theology. His decision was a wise choice, because it allowed him the greatest possible freedom to investigate areas which were not necessarily related. Theology was the only discipline large enough to contain all of Troeltsch's particular interests. Finally, even though he maintained a strong interest in the speculative side of philosophy, theology and history, he saw all his work in the light of one question which was entirely practical. This he identified as "die praktische Lebenstrage nach dem Recht der religiösen Lebensposition gegenüber dem alles verschlingenden modernen Naturalismus".<sup>25</sup> This is the "Hauptthema" of all of Troeltsch's works.<sup>26</sup>

It has been noted that Troeltsch is significant not for the original work he did in theology and history, but rather in his particular methodology.<sup>27</sup> The truth of this

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<sup>24</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Aufsätze zur Geistesgeschichte. . ., p. 4.

<sup>25</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Aufsätze zur Geistesgeschichte. . ., p. 5.

<sup>26</sup>H. Benckert, "Ernst Troeltsch", p. 1044.

<sup>27</sup>Roland Bainton, "Ernst Troeltsch--Thirty Years Later", Theology Today, VIII (April, 1951), p. 70.

can be noted with recourse to his "The Social Teaching. . .". As Roland Bainton has correctly pointed out, the historical research for the work was based entirely on secondary material. Bainton writes: "His procedure was rather to take the best dozen or so books for each period and out of these to construct a picture of the dominant characteristics."<sup>28</sup> Thus, while there is originality in Troeltsch's application of his knowledge to religion, that very knowledge can be traced back to several important influences in his life. To hope to discover and discuss every influence behind Troeltsch's work is probably impossible, and yet there were several individuals who made such a profound impact on him that any study of him would be incomplete without reference to them. These influences will be discussed under the general headings of theology and history.

Influences in Shaping Troeltsch's Theological Development.

During the nineteenth century, theological thinking in Germany underwent some radical changes. At the beginning of the century, the rival influences of Schleiermacher and G. F. W. Hegel held dominant influence. Schleiermacher, who was part of a general movement in Germany known as Romanticism, emphasized a very subjective approach to religion in general and to Christianity in particular. In keeping with current psychological theory of his time, and in opposition to the thorough going rationalism which at this time shared intellectual dominance with Romanticism in Germany, Schleiermacher postulated

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<sup>28</sup>Roland Bainton, "Ernst Troeltsch. . .", p. 72.

a "religious faculty" of the human spirit out of which religion arises.<sup>29</sup> Mackintosh notes:

When Schleiermacher asks what religion is, his question is not primarily historical but psychological. He is not out to ascertain what in the way of convictions, hopes, norms, or usages has remained constant throughout the varied forms of human worship in the past, but rather to discover the special psychical function in man which is concerned wherever and whenever man comes to be in the religious attitude. This specifically religious function he detects not in knowledge or will, but in that which forms a third partner along with knowledge and action--feeling, or immediate self-consciousness.<sup>30</sup>

In considering the place of Christianity among other religions, Schleiermacher held that it was at least the highest among religions, and further, based on his own Christology, it is absolute. Mackintosh further notes that according to Schleiermacher, "Christ confronts us as an absolute figure. In Him there exists a conjunction and a perfect one, of the ideal and the historical."<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to Schleiermacher's romantic approach to religion, there was Hegel's rationalism. Hegel's own approach to religion, specifically Christianity, was based strictly on speculative reason. In his "Phenomenology of the Spirit", Hegel asserted that religion was the highest attempt by the Weltgeist to manifest itself to the world. Although, according to Hegel, other religions represented attempts by the Weltgeist

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<sup>29</sup>H. R. Mackintosh, Types of Modern Theology, p. 49.

<sup>30</sup>H. R. Mackintosh, Types of Modern Theology, p. 49.

<sup>31</sup>H. R. Mackintosh, Types of Modern Theology, p. 31.

at Revelation, it was only finally, in Christianity that the Weltgeist found absolute expression. Thus, Christianity represented the end of a long evolutionary process by which the Spirit manifested itself.

It was these two contemporaneous, yet opposing forces which set the stage for the dominant theological thinker of the latter half of the nineteenth century, Albrecht Ritschl. Although later Troeltsch deviated from Ritschl's views on significant points, still it is to Ritschl that Troeltsch owed much of his theological development. Troeltsch later wrote of him:

Mein Lehrer Albrecht Ritschl war ein scharfer Logiker, ein höchst systematischer Kopf und eine gross geschnittene originale Persönlichkeit. Ihm danke ich einen Einblick in Psychologie und Logik der christlichen Dogmenbildung, wie man kann ihn sonst nicht leicht irgendwo lernen konnte.<sup>32</sup>

According to Altholz, Ritschl's general desire was to "expel from theology both the speculative metaphysics of the Hegelians and the subjective individualism of the Pietists".<sup>33</sup> (Schleiermacher). Ritschl himself had been trained as a historian before he directed his energies toward theology, and he came to that discipline with a practical bent engendered by principles of historical criticism. As Mackintosh notes:

The criteria he was to make use of in theology, Ritschl drew from his scientific interest in history. Solid research, as he felt, would make an

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<sup>32</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Aufsätze zur Geistesgeschichte. . . , p. 5.

<sup>33</sup>Josef L. Altholz, The Churches in the Nineteenth Century, p. 107.



end of purely subjective speculation. Religion must feed upon concrete facts and events.<sup>34</sup>

Ritschl's emphasis on the historical as particularly important for theology was fed by a particular epistemology. First, in rejecting Hegelianism generally, Ritschl denied that universals reside in rebus. Moreover, he asserted that it is only particular ideas which have any correspondence to reality. Secondly, relying heavily on Immanuel Kant's "Critique of Practical Reason", Ritschl asserted that "ontological statements in theology should give way to value judgments, since theology must focus on ethical and moral realities; it cannot operate with deductions from Ding an sich".<sup>35</sup> In reacting against Hegelianism, Ritschl's strongpoint was his appeal to concrete historical fact, yet in the end it became one of his most serious weaknesses, for as Mackintosh notes:

The argument as actually unfolded often appears to rest on the assumption that the Person and life work of Jesus confronts us as a homogeneous piece of profane history, the divine import of which is accessible to direct historical inspection, or can be made plain by sober rational deduction from obvious facts. The facts simply qua history are revelational.<sup>36</sup>

Troeltsch shared with his former teacher, the abhorrence of speculative idealism and sentimentality, as well as the firm confidence in critical historical scholarship. Yet there were several very important points upon which Troeltsch could not

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<sup>34</sup>H. R. Mackintosh, Types of Modern Theology, p. 153.

<sup>35</sup>D. Ritschl, "Albrecht Ritschl", New Catholic Encyclopedia (1967), XII, p. 523.

<sup>36</sup>H. R. Mackintosh, Types of Modern Theology, p. 173.

agree with Ritschl and these finally caused Troeltsch to break with him to form a new school, which became known as the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule. The new school comprised many individuals who were drawn together by a new method in theology based, to a very large degree, upon critical historical scholarship. The revolt from Ritschl came over various points such as his apparent acceptance of the possibilities of miracles and his ignorance of the implications of naturalism, a force they felt that was taking all before it, yet the most important factor appears to have been Ritschl's apparent belief that history itself was revelational. The members of the new Schule were deeply impressed by the particularities of history, especially as viewed from the methodological standpoint of historicism. But they were reluctant to recognize any deus ex machina force within historical events, choosing to locate the source of historical phenomena and change in a natural causal connection with things which had preceeded. This fact is noted by a statement made by Johannes Weis, a member of the new school who edited a New Testament commentary based on the principles of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule. He wrote:

Modern study of religion shows that the whole circle of ideas and thought-forms--soteriological, Christological, sacramental, eschatological--as they crowd the pages of the New Testament, were already present in some form in the world of Jewish, Hellenistic, Oriental or syncretistic thought.<sup>37</sup>

Troeltsch was influenced by the various movements in theology,

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<sup>37</sup>H. R. Mackintosh, Types of Modern Theology, p. 179.

during the nineteenth century, either positively or negatively. Negatively, his impatience and revulsion with both Hegelianism and Pietism caused him to look for certainty not in human speculation or feeling but in the security of concrete historical facts. Positively, Ritschl's emphasis on historical scholarship in theological work moved him increasingly in the same direction. Yet, ultimately, it was the developments in historiographical thought which took place during the nineteenth century, that had the most profound impact upon him. Actually, at the same time that Troeltsch was drawing farther and farther away from Ritschl, he was drawing closer and closer to an acceptance of the principles of historicism as a methodology in theology and Church history. Benckert notes:

Nach kurzer Auseinandersetzung mit dem Naturalismus (bis. ca. 1895) wird Troeltsch sich mehr und mehr von Ritschl abwendend, alsbald von der historischen Betrachtungsweise ergriffen, die er zunächst auf Christentum und Religion anwendet, um dann diese methode selber allseitig zu erforschen.<sup>38</sup>

It was his desire to come to grips with the implications of the new historical method on its own terms which both motivated him in his vast research and in the end defeated him. But what were these new developments in historiography?

#### Influences in Shaping Troeltsch's Historiographical Development.

The writing of history, since the previous century, had been characterized by a certain subjectivism, which, while pleasant to read, was not really within the sphere of the scientific method. In reaction to this, a movement was begun

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<sup>38</sup>H. Benckert, "Ernst Troeltsch", p. 1044.

to put the writing of history on more scientific basis. No one was more involved in this than Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) who has been characterized as "the father as well as the master of modern historical scholarship".<sup>39</sup> To Ranke can be traced the genesis of Historicism, the movement which so influenced Troeltsch and still holds sway today. Ranke rejected the contention that historical writing's purpose was to judge the past or instruct the present. On the contrary, its task was simply to write history, "wie est eigentlich gewesen".<sup>40</sup> To do this the historian is commanded to first pay close attention to the particulars, indeed he must "feel a participation and pleasure in the particular for itself".<sup>41</sup> At this point, Ranke was calling for the historian to glory in diversity, to become completely wrapped up in the manifold phenomena of life. At the same time however, Ranke exhorted the historian to keep an eye on the universal aspect of things for "while he reflects on the particular, the development of the world in general will become apparent to him".<sup>42</sup> One can note a fundamental shift here from the then current, writing of history. History had previously been written in the light

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<sup>39</sup>Fritz Stern, ed., The Varieties of History (1st Vantage Books Edition; New York: Random House, 1973), p. 54.

<sup>40</sup>Fritz Stern, ed., The Varieties of History, p. 57.

<sup>41</sup>Fritz Stern, ed., The Varieties of History, p. 59.

<sup>42</sup>Fritz Stern, ed., The Varieties of History, p. 59.

of deductive principles. The particulars were taken and fitted into a general framework which had been previously constructed. What Ranke was suggesting, was that the process be reversed, i.e., that the facts be allowed to speak for themselves. Ranke believed that attention to the particulars of historical phenomena would clearly show a rational development in world history, yet he rejected any idea that this development could be identified with "one thought or one word". He continued: "The spirit which manifests itself in the world is not to be so confined; its presence suffuses the bounds of its existence; nothing is accidental in it, its appearances has its grounds in everything."<sup>43</sup> The inter-connection and unity of history, Ranke located, not in a particular Weltgeist, as had Hegel, or in a Holy Spirit as had writers of ecclesiastical history, but rather in the inter-connections of historical individuals. In his view, history proceeds with complete freedom. He wrote:

We must concede that history can never possess the unity of a philosophical system, but it does have an inner connection of its own. We see before us a series of events which follow one another and are conditioned by one another. If I say "conditioned", I certainly do not mean conditioned through absolute necessity. The important point is rather that human freedom makes its appearance everywhere, and the greatest attraction of history lies in the fact that it deals with the scenes of this freedom.<sup>44</sup>

Troeltsch wholeheartedly agreed with the principles of historicism as they were sketched in Ranke's writings yet he finally

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<sup>43</sup>Fritz Stern, ed., The Varieties of History, p. 60.

<sup>44</sup>Fritz Stern, ed., The Varieties of History, p. 60.

embraced them through the mediation of Wilhelm Dilthey. Dilthey's own particular brand of historicism, while in total agreement with Ranke, was deeply impressed by a reactionary element against positivism. Indeed, nineteenth century historiographical thought might be characterized as an ongoing struggle between the positivist and historicist to establish their methodologies.<sup>45</sup>

Positivism, as a general philosophy, sought a methodology by which all disciplines could be approached and positivists asserted that this methodology could be found finally in the methods of the natural sciences. August Comte wrote:

Now that the human mind has grasped celestial and terrestrial physics, --mechanical and chemical; organic physics, both vegetable and animal,--there remains one science, to fill up the series of sciences of observation;--social physics.<sup>46</sup>

Comte's use of the term "social physics" immediately gives him away. He intends to delineate "laws" of history under which all historical phenomena will be intelligible. Later, J. S. Mill, sought to apply Comte's methods to the science of history. The proposed method of the positivists for apprehending historical truth may fairly be represented in this quote from his works:

In order to obtain better empirical laws, we must not rest satisfied with noting the progressive changes which manifest themselves in the separate elements of society, and in which nothing is indicated but the relation of fragments of the effect

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<sup>45</sup>Ronald Nash, ed. Ideas of History (1st edition; New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1969), p. 3.

<sup>46</sup>Ronald Nash, ed. Ideas of History, p. 11.

to corresponding fragments of the cause. It is necessary to combine the statical view of social phenomena with the dynamical, considering not only the progressive chances of the different elements, but the contemporaneous condition of each; and thus obtain empirically the law of correspondence it is, which, duly verified a priori, would become the real scientific derivative law of the development of humanity and human affairs. . .<sup>47</sup>

Wilhelm Dilthey, representing historicism, rejected such a methodology on the basis that, because man is himself in the processes of history, history cannot be examined as a physical scientist examines a specimen in a laboratory. Rejecting positivism from its theoretical foundation (represented by Comte and Mill) as well as its practical results (represented by the work of T. H. Buckle), Dilthey wrote:

All knowledge is knowledge of experience; but the original unity of all experience and its resulting validity are conditioned by the factors which mold the consciousness within which it arises, i.e. by the whole of our nature. This standpoint, which consistently realizes the impossibility of going behind these conditions, of seeing as it were without an eye or directing the gaze of knowledge behind the eye itself, I call the epistemological standpoint; modern knowledge can recognize no other.<sup>48</sup>

In rejecting positivism's methodology for historical writing, Dilthey not only recognized the problem of relativism but warmly embraced it. Acceptance of the various and manifold phenomena of life is at the very heart of historicism. It shuns any attempt to address the question of validity, contenting itself with the particulars alone. The historicist view, according to Dilthey:

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<sup>47</sup>Ronald Nash, ed. Ideas of History, p. 21.

<sup>48</sup>Ronald Nash, ed. Ideas of History, p. 27.

disposes of the view which sees the task of history in the progress from relative values, obligations, norms, or goods to unconditional ones. That would take us out of the field of the empirical studies into the fields of speculation. . . historical experience knows only the process, so important for it, of making these assertions: on its own grounds it knows nothing of their universal validity.<sup>49</sup>

How then does one, on the basis of historicism proceed to write history? The approach, is based on certain methodological concepts, which, in the Rankian tradition, were shared by Dilthey and Troeltsch. The three most important of these concepts are individuality, development and relatedness.<sup>50</sup>

On this basis the historian:

must select characteristics which distinguish a particular individual from all others as well as characteristics common to all (relatedness); he must note the different stages of an individual's development, what has led to these changes and whether internal or external causes are in question; and he must determine, if significant, the influence of external causes, which may be other individuals or more general environmental factors.<sup>51</sup>

By its very methodology; historicism presupposes that history is rooted in a natural causality much as the natural world is, and yet because of the nature of its material (constantly fluctuating) it cannot be approached by the methodology of the natural sciences. According to Dilthey, the relative position of every historian, i.e. his position within the historical process itself, is an advantage for he can thereby

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<sup>49</sup>Ronald Nash, ed. Ideas of History, p. 29.

<sup>50</sup>C. G. Rand, "Two Meanings of Historicism. . .", p. 507.

<sup>51</sup>C. G. Rand, "Two Meanings of Historicism. . .", pp. 507-508.



"relive" the events of history in his own mind. He went on to state, "In contrast to external perception, inner perception rests upon an awareness (Innewerden), a lived experience (Erleben), it is immediately given."<sup>52</sup>

Whereas Dilthey could embrace historicism and not be bothered by the question of relativism, Troeltsch could never consider the problem so lightly. Dilthey considered Christianity to be simply one view or philosophy of life and hence he never directly applied the principles of historicism to religion at all. But, as a theologian, seeking to apply the methodology of historicism to Christianity, Troeltsch ran head on into the "problem of relativism". The problem emerged because, while Troeltsch the historian recognized the validity of historicist principles, Troeltsch the theologian cried out for theological certainty. We are, once again, confronted with that ambivalence which characterized Troeltsch's intellectual struggle as the incarnation of the ideas of Heraclitos and Archemides. In embracing historicist principles he gave assent to the proposition "all is in flux" yet he could not be satisfied with just that. As a theologian he cried out: "Give me a place to stand". In this eulogy to his friend, Friedrich Meinecke went on to add:

He was a God-seeker of the great manner who impetuously questioned and criticized the great God-seekers of world history while, at the same time, he revered them. In every moment, he was both a skeptic and a believer; simultaneously analytical and constructive; in need of faith and thirsty for life.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Ronald Nash, ed. Ideas of History, p. 27.

<sup>53</sup>Wilhelm Pauck, Harnack and Troeltsch. . ., p. 49-50.

Troeltsch's struggle with what he called the "problem of historicism", was an almost life-long struggle. It raises its head in almost all of his writings. His work, entitled The Absoluteness of Christianity. . . was his first attempt at a systematic solution to this problem, thus a systematic treatment of this work is the subject of the following chapter.

## Chapter 3

## THE INITIAL QUEST FOR CERTAINTY

In the historicist tradition, Troeltsch considered Christianity to be a historically conditioned religion more or less on the level of other religions. On the other hand, he recognized that Christianity itself laid claim to universality and he was not willing to simply throw out the latter proposition to salvage the former. It was the tension between these two propositions that Troeltsch set out to resolve in his The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions. He considered this work one of his most important, describing it as "der Keim alles Weiteren".<sup>54</sup> Actually, the word "absoluteness" included in his title is somewhat misleading. Indeed, Troeltsch felt that if there was resolution of these two propositions, then the idea of Christianity as absolute would have to be discarded. Still, the tension needed to be resolved, as James Luther Adams notes in his introduction to the English translation of this work: "Troeltsch was convinced that if Christianity could not face the challenge squarely, it would have to retreat into the stagnant cave of

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<sup>54</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions trans. by David Reid (Richmond, Virginia, John Knox Press, 1971), p. 9.

obscurantism."<sup>55</sup> His task then was to "discern some transcendent meaning precisely within the multiformity of culture, and thus to overcome what he calls "unlimited" or "purposeless" relativism.<sup>56</sup> The first step in his proposed solution to this problem was to consider, in historical perspective, what had been advanced as proofs of the absoluteness of Christianity. Troeltsch narrowed down the field of consideration to two theories, the supernatural apologetic of the orthodox church, and the evolutionary apologetic of the enlightenment epitomized by Hegel. He took up these for consideration in chapter one.

#### I. The Problem in Historical Perspective.

Troeltsch began his work by noting the effects of "the historicizing of our entire knowing and experiencing of the entire world, as it has taken place in the nineteenth century". He wrote:

The more this idea of history has been emancipated from extraneous metaphysical prejudgments and gained recognition as a way of thinking independent of the formulation of concepts that takes place in the natural sciences, the more it has demonstrated that it is the matrix out of which all world views take shape.<sup>57</sup>

While in antiquity, western historiography was dominated by political or patriotic interests, and while during the Middle Ages it was dominated by the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church, it was in perfect accord with the dominant thought of

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<sup>55</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 8.

<sup>56</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 10.

<sup>57</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 46.

its culture, becoming the servant of its particular culture "it conformed to the national, rational, or theological norms of thought".<sup>58</sup> But now a new philosophy of history has emerged which cares little for reverence or theories of validity. It operates, says Troeltsch, "entirely free as regards the outcome of specific investigations and yet bound to definite methodological presuppositions".<sup>59</sup> Whereas, during the Middle Ages, mere human history was considered imperfect because of sin and error, now historical writing and scholarship has been emancipated. It has become an autonomous force subject to no restraints other than its operating principles, and when it suddenly turns on its former master (Christianity), the results are devastating to its concept of absoluteness. Christianity is now to be classed with other religious phenomena. This has, according to Troeltsch, meant the demise of the supernatural apologetic, based as it is on either the external or internal miracle. He writes:

The apologetic wall of division, the wall of external and internal miracle, has slowly been broken down by this idea of history, for no matter what one may otherwise think about miracles, it is impossible for historical thought to believe the Christian miracles but deny the non-Christian. Again, however frequently one may discern something supernatural in the ethical power of the inner life, no means exist by which to construe the Christian's elevation above sensuality as supernatural while interpreting that of Plato or Epictetus as natural.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 46.

<sup>59</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 47.

<sup>60</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 48.

This process, which Troeltsch describes as the "breaking down" of the apologetic wall of division, refers back to the debates of the enlightenment concerning miracles, and whether they were to be regarded as an adequate sign that Christianity was "absolute" among other religions. The gradual "breaking down" was carried out by such philosophers as Locke, Lessing, and Hume until it was generally accepted that miracles were no longer an adequate apologetic on which to claim Christianity's supremacy. Troeltsch proceeds with his attempt to trace the foundations of the problem of the absoluteness of Christianity by noting that the demise of the supernatural apologetic gave rise to a new attempt to demonstrate Christianity's superiority. This new attempt was based upon speculative philosophy epitomized by Schleiermacher and Hegel. Troeltsch describes this attempt thus:

Its starting point was the concept of a total history of mankind, with history taken as a dynamic principle in its own right. The history of mankind was viewed causally and teleologically as a single whole. Within this whole the ideal of religious truth was thought of as moving forward in gradual stages, and at one definite point, namely, in the historical phenomenon of Christianity, it was deemed to have reached absolute form i.e., the complete and exhaustive realization of its principle.<sup>61</sup>

Troeltsch is quick to point out that, while he can appreciate Hegel's significance as a leader in theology, he cannot ignore the fact that he has sacrificed historical phenomena to the form of his own speculation. Ultimately,

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<sup>61</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 48.

both the supernatural and evolutionary apologetic are closely related in two ways. They have a common motive in that they seek to establish the normative value of Christian thought, and further they have a common goal in that "they are not content with a de facto supremacy and ultimacy but want to make it into the sole truth to which everything else stands opposed in accordance with the requirements of theory".<sup>62</sup>

By this, Troeltsch means, that these two views seek to make Christianity an absolute standard whereby all other religions and religious phenomena are judged. From his own perspective, Christianity merely shares characteristics with other religions and although it may be on a comparative basis, higher than other religions, it does not occupy a special place and certainly not an absolute place among them. Troeltsch's objection arises out of his desire to be consistent with his historicist presuppositions.

At the end of the first chapter, Troeltsch rejects the supernatural apologetic of the orthodox church, which appeals to the internal experience of the believer, in its attempt to validate the Christian religion as absolute. For, Troeltsch writes:

When it tries to prove on this basis that Christianity occupies a unique position, it constantly finds itself obliged to argue for a specifically Christian miraculous causality that breaks through natural causality in this inner experience. . . Inner miracles that defy the homogeneity of history are not as such capable of demonstration.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 51.

<sup>63</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 60.

Troeltsch dismissed the supernatural apologetic with this chapter yet it should be noted in passing that it was on the basis of his historicist presuppositions, especially the concept of analogy, that he rejected it. He was willing to grant the variety of historical phenomena in keeping with the methodological concepts of historicism i.e., individuality and development, etcetera, yet he wished to screen out any considerations for which historicism, by design, has no categories to deal with, i.e., the deus ex machina. Ted Peters notes the interrelation of individuality and homogeneity in Troeltsch's thought. He writes:

Troeltsch's meaning is that 'all differences should be comprehended in a uniform, universal homogeneity. In this form, the postulate of the homogeneity of all events leads to a construction of the historical question itself'. All dissimilarities would be grounded in a 'core of homogeneity' which can be possessed by the historian. This suggests that the universal as such and everything in it at any time can be understood without remainder by analogy.<sup>64</sup>

It was this very weakness in Troeltsch's historicism, which need not be a weakness in historicism as a general historiographical method, that caused Pannenberg to criticize it as being anthropocentric. Peters goes on to note:

This anthropocentric presupposition of historicism precludes the realm of the transcendent before an examination of the historical evidence has even begun. It is Pannenberg's contention that historical method need not be bound to such a world view, and that freed from the constrictions of historicism, it may serve theology without causing ideological friction.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Ted Peters, "The Use of Analogy in Historical Method", The Catholic Biblical Quarterly, XXXV, (October, 1973), p. 478.

<sup>65</sup>Ted Peters, "The Use of Analogy. . .", p. 478.



Troeltsch was guilty of a fundamental error in logic when he rejected the miraculous as a valid apologetic because of its assumed "unhistorical" nature. While the historian is committed to description of historical phenomena from an anthropocentric view, this does not in the least mean that it is the only possible view, as Troeltsch seems to have implied. Pannenberg is quite right in noting that theology and history need not exclude one another, but can indeed compliment each other. Nevertheless, Troeltsch passed from a consideration of the supernatural apologetic to a "reexamination of the evolutionary apologetic", in chapter two of his work, citing it as the "only one that calls for serious critical consideration".<sup>66</sup>

## II. Troeltsch's Reexamination of the Evolutionary Apologetic.

Troeltsch stated, from the outset, his conclusion on the viability of the idealistic-evolutionary apologetic. Thus, he wrote:

It is impossible to construct a theory of Christianity as the absolute religion on the basis of a historical way of thinking or by use of historical means. Much that looks weak, shadowy, and unstable in the theology of our day is rooted in the impossibility by putting such a construction on Christianity.<sup>67</sup>

Troeltsch's main argument against the evolutionary apologetic is that it violates the modern conception of history by presupposing a principle or Geist behind all manifold phenomena of history, thus unnaturally forcing the particulars of history into a confining speculative system and distorting their true

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<sup>66</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 60.

<sup>67</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 63.

significance. He wrote:

The modern understanding of history sees an encounter between opposed forces wherever it looks, and it has only muddled the waters of historical understanding when it has incorporated monistic theories into its work. The modern idea of history, as it has taken shape in connection with the object of its inquiries, knows no concept of a universal principle that embodies a law governing the successive generation of individual historical realities.<sup>68</sup>

History does not flow, according to Troeltsch, along a line previously charted by an inner spirit. History, is in a constant state of flux, contingent upon the interaction of historical individuals. The flow of history is charted only on the basis of a natural causal connection which is discerned only with regard to historical phenomena itself. Only such an approach can produce good historical writing and research. To substantiate this point, Troeltsch directs our attention to a comparison of accounts of the history of Christianity written on the basis of the new historical principles<sup>69</sup>, in contrast with those which "attempt to survey the total phenomenon of the religious life of mankind or of the so-called "essence of religion".<sup>70</sup> The effect of such a comparison, Troeltsch notes, is "a certain sense of disquiet much the same as we feel when we turn from historical books of this quality to doctrinaire historical introductions in works of

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<sup>68</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 64.

<sup>69</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 65. Here he notes for example Wellhausen's Geschichte Israels, Julicher's Die Einleitung in Das Neue Testament, and his Die Gleichnisreden Jesu, and Harnack's Dogmengeschichte.

<sup>70</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 65.

systematic theology".<sup>71</sup>

Troeltsch now gives the basic ideas of interpretation based on the evolutionary hypothesis. "First", he writes:

it subordinates history to the concept of a universal principle which represents a uniform, homogeneous, law structured, and self actuating power that brings forth individual instances of itself. Second, it elevates this concept of a universal principle to that of a norm and ideal representing what is of permanent value in all events. Third, it binds the two concepts together by means of a theory of evolutionary development. This implies, as the fourth basic idea, both a perfect congruity between the results of the law regulated causal process as brought forth in accordance with the concept of the universal principle and the successive creation of value as produced in accordance with the concept of absolute realization.<sup>72</sup>

Troeltsch finds the weaknesses in this approach primarily in its results. In the first instance, the subordination of history to a universal principle can only succeed if the particulars of historical phenomena are blurred to the point of losing their distinctiveness. This whole methodology is, of course, in total disharmony with the aspirations of modern historical scholarship i.e., historicism, which from the beginning has sought to apprehend historical events, "wie sie eigentlich gewesen sind". Even if one sees this unifying principle as operating within historical phenomena, and not as an overall principle under which they are subsumed, there still remains the problem of discerning "in the lower stages the higher stages toward which they lead".<sup>73</sup> In the end, Troeltsch

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<sup>71</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 65.

<sup>72</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 66.

<sup>73</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 67.

writes:

This approach invariably leads to concepts and definitions of the essence of religion that do not yet fit the lower stages and no longer fit the higher. It leads to vague notions which must then be inserted by the power of imagination into discrete empirical phenomena as their germinative nucleus.<sup>74</sup>

The second principle of this approach, according to Troeltsch, is problematic on a more practical level. In identifying all that is of permanent value in historic events with the presence of this "universal principle", we give up any hope of real certainty. In the first place, if greater emphasis is laid on the causal aspect of this universal principle then its total absolute realization is the cumulative effect of all its manifestations in history and not just strictly in Christianity. In this case, the argument for Christianity defeats itself. On the other hand, if the emphasis is given to the "gradual manifestation" of this absolute, with its final and complete realization coming in the form of the realization of its goal, i.e. Christianity, then how can one be sure that the absolute has reached its final goal? This could only be stated with certainty at the end of all history. Thus, Troeltsch notes, it is: "Precisely for this reason, the attempt to demonstrate a religion as absolute never continues long with one historical religion but tends to become a projection of the religion of the future."<sup>75</sup> In the light of this, one takes his stand on faith that his

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<sup>74</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 67.

<sup>75</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 69.

religion is the highest, and competing claims, as Troeltsch pointed out in regard to miracles, cancel out one another.

The third principle, which Troeltsch objects to, deals with the attempt of those who hold to the evolutionary theory to demonstrate the absoluteness of Christianity by seeking to combine the absolute and particular into one. He objects to this primarily because of the "impossibility of uniting a theoretically conceived universal principle with a concrete, individual, historical configuration".<sup>76</sup> Such an attempt will not bear close examination of the historical subject, indeed it can only be achieved at the expense of the historical individual. This attempt, Troeltsch remarks, "reminds one, more than anything else, of molten iron in a wax container or of solid paraffin in a red hot mold".<sup>77</sup> Thus, he concludes:

All this simply shows us, however, that it is historical reality itself which shatters every attempt to interpret Christianity on the basis of the concept of an absolute, self-fulfilling principle. Whatever the significance of Christianity may be, neither its origin nor its history nor again its importance in the history of religions will ever be known from its alleged identity with the absolute principle of religion.<sup>78</sup>

Troeltsch's final objection to the evolutionary apologetic is based on his critique of the concept of evolution itself. Not that he does not recognize the concept as valid. On the contrary, he calls it "one of the most reliable working tools there is, and it is one of the fundamental

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<sup>76</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 70.

<sup>77</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 72.

<sup>78</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 72.

presuppositions of the scientific study of history".<sup>79</sup> What he objects to is its misuse by some, notably positivists, in applying it to human affairs and concrete individual events in a form he calls "Speculative Evolution". Speculative evolution is characterized by:

Its conception of the total life of mankind as an evolutionary sequence in which a creative, teleological force generates the entire causal dynamic for the subsequent inwardly motivated acts that follow one upon the other in a definite order logically requisite to attaining their goal. . . It has its sole support in an evolutionary metaphysic of the absolute.<sup>80</sup>

Keeping in mind all the objections to this methodology which he has already made, Troeltsch rejects this approach with the blanket statement that it "stands in utter contradiction to real events".<sup>81</sup> Behind this reason for rejecting the evolutionary hypothesis as adequate in studying the history of religions, lies a more general reason, which has its place in the methodology of historicism. We have in mind here the fundamental distinction of historicism between the causality of natural science and that of historical science. According to Troeltsch, the historical attempts to write history without making this distinction has only caused confusion. He wrote:

Descartes surrendered history to the theologians and to revelation; Hobbes and Spinoza treated it in a naturalistic fashion. The naturalistic view prevailed also in the case of Hume and Kant, notwithstanding the great diversity in their respective views of causality. This is the case even to the

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<sup>79</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 72.

<sup>80</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 73.

<sup>81</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 73.

present day among the successors of Hume---the adherents of the positivism of Comte--and we need here recall only the names of Buckle and Taine. In the Kantian school, in its development towards Hegel's panlogism, the knowledge and aetiology of nature were, on the other hand, subjected to extreme violence by historical thought, inasmuch as the latter became simply the application of the law of dialectical movement of the cosmic process and the course of human affairs.<sup>82</sup>

What needs to be done, then, is to reevaluate the historical method and to recognize the fundamental differences between it and the methodology of the natural sciences. While the natural sciences function nomothetically i.e., reducing events to non-qualitative forces and through the concept of causal equivalence, abstracting universal laws, historical science functions ideographically i.e., "selecting from the flux of phenomena that which is qualitatively and uniquely individual".<sup>83</sup>

In the end, Troeltsch notes:

It is not the methods themselves, but their respective intellectual ends, that spring directly from the nature of the subject matter; and accordingly, the distinctive characteristics of the material correspond in either case to the ends determining the respective methods.<sup>84</sup>

Those who would use the concept of evolution in understanding social phenomena, must take this distinction between the two methods into account if they would fully appreciate the essential character of the material of history. The problem with the evolutionary apologetic is that it utilizes the concept of evolution in terms of the methodology of the

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<sup>82</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, "Historiography", Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics (1914), VI, p. 719.

<sup>83</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, "Historiography", p. 720.

<sup>84</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, "Historiography", p. 720.

natural sciences and hence does violence to historical phenomena.

This distinction is the groundwork from which Troeltsch builds his case for the normative nature of Christianity. He writes:

The conception of historico-empirical development denotes the progress that issues from the essential element of certain psychical efforts, the working out of the consequences that are latent in the earliest beginnings, the dynamic element in psychical forces which are not exhausted in a single manifestation, but work out towards a result--forces in which exists a tendency to a development akin to logical evolution.<sup>85</sup>

Having demonstrated the inadequacy of the evolutionary apologetic (the only one he considers to be in need of serious consideration) and having further laid the methodological grounds from which to build, Troeltsch now proceeds to develop his theory of norms of value.

### III. Troeltsch's Attempt to "Overcome History with History".

Troeltsch begins this section by giving a conclusion to all that has preceeded. This is quoted here at length for the purpose of review:

The Christian religion is in every moment of its history a purely historical phenomenon, subject to all the limitations to which any individual historical phenomenon is exposed, just like the other great religions. It is to be investigated, in every moment of its history, by the universal, verified methods of historical research. Just as these methods demonstrate their fruitfulness in relation to Christianity, so too do they conform, when applied to Christianity, their general presuppositions as to the nature of everything historical. To employ the methods with their substantive presuppositions would be to use

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<sup>85</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, "Historiography", p. 720.



a lever without a fulcrum. If the lever of historical method has raised the level of our understanding of Christian history, then by so doing it has also demonstrated that the fulcrum of a universally historical mode of thinking is true. If one should say "Christianity is a relative phenomenon", there is no reason to object to this, for the historical and the relative are identical.<sup>86</sup>

Thus far has Troeltsch come in his argument and now, as his last comment suggests, he takes up the problem of relativism. For many the word leaves a "bad taste" in ones mouth, because of its connections with uncertainty and purposelessness. This, argues Troeltsch, need not be the case, for relativism in no way necessarily denies the validity of values within particular historical configurations.<sup>87</sup> The concept as he wishes to use it, "simply means that all historical phenomena are unique, individual configurations acted on by influences from a universal context that comes to bear on them in varying degrees of immediacy".<sup>88</sup> This interrelationship of the particular and absolute represents, for Troeltsch, the crucial problem. He is in no way suggesting that the absolute is within the phenomena of history itself, for that can only exist beyond history as he is said to have stated: "History is no place for the Absolute". This, then is his problem as he states it:

How does one work out a fresh, durable, and creative synthesis that will give the absolute the form possible to it at a particular moment and yet remain true, to its inherent limitation as a mere approximation of the true, ultimate, and universally valid values.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 85.

<sup>87</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 89.

<sup>88</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 89.

<sup>89</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 90.

With this challenge before him, Troeltsch introduces his particular methodology of comparing norms of value, which consists, with regard to religion, in "drawing together and analyzing what has emerged within the horizons of the world as it presently exists and the more or less clearly known history that it embraces".<sup>90</sup> But the question immediately arises, "If history is so relative, and historical phenomena so manifold, how can one go about "drawing together and analyzing" various historical configurations without making the same error which the evolutionary apologists have made, i.e., presupposing a universal spirit within historical phenomena?" As will be shown later, the seed of Troeltsch's defeat lies hidden within this very question, but at this point, he answers by noting that while historical relativism acknowledges the varieties of history it does not thereby presuppose a "limitless number of competing values".<sup>91</sup> Thus he writes: "In the history of religions in particular, we find ourselves confronted not by a profusion of powerful religious forces, among which we would never be able to choose, but only by a few great orientations."<sup>92</sup> More specifically, Troeltsch notes that among all religions there exist only a few basic orientations and these amount to "the rivalry between the prophetic, Christian, Platonic, and Stoic world of ideas on the one hand, and the Buddhist or Eastern world of ideas

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<sup>90</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 92.

<sup>91</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 92.

<sup>92</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 92.

on the other".<sup>93</sup> Further, Troeltsch argues, there is no reason to suppose that the significant religious developments of man will ever disappear, although he does allow for the possible disappearance of the particular historical configuration through which they have come. Here, Troeltsch seems to be suggesting an ideological "survival of the fittest". He writes: "What is of chief importance in this connection is the victory of the highest values and the incorporation of all reality into their frame of reference".<sup>94</sup> Finally, Troeltsch argues, the method of historical thinking he suggests, does not forbid the comparison of these basic orientations in order to subsume them "under the idea of a common goal". Here again he is not suggesting that this goal is to be achieved within history, for as long as the expression of the basic orientations are historical, they are by his definition, relative. "History and the relative are identical." It is at this point, that Troeltsch diverges from strict historicism. As noted earlier, historicism and its adherents (especially Ranke and Dilthey) cared little for a consideration of the meaning of events, this was where Troeltsch separated from Dilthey, over the matter of an adequate theory of validity.

Troeltsch clearly acknowledges this separation at this point when he writes:

The only course that remains, therefore, is the kind of scientific enquiry in which man strive as best they

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<sup>93</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 93.

<sup>94</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 94.

can to comprehend empirical, historical reality and to acquire norms from history by conscientious comparison and reflection. The study of history is not of itself the obtaining of such norms but the ground from which they arise.<sup>95</sup>

The challenge before him is to develop a theory of validity while being consistent with historicist precepts.

It is upon the possibility of the comparison of value orientations which Troeltsch attempts to build such a theory of validity. This validity is recognized in the light of the concept of a goal toward which mankind is directed. But, Troeltsch warns:

It should be remembered, however, that this is not an actual universal which is exhausted in its human realization. It is the concept, rather, of a common, orienting goal that may from time to time manifest itself in history in clear and distinct preparatory form but always remains a goal "out in front". A goal of this kind can be a common one and yet never really be grasped except in an individual and historical way.<sup>96</sup>

The goal is, further, not to be identified in any way with Hegel's panlogistic theory. Rather the development occurs through the interaction of historical configurations. He describes this process thus:

Each orientation evolves the richness of the potential granted to it, first in its own limited sphere. At length, these orientations come into contact with one another. Then in free religious and ethical encounter men take note of their gradations of value and strive to obtain a basis of judgment by drawing them together to form a philosophy of history.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 105.

<sup>96</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 105.

<sup>97</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 101.

All this, then, is what Troeltsch hopes to do when he seeks to "overcome history with history". Through an examination of norms of value, abstracted strictly from the material of history, Troeltsch seeks to conquer historical relativism, and demonstrate Christianity as the normative religion in the world. Troeltsch sums up what he has said in this chapter by stating:

Thus the problem is to define the scope of the relative and individual with ever increasing exactness and to understand with ever increasing comprehensiveness the universally valid that works teleologically within history. Then we will see that the relative contains an indication of the unconditional. In the relative we will find a token of the absolute that transcends history.<sup>98</sup>

Troeltsch next examines what such a methodology can say about Christianity's position amongst the other religions.

#### IV. Troeltsch's Argument for Christianity as Normative.

Troeltsch's argument so far, given his presuppositions, brings us to the place of accepting only the possibility that Christianity might be the highest manifestation of religion up till now and, as Roger Johnson notes, "the converging point of all known directions of religious development".<sup>99</sup>

Troeltsch first contrasts Christianity with the religions of "polytheisms and polydemonisms" and concludes that they are not worth consideration in that they only bear upon the questions of "the origin of religion and for that of

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<sup>98</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 106.

<sup>99</sup>Roger Johnson, "Troeltsch on Christianity and Relativism", Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion Vol. I (Spring, 1962), pp. 221-222.

whether religion can be traced to the human psyche".<sup>100</sup> He moves quickly along to the higher religions arguing that:

It is these religions that free themselves from the natural confinement of religion to state, blood, and soil, and from the entanglement of divinity in the powers and phenomena of nature. It is in them that the world of the senses is solidly confronted by a higher spiritual and eternal world, and it is in them, therefore, that the full, all-embracing power of religion first arises.<sup>101</sup>

Troeltsch further divides the great world religions into two categories, religions of law, and religions of redemption. The two most important religions of law he cites as Judaism and Islam. The two religions of redemption he cites are Christianity and Indian religions taken together. Religions of law are superior to "polytheisms and polydemonisms" by virtue of their aspiration towards the concept of redemption in the promises they contain. However, they remain inferior to religions of redemption in that:

Redemption conceived on the basis of law remains forever bound to achievements that man produces out of his own nature, while the redeeming divinity conceived on the basis of what were originally nature religions always remains a thinglike being that lacks the vital, activating power needed to tear men away from the world and return them, transformed, to confront the world again.<sup>102</sup>

There remains then, only the religions of redemption to consider. Troeltsch contrasts Christianity with Indian religions on the basis of the respective processes of redemption. In Christianity, he writes:

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<sup>100</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 109.

<sup>101</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 109.

<sup>102</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 110.

We find a complete and radical disengagement of God and of souls from the world; the elevation of both into the sphere of personality where nature is shaped and overcome and where unconditioned value is realized; and the overcoming of all that is merely given, merely existent, by an infinitive and intrinsic value that bursts forth from the depths of the world and finds expression in practical conduct.<sup>103</sup>

The redemption of a soul is founded upon faith, it is this, according to Troeltsch, which apprehends unconditioned value in the sphere of the "merely given". All this is done in the sphere of personality, personality not abnegated, but affirmed. This, says Troeltsch, is in stark contrast to the way of redemption proposed by Indian religions. In the Indian religions, redemption, through encounter with the divinity, is brought about through "self-renunciation and strenuous spiritual exercises as an impersonal, eternally existent thing, as an ultimate abstraction from the given and the actual".<sup>104</sup> Thus, Christianity alone stands as the highest of the great world religions because it presents the hope of redemption to man in the realm of personality. Troeltsch summarizes his argument thus:

The religions of law proclaim the divine will, but they leave the natural man to overcome the world in his own strength. The non-Christian religions of redemption dissolve man and the world in the divine essence but in the process forfeit all positive meaning and content in the divine nature. Only Christianity has overcome this way of looking at things that actually represents a vestige of nature religion. Only Christianity has disclosed a living deity who is act and will in contrast to all that

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<sup>103</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 110.

<sup>104</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., pp. 110-111.

is merely existent, who separates the soul from the merely existent and in this separation unites it with himself. In this way the soul, purified from guilt and pride and granted assurance and security, is set to work in the world for the upbuilding of a kingdom of pure personal values, for the upbuilding of the Kingdom of God.<sup>105</sup>

This is, in essence, Troeltsch's argument for the superiority of Christianity over all other religious phenomena. It was generated out of his overwhelming desire for religious certainty combined with his wish to be consistent with historical scholarship. Towards the end of his life, he was forced to abandon the former of these two goals because of his commitment to the latter. However, at this stage in his life, Troeltsch discovered a measure of certainty within this construction; albeit only a measure for he closed this section of his work admitting that whereas Christianity had emerged as the highest manifestation of man's religious strivings, it could not thereby claim to be the final manifestation. Only the end of all history could disclose that. In the end, Troeltsch wrote: "Faith may regard Christianity, therefore, as a heightening of the religious standard in terms of which the inner life of man will continue to exist. But we cannot and must not regard it as an absolute, perfect, immutable truth."<sup>106</sup>

#### V. The Usefulness of Troeltsch's Normative Approach.

Earlier we noted that Troeltsch, no matter how theoretical he became in his exposition, always sought to see the problem from a practical side. He now moves, in the next

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<sup>105</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 114.

<sup>106</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 115.



section of his work, to a practical argument on the usefulness of his historical approach. Writing in an almost sermonic tone, Troeltsch now takes up the question of "whether an "absoluteness" of this kind can satisfy ordinarily devout people in their acknowledgement of and quest for God".<sup>107</sup> Here his concern is for the person "whose modes of perception and reflection are those of the modern world".<sup>108</sup> Of course, Troeltsch answers in the affirmative. A religious man does not necessarily need to know that he possesses the truth to the exclusion of everyone else, rather he needs only to know that "he is on the right path, that he is following the right star".<sup>109</sup> A normative religion can fill this need. He concludes: "All that the Christian needs, therefore, is the certainty that within the Christian orientation of life there is an authentic revelation of God and that nowhere is a greater revelation to be found."<sup>110</sup>

Troeltsch's works have been criticized on several accounts. For example, as Bainton noted, he often does not pay close enough attention to historical facts, but tends to generalize. In addition, as others have pointed out, he has neglected "the social-institutional aspects of 'personalism', in his work The Absoluteness of Christianity. . .<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . . , p. 118.

<sup>108</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . . , p. 118.

<sup>109</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . . , pp. 120-121.

<sup>110</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . . , p. 123.

<sup>111</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . . , p. 16.

But perhaps the most harmful criticism of his work, at least from an evangelical perspective, is his almost complete ignorance of the person of Christ, producing what some have called a "Christless Christianity".<sup>112</sup> The fact is, that without Christ, there is no Christianity. As a religion of redemption, Troeltsch is right in noting its unique 'personalism' which sets it aside from other religions, yet that 'personalism' of the New Testament, and hence Christianity, is centered upon a person through whom it is mediated. The claim of the New Testament writers is that God himself (the Logos) has entered the temporal realm. In Troeltsch's terms, the Absolute has indeed entered history and thereby communicated absolutely. This is clearly seen where John writes in his gospel: "The Word became flesh and lived for awhile among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth";<sup>113</sup> and the writer of Hebrews proclaims: "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."<sup>114</sup> This is the very thing that Barth came to see later in his life. God "is not a prisoner of His own exalted status, but he can also be lowly--not in the surrender but the affirmation of His divine majesty".<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., p. 15.

<sup>113</sup>John 1:14, New International Version.

<sup>114</sup>Hebrews 1:3, New International Version.

<sup>115</sup>Thomas W. Ogletree, Christian History and Faith (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), p. 119.

Ogletree in commenting on this statement notes that:

This means that God's activity is not confined to the frontier or boundary between time and eternity. God has crossed that boundary and entered into the midst of human life and history, becoming an object for man in the relative, transient creaturely context in which man has his being.<sup>116</sup>

Simply stating the propositions of the New Testament that God has truly (though not exhaustively) spoken to us through his Son in these latter days, does not thereby prove that he indeed has. That truth must be apprehended by faith. On the other hand, for those who name the name of Christ, the proposition, that God has spoken absolutely through his Son Jesus Christ, must become the core, the focus, and the basis of their hope of redemption. It is only in reference to Him that redemption, as a Christian concept has meaning! However logical and consistent Troeltsch has been in his attempt to show the superiority of Christianity, this can never become the basis for a believer's hope in his ultimate redemption through Christ.

Troeltsch's own dissatisfaction with his apologetical formulation for the superiority of Christianity came about gradually through his increasingly in-depth study of the nature of history itself. Ultimately, it was over the question of the possibility of validity within a world of contingency. In his earlier work, Troeltsch founded his argument for validity on the basis of the religious a priori. This was reflected in the essay "zur Frage des Religiösen Apriori" written in

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<sup>116</sup>Thomas W. Ogletree, Christian History and Faith, p. 119.

1909. Here he wrote: "The unconditionality of all that which is a priori and the continuity and logical succession of the historical forms of reason seem to point to an active presence of the Absolute spirit in finite things, to an activity of the universe, as Schleiermacher says, in individual souls."<sup>117</sup> This reference to the a priori, although not specifically dealt with there, was the substructure for Troeltsch's appeal in The Absoluteness of Christianity. . . . What occurred subsequently however, was that he began to question the validity of the religious a priori itself, thus effectively undermining any real certainty he had derived from his argument. The shift in his thinking is clearly evident in his article on "Contingency" which appeared in 1912, in the Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics. Here, Troeltsch wrote:

The facts, as such, are irrational and contingent. We cannot comprehend why this or that should exist; and even if any particular thing be rationalized in virtue of its derivation from another, yet that other itself remains contingent. Should it be affirmed, however, that the whole manifold of phenomena can logically be deduced from the fact of the world as a whole--a consummation which as yet is not even remotely possible, and remains at best a logical postulate,--nevertheless, the existence of the world itself would still remain irrational and contingent. The truly incomprehensible thing, as D'Alembert puts it, is that anything should exist at all.<sup>118</sup>

Whereas, in The Absoluteness. . . ., Troeltsch had been able to confine contingency to historical phenomena, while apprehending a fixity of values within the religious a priori, he now extends

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<sup>117</sup>James Luther Adams, "Ernst Troeltsch as Analyst. . .", p. 101.

<sup>118</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, "Contingency", Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics (1912), IV, p. 88.

the concept of contingency to the higher goals he thought he had discerned within the various religions. It was his ultimate rejection of the religious a priori which precipitated this. On this basis, Adams notes; "It is not surprising that the concept of the religious a priori does not appear in his later writings."<sup>119</sup>

As these developments were proceeding in Troeltsch's mind, he completed a work entitled "The Social Teachings of the Christian Church", which had a very practical goal, that of providing an understanding of the Church in his "modern" day through a systematic consideration of the Church's history. We have noted that in Troeltsch's writings there is an overriding practical goal inherent. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in "The Social Teachings. . .", where he took up the question of the Church's role in the modern world, a world which had been radically transformed since the days of its hegemony over western culture. It addressed itself to the social institutional aspects of his concept of personalism which had been a weakness of his earlier work and laid the groundwork for a new methodology in the study of the history of religion. But ultimately, it too contributed to the impasse at which he arrived in his search for certainty. Hans Frei notes this effect, stating that:

His work on "The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches" had shown him the individual and relative

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<sup>119</sup>James Luther Adams, "Ernst Troeltsch as Analyst. . .", p. 101.

nature of Christianity and its components more forcefully than ever: the Christianity of the West really has nothing in common with its Oriental counterpart. Furthermore, he found that Buddhism and Brahmanism are fully as spiritual and humane as Christianity and therefore have on this basis the same claim to absolute validity.<sup>120</sup>

Before proceeding to an examination and analysis of this work, we must give consideration to a man, who may have influenced Troeltsch's life more than any other. This was sociologist Max Weber. From him, Troeltsch claimed to have learned "a new way of seeing"<sup>121</sup>, and this "new way" Troeltsch employed in The Social Teachings. . . .

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<sup>120</sup>Hans W. Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background" Faith and Ethics ed., Paul Ramsey, (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 58.

<sup>121</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Absoluteness. . ., with intro by J. L. Adams, p. 16.

## Chapter 4

ERNST TROELTSCH'S ASSOCIATION  
WITH MAX WEBER

Troeltsch first became acquainted with Max Weber in 1897, while Weber was working on his Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Troeltsch was impressed by the man from the very beginning of their friendship, and likened Weber's effect on him to "coming under the spell" of an "ubermachtigen Personlichkeit".<sup>122</sup> Later, after Weber's death in 1920, Troeltsch wrote, "For years I experienced in daily contact with him the infinitely stimulating power of this man, and I am aware of owing him a great part of my knowledge and ability."<sup>123</sup> Reist testifies to the immense impact Weber had upon Troeltsch, stating that:

Weber's contribution to Troeltsch's thought is both formal and substantial. One must add that it was also profound. . . . It is undoubtedly true to say that it was from Weber primarily that Troeltsch gained his insights into the emerging discipline of Sociology--insights which, as we have seen at length, shaped the center of his own creativity.<sup>124</sup>

Weber's central focus was religion, although he

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<sup>122</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Aufsätze zur Geistesgeschichte. . ., p. 11.

<sup>123</sup>Wilhelm Pauck, Harnack and Troeltsch. . ., p. 70.

<sup>124</sup>Benjamin Reist, Toward a Theology. . ., p. 107.

approached the study of religion from the perspective of a sociologist. As such, he concerned himself with the sociology of religion, focusing his attention, as Talcott Parsons notes, upon "the relations between religious ideas and commitments and other aspects of human conduct, especially the economic characteristics of human conduct within a society".<sup>125</sup> This driving focus of Weber can be clearly seen in his most famous work entitled The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. A consideration of Weber's significance for the development of sociology, especially theoretically, is, however, the subject matter for another work. What is important here is the impact he made upon Troeltsch's development.

Weber and Troeltsch were brought together through their unanimous agreement as to the important place religion plays in any given society. O'Dea notes that "both Weber and Troeltsch insisted on the reality of religious interests and their causal influence in human history, in contrast with contemporary Marxist writers who reduced religious interests to socioeconomic interests and saw religion as an epiphenomenon".<sup>126</sup> They differed somewhat, however, in that Troeltsch considered religion to be central, whereas Weber considered it to be but one factor (sometimes a crucial factor) involved in economic development. The most phenomenal point of Weber's influence

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<sup>125</sup>Max Weber, The Sociology of Religion, intro. Talcott Parsons (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. XX.

<sup>126</sup>Thomas F. O'Dea, "Religion, Sociology of", New Catholic Encyclopedia. (1967), 12, p. 265.



upon Troeltsch is in the concept of "Ideal Types". Weber defined the concept of ideal types thus:

It is a conceptual construct which is neither historical reality nor even the true reality. It is even less fitted to serve as a schema under which a real situation or action is to be subsumed as one instance. It has the significance of a purely ideal limiting concept with which the real situation or action is compared and surveyed for the explication of certain of its significant components. Such concepts are constructs in terms of which we formulate relationships by the application of the category of objective possibility. By means of this category, the adequacy of our imagination, orientated and disciplined by reality, is judged.<sup>127</sup>

The appeal which this concept had for Troeltsch was, that it allowed for a sort of general classification, while at the same time leaving intact historical details. As Reist notes: "One does not seek to force historical data into propagandistic use in favor of the church type as over against the sect type, or vice versa. The point is, rather, to clarify the process by which the past has yielded and shaped the problematic of the present."<sup>128</sup> Weber characterized the process of ideal-typical analysis using the example of the concepts of "church" and "sect". Two years before Troeltsch published the "Social Teachings. . .", he wrote:

The ideal-type is an attempt to analyze historically unique configurations or their individual components by means of genetic concepts. Let us take for instance the concepts "church" and "sect". They may be broken down purely classificatorily into complexes of characteristics whereby not only the distinction between them but also the content of the concept must constantly remain fluid. If, however, I wish to formulate the

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<sup>127</sup> Benjamin Reist, Toward a Theology. . ., p. 108.

<sup>128</sup> Benjamin Reist, Toward a Theology. . ., p. 112.

concept of "sect" genetically, e.g., with reference to certain important cultural significances which the "sectarian spirit" has had for modern culture, certain characteristics of both become essential because they stand in an adequate causal relationship to those influences. However, the concepts thereupon become ideal-typical in the sense that they appear in full conceptual integrity either not at all or only in individual instances. Here as elsewhere every concept which is not purely classificatory diverges from reality.<sup>129</sup>

Troeltsch accepted the methodology of ideal-typical analysis in toto and utilized the church/sect distinction though with a slight variation. Whereas Weber had located the distinction between church and sect in the characteristic element of sectarian voluntarism, Troeltsch focused on the varying attitudes of the church and sect in regards to their respective attitudes towards the state. This can be largely accounted for by his stated purpose in writing The Social Teachings which was:

to pave the way for the understanding of the social doctrines of the gospel, of the early church, of the Middle Ages, of the post-Reformation confessions, right down to the formation of the new situation in the modern world, in which the old themes no longer suffice, and where, therefore, new theories must be constructed, composed of old and new elements, consciously or unconsciously, whether so avowed or not.<sup>130</sup>

Troeltsch approached this task armed with the method of ideal-typical analysis. For this, he could thank Weber. Yet the concerns he had in writing this work set him apart from Weber. Troeltsch saw that things in his culture were

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<sup>129</sup>Benjamin Reist, Toward a Theology. . ., pp. 110-111.

<sup>130</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches (London: George Allen and Unwin LTD, 1950), p. 29.

"tottering" and he was concerned for the future of the Church. Is the Church to find a place in this rapidly changing world? And, further, what might its place be? These were the questions which Troeltsch sought to answer. He believed that he would find the answers locked within the history of the church itself and he set upon himself the task of finding and unlocking the potentialities of the Church. This was, for Troeltsch, the driving impulse behind "The Social Teachings. . . ."

## Chapter 5

### TROELTSCH'S VIEW OF THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

#### I. The Practical Nature of the Social Teaching.

The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches was borne out of a real situation which Troeltsch was witnessing, and indeed deeply involved in<sup>131</sup>, i.e., the Church's intricate involvement in the party politics of the German state. This involvement had been most clearly manifested in the areas of social conflict as Troeltsch himself noted:

Amid all the social confusion of the present day, with its clamour of conflicting voices, the Churches also are making their voices heard. These social conflicts are due in part to the growth of large modern unified states, with their democratic tendencies, and their party struggles. They are also the outcome of modern industrialization, the development of the proletariat, and the emancipation of the masses in many lands. These problems do not merely concern politicians, political economists, specialists in social science, and modern independent philosophers of culture; they are also the concern of the churches, whose roots are intertwined with traditions of great historical importance and vital energy.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup>Troeltsch became very involved in the political life of his country, especially after the first world war. He was one of the founders of the New Democratic Party of the Weimar Republic and served for a time as an undersecretary of State in the ministry of education and public worship here, as Pauck notes, "Troeltsch "exercised considerable influence upon the definitions of the rights and functions of schools and churches which were ultimately included in the Constitution of the Weimar Republic." (Pauck, Harnack and Troeltsch, p. 48.)

<sup>132</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 23.

Yet while the churches were "making their voice heard," and indeed making an impact upon their social environment, they were being "strongly influenced in their turn by the political and class interests which these parties represent."<sup>133</sup> It was in the light of this situation that Troeltsch argued for the relevance and importance of his study. The Church, according to Troeltsch, had always been more or less involved in its social environment, and he set out to trace this involvement through the various periods of history, i.e., early Church, Middle Ages, Reformation, post-Reformation, down to the modern era. In doing this, Troeltsch pointed out that his purpose was not to address himself to the question of whether "it is permissible to formulate social doctrines from the standpoint of the churches and of religions in general."<sup>134</sup> For such a task, Troeltsch admitted himself ill-equipped. Rather, he noted, his primary focus was more directed towards the theological aspect of the problem. Thus, the questions to which he would address himself, he stated as: "What is the basis of the social teaching of the churches? From the point of view of their essential nature in principle what is their attitude towards the modern social problem? And what should be their attitude?"<sup>135</sup> For the task of answering such questions, Troeltsch felt himself well prepared, in that they combined

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<sup>133</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 23.

<sup>134</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 24.

<sup>135</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 24.

the elements of his two loves, Theology and History.

## II. Methodological Approach in The Social Teaching.

In considering the work as a whole, it is somewhat difficult to discern clearly the connection The Social Teaching. . . has with his other work. This can be, in part at least, accounted for by the practical nature of the work. Troeltsch was seeking specific solutions to problems of his own day. Our unfamiliarity with, or at least our distance from, such political exigencies, might tempt us to discount, The Social Teaching. . . as an obsolete history book. Some, for example, have severely criticized Troeltsch on the grounds of his inadequate historical research. However, it is not in Troeltsch's particular historical reconstruction of Church History that we find the importance of the work, or further its connection with his other works. It is, rather, in his specific methodology that we find both the former and latter. From this perspective, the importance of the work looms large.

In beginning his work, Troeltsch noted that we are immediately faced "with the fundamental fact that the churches and Christianity," are, "preeminently historic forces," and, "are at all points conditioned by their past. . .,"<sup>136</sup> In this statement, we are confronted with Troeltsch's commitment to historicism. As he had argued in the Absoluteness of Christianity. . ., Christianity was not to be considered in any way as absolute. It was strictly an historical (as opposed to a divine)

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<sup>136</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 25.

phenomena and should be treated as we would treat any other historical configuration. This methodology amounted to a radical departure from the writing of Church History in the orthodox tradition as well as a revolt from positivistic interpretation within the same area. But before considering specifically in what ways The Social Teaching. . . was a departure from the orthodox way of writing Church History as well as from positivism, we must take up a general description of his methodology, consisting primarily of his "Sociological formulation of the Question", and his use of Ideal Types.

#### A. Sociological Statement of the Question.

When Troeltsch uses the term, "social" or "society", he means:

A definite, clearly defined section of the general sociological phenomena--that is the sociological relations which are not regulated by the state, nor by political interest, save insofar as they are indirectly influenced by them. This sociological section is composed of the various questions which arise out of economic life, the sociological tension between various groups with different customs and aims, division of labor, class organization, and some other interests which cannot be directly characterized as political, but which actually have a great influence on the collective life of the state.<sup>137</sup>

When one thinks then of the relationship between Christianity and Society, he must not think in generalities or in dogmatic theological precepts. That is done only by "dilettanti". Rather, one must think of particular social entities and relationships. When Troeltsch considers the "social problem" he is thinking specifically of "the relation between the

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<sup>137</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 28.

political community and these sociological phenomena, which, although they are essentially non-political, are yet of outstanding importance from the political point of view."<sup>138</sup> When, therefore, Troeltsch considers Christianity in relation to social problems, he is thinking of concrete historical examples. There is no other scientific way to proceed, for, he notes, "there is no "natural-science" conception of Society such as there is of mechanics, which will cover all particular phenomena"<sup>139</sup> and further, "the only method of attempting to find an answer at all is by investigating the concrete effect of its (the Church's) influence in different social groups."<sup>140</sup>

While Troeltsch may not appear to be anything out of the ordinary in our own day, in his own, he was very controversial. Although he did not specifically deny the commonly accepted view that the Church is a supernatural institution in the world, he proposed a methodology, which at least did not take this as a basic presupposition. Reist notes:

In its simplest terms his demand was that the context within which Christian thought develops must be given its due. There is of course nothing new in this. No historian worth his salt would ever debate such a concern. What was new was the decisively sociological character of Troeltsch's version of this demand. He was peculiarly sensitive to the earthy, empirical, ethical character of the substratum of all Christian thought.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>138</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 28.

<sup>139</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 29.

<sup>140</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 30.

<sup>141</sup>Benjamin Reist, Toward a Theology. . ., p. 36.



## B. Function and Use of "Ideal-Types".

In the same way that Troeltsch felt the need for precise definition in utilizing the concepts of the "social" and "society" in his work, so he also felt, in regards to considering Christianity as a social factor. Just as it was obscuring to talk of "the social" in broad generalities, so it was misleading to speak of Christianity in such a way. It was here that Weber's method of Ideal-Typical analysis came to serve him well. It should be remembered that Troeltsch used ideal-typical analysis in the same way that Weber intended, and that was for clarification, not classification. Both Weber and Troeltsch recognized that strict classification resulted in distorting historical particulars, something which went contrary to their purposes. In keeping with this, then, Troeltsch noted three distinct attitudes of Christianity toward "the social" which he characterized as three ideal-types. These were, the church type, the sect type, and the mystic type. In describing these types Troeltsch wrote:

The Church is an institution which has been endowed with grace and salvation as a result of the work of redemption; it is able to receive the masses, and to adjust itself to the world, because to a certain extent, it can afford to ignore the need for subjective holiness for the sake of the objective treasures of grace and of redemption. The Sect is a voluntary society, composed of strict and definite Christian believers bound to each other by the fact that all have experienced "the new birth". These "believers" live apart from the world, are limited to small groups, emphasize the law instead of grace, and in varying degrees within their own circle set up the Christian order, based on love; all this is done in preparation for and expectation of the coming Kingdom of God. Mysticism means that the world of ideas which had hardened into formal worship and doctrine is transformed

into a purely personal and inward experience; this leads to the formation of groups on a purely personal basis, with no permanent form which also tend to weaken the significance of forms of worship, doctrine and the historical element.<sup>142</sup>

As previously mentioned, what distinguishes these ideal-types from one another is their respective attitudes towards society. The church type settles down in a state of peaceful co-existence with the world whereas the sect-type seeks to separate itself from the world, all the while waiting expectantly for the end. Mysticism is distinguished from these two by its relative ignorance of the world. All three of these local types were inherent in Christianity from the beginning and were contained within one monolithic Catholic Church; during the Middle Ages the sect-type and mystic-type being confined primarily to monasticism. Later, according to Troeltsch, as the Church was broken by fragmentation, one could find examples of any one of these ideal-types existing by itself. But the Church-type remained the most important for Troeltsch mainly because of its willingness to co-exist and work hand in hand with the state in dealing with social problems. Its very claim to universality moves it in this direction although, as Troeltsch has argued, this claim is no longer justified. In any case, the point at which the Church has had the most influence in dealing with social problems is that very point at which it has involved itself in the political and social areas. Troeltsch went on to point out that the Church had succeeded only twice

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<sup>142</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 993.

in its history to attain its ideal of universality, and that was during the High Middle Ages, and later immediately following the Reformation.<sup>143</sup> In his own day, Troeltsch felt that, not only were the Churches in danger of failing to understand and realize their social responsibility, but that the old solution of comprehending the political and social areas under the dogmas of Christianity was no longer a viable solution. The increasingly irresponsible attitude the churches were manifesting towards social problems in his own day, Troeltsch attributed to a lack of strength among Protestant Churches coupled with increasingly strong "influence of the sect-type and mysticism, both of which are tendencies which have a close affinity with the modern world."<sup>144</sup>

Troeltsch's reason for rejecting the suggestion of a universal Christian culture as a viable solution to the social problem, was based on quite another reason, i.e., a shift in the basic historical awareness of Western Civilization stemming from the Enlightenment. The postulation of this shift represents the very heart of the problem which Troeltsch seeks to address in The Social Teaching. . . and also accounts for his rejection of the orthodox way of writing Church History. Therefore, it will be discussed in the next section regarding Troeltsch's divergence from orthodox historians of the Church.

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<sup>143</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 34.

<sup>144</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 1009.

### III. Troeltsch's Method of Writing Church History.

Troeltsch wished to distinguish himself as methodologically distinct from orthodox writers of Church history for the same reason he distinguished himself from Hegel's attempt to demonstrate the absoluteness of Christianity on the basis of the speculative concept of a Weltgeist. The problem, that Troeltsch found with such an approach was that it violated the particulars of history, effectively blurring them in order to maintain its own particular system of meaning and validity. James Luther Adams notes the connection between Troeltsch's rejection of Hegel's evolutionary apologetic for the absoluteness of Christianity in The Absoluteness of Christianity. . ., and his rejection of the orthodox methodology in writing Church History. He writes:

The Hegelian and Neo-Hegelian idealists had interpreted Christianity as the unfolding of an Idea, according to some uniform developmental principle; they also tended to stress the decisive role of great men. Troeltsch believed it impossible to formulate any such Idea or principle. He also rejected the notion that the history of religion can be understood in terms simply of the relations between Ideas and persons.<sup>145</sup>

Orthodox Church historians were presupposing that something called Christianity had always existed, in an abstract form apart from its various historical manifestations. Against such an "ideological-dogmatic approach" to Church history, Troeltsch advanced a new "sociological-realistic-ethical approach" which functioned fully within the new methods of historical research, i.e., historicism. Reist notes

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<sup>145</sup>James Luther Adams, "Ernst Troeltsch as Analyst. . .", p. 104.

Troeltsch's rejection of orthodox church history upon these very grounds, writing:

New historical methods have destroyed once and for all the simple continuity hitherto presupposed by church historians and the historians of dogma. To speak, within the framework of either discipline, of a pure and undefiled primitive period, a blurred and distorted Catholic period, and a time of great restoration in the Protestant period is no longer possible. Modern historical method rejects "any such constant, uniform, and supernatural subject." It has in fact made all things "fluid, mobile, and relative", and, above all, "has placed in the foreground the great cultural and institutional contexts, on which depends the actual, definitive sphere of governing religious structures of thought."<sup>146</sup>

The advent of the new historical methods in the modern world have really had a much greater impact upon western culture than just precipitating a revolution in the writing of Church history. That in itself is only symptomatic of an even greater shift, the demise of what might be termed the hope of the Christian Weltanschauung. Historically, Troeltsch locates the time of this shift from the Enlightenment. He illustrates the meaning and importance of this shift for the Church in his postulation of two Protestantisms.

#### IV. The Two Protestantisms.

Writers of Church History in Troeltsch's day located the temporal beginning of the modern world with the Reformation. In Troeltsch's view they did this only by ignoring what had occurred within Christianity's social environment. According to him, the Protestant Reformation was much more within the

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<sup>146</sup> Benjamin Reist, Toward a Theology. . ., pp. 37-38.

tradition of the Middle Ages than within the modern era, because of its view that the Lex Naturae and Lex Dei while not now synonymous, were originally so, and now function harmoniously. He writes:

The genuine early Protestantism of Lutheranism and Calvinism is, as an organic whole, in spite of its anti-Catholic doctrine of salvation, entirely a Church civilization like that of the Middle Ages. It claims to regulate state and society, science and education, law, commerce, and industry, according to the supernatural standpoint of revelation, and exactly like the Middle Ages, everywhere subsumes under itself the Lex Naturae as being originally identical with the Law of God.<sup>147</sup>

In terms of social significance, then, "Protestantism carries forward the acceptance of the life of the world into the ethic of a universal Christian society; which had been dimly foreshadowed in late antiquity, but which was only really attained in the Middle Ages."<sup>148</sup> It was especially during the seventeenth century that the belief in the harmonious relationship between the Lex Naturae and Lex Dei began to dissolve. Today, according to Troeltsch, the dissolution is an accomplished fact. He writes:

Modern Protestantism, since the end of the seventeenth century, has . . . everywhere accepted the principle of the state's recognizing religious equality, or even remaining religiously indifferent. . . . It has further, in principle, recognized alongside itself a completely untrammelled secular life, which it no longer attempts to control, either directly or indirectly, through the agency of the state. In connection with this it has forgotten its former doctrine--which made possible and encouraged this

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<sup>147</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Protestantism and Progress, trans. W. Montgomery. Boston: Beacon Press, (1958), p. 45.

<sup>148</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 511.

control--of the identity of the Lex Dei and Lex Naturae; so completely forgotten it as to have lost all understanding of it.<sup>149</sup>

To borrow a phrase from Francis Schaeffer, "Nature has eaten up grace." The Church which during the Middle Ages and Reformation was looked upon as the source and guarantor of the social structure, is now only considered a part of that structure subject to analysis and criticism along with every other historical configuration. For this reason, Troeltsch castigates those who continue to formulate solutions to social problems based on the distinction of the Church on one side and everything else (society) on the other. This is none other than the old Lex Dei-Lex Naturae world view and it is totally irrelevant in the modern era. On this basis Troeltsch concludes:

If the present social situation is to be controlled by Christian principles, thoughts will be necessary which have not yet been thought, and which will correspond to this new situation as the older forms met the need of the social situation in earlier ages.<sup>150</sup>

What these new thoughts might be, Troeltsch could not be certain, however, he knew that whatever they be, they must pay homage to the methods of the new historiography. Whereas during the Middle Ages and Reformation periods the Church could dictate to society what forms it should take, now the roles had been reversed and the Church must adjust itself to the new scientific situation. This was the essence of his conclusions concerning the Church and especially theology. It was the very

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<sup>149</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Protestantism and Progress, pp. 45-46.

<sup>150</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 1012.

argument set forth in one of his earliest essays: "Die Wissenschaftliche Lage und Ihre Anforderungen an die Theologie" (1900). As Reist observes: "As he (Troeltsch) saw it, theology is being challenged to make itself intelligible apart from this distinction (natural/supernatural) and all that it implies."<sup>151</sup>

#### V. Troeltsch's Rejection of Positivism.

Though Troeltsch was insistent upon his sociological-historical method of treating Church History, he was even more insistent in his opposition against the application of positivism as a method for studying the history of Christianity. His opposition to such a methodology was that its adherents made the same basic mistake those theologians did, who presupposed the harmonious Lex Dei-Lex Naturae relationship, although from the opposite pole. While orthodox theologians over-estimated the importance of the Church in society, claiming for it a place in contrast to all other social phenomena, the positivists under-estimated the importance of religion in society, reducing it to merely a product of more basic social and psychological factors of human existence. But as David Little, has accurately observed:

According to Troeltsch, neither religion nor society can be understood accurately unless all reductionism is avoided. Positivistic imperialism is exactly the source of scientific impoverishment. Consequently, in refusing to treat religion positivistically, he is interested in establishing what is "really" the scientific status of religion in general social

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<sup>151</sup> Benjamin Reist, Toward a Theology. . ., p. 23.



analysis, and not in defending a dogmatic supernaturalism for apologetic reasons.<sup>152</sup>

Troeltsch's objection to positivistic method appears at the outset of The Social Teaching. . . when he discusses his methodological approach. In response to a work by Nathusius entitled: "Co-operation of the Church in the Solution of the Social Question" which appeared in 1904, Troeltsch notes that the author is guilty of reductionism although in a somewhat disguised form, for he seeks to explain the developed structure of Christianity and its effects simply upon the basis of a "social spirit" which he supposes it contains.<sup>153</sup> Nathusius has erred, according to Troeltsch, because he has ignored "vast differences which exist in questions of basis and structure, in their connection with other groups, between these various sociological phenomena."<sup>154</sup> The objection here is the same one discussed in Troeltsch's rejection of positivism as a methodology of historical research. Just as one cannot reasonably take the categories of causality directly from the natural sciences, and apply them to a theory of historical developments, so one cannot, or rather, should not seek to explain social phenomena on the basis of one root cause. "This is", as Little points out, "the problem of relating the "substructure" (Unterbau) to the "superstructure" (Uberbau)."<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup>David Little, "Religion and Social Analysis in the Thought of Ernst Troeltsch", Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, I (October, 1961), p. 115.

<sup>153</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 27.

<sup>154</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 26.

<sup>155</sup>David Little, "Religion and Social Analysis. . .", p. 115.

The best example of the positivistic reductionist method as applied to religion is that of Marxism which Troeltsch discusses at the end of The Social Teaching. . .. He writes that the "scholars of the "class-war" school have undertaken to represent the whole of Christianity as an ideological reflection of economic development, and in doing so they have not only impressed the comrades within their own Party (but many others as well, have been impressed)."<sup>156</sup> However, coming to the end of his comprehensive consideration of Christianity's historical development, Troeltsch feels he has amassed sufficient evidence to refute this view, in spite of its popularity. He writes:

In opposition to the exclusive and doctrinaire application of this method, however, the whole of this survey has shown that all that is specifically religious, and, above all, the great central points of religious development, are an independent expression of the religious life. Jesus, Paul, Origen, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Francis of Assisi, Bonaventura, Luther, Calvin: as we study their thought and their feeling we realize that it is impossible to regard them as the product of class struggles and of economic factors.<sup>157</sup>

Troeltsch thus denied a monistic principle which moved history in the material world (against Marx) and he rejected the same idea in the spiritual world (against Hegel). Religion, he argued, is to have its own value "Unterbau" and this, as we saw before, he located in the religious a priori. Any study of religion which does not take into account this independent

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<sup>156</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 1002.

<sup>157</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching. . ., p. 1002.

"Unterbau" of Christianity, or any religion for that matter, will only succeed in blurring the historical details. Both factors, the phenomena (Uberbau) and the value system from which it operates (Unterbau) must be taken into account if one wishes to produce a scientifically accurate description and account of Christianity. As Little states in sum:

However intricate the interweaving of "superstructure" and "substructure" may be, Troeltsch is certain that there is no scientific understanding of either religion or society without taking both structures into account. It is that delicate analysis, proceeding in the light of the irreducibility of the system of meaning and the system of socio-psychological conditions, which constitutes adequate social analysis and vindicates authentic religious consciousness.<sup>158</sup>

#### VI. A Shift in Troeltsch's Thinking and the Concept of Compromise.

In concluding our general survey and consideration of The Social Teaching. . ., we can observe that on the methodological level, Troeltsch was completely consistent with the presuppositions he had developed in The Absoluteness of Christianity. . .. Within his historicist position, Troeltsch rejected the supernatural as an explanatory factor in writing Church History, for much the same reasons as he had earlier rejected the supernatural as an adequate apologetic for the absoluteness of Christianity. From the same position, he rejected positivistic methodology in considering religious phenomena for much the same reason as he had rejected Hegel's evolutionary apologetic for the absoluteness of Christianity. Within such methodological continuity there were also signs

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<sup>158</sup>David Little, "Religion and Social Analysis. . .", p. 116.

of new influences. Weber's influence was, of course, paramount here, but also his practical concern for his culture was becoming more evident. Further evidence of continuity is found in his appeal for the existence of the religious a priori.

Yet, among such evidence of continuity, there was also evidence of changes going on in the thinking of Troeltsch. The deeper he probed into the historical particularity of Christianity, the more he began to question his own apologetical argument for the superiority of Christianity. Through his desire to see Christianity in all of its historicity, and in the midst of its cultural context, he began to feel more intensely than ever the problem of relativity. The doubts which Troeltsch began to feel as a result of his study were primarily mediated through the concept of "compromise" or "synthesis". This concept sprang from his methodological presuppositions and became integrated into the very fabric of The Social Teaching. . .

By "compromise" or "synthesis" Troeltsch meant the process by which Christianity had influenced, and been influenced by its culture. This concept held for Troeltsch, no negative connotations, but, as Adams notes, represents:

The means whereby the indirect influence of Christianity has been exercised, the means whereby the ideas latent within the Christian ethos come to fruition, or whereby Christianity has been distorted. Compromise is thus a concept of mediation. It may be effective in the dimension of intellectual, theological construction, in the sphere of the arts, in the political or economic sphere. But not even a highly effective, creative compromise can last. The process must be renewed again and again through thrust and counterthrust.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>159</sup>James Luther Adams, "Ernst Troeltsch as Analyst. . .", p. 105.

It was consequently on the basis of this "synthesizing" process that Troeltsch appealed to the churches of his day to seek a new compromise with the world. In the light of the developments since the Enlightenment, he knew that the new synthesis would have to be formulated on the basis of modern presuppositions. But apart from the recognition of the need for a new compromise, Troeltsch's study of the development of the Church in the context of Western culture as a whole, brought him to the point of seriously questioning his belief in the normativeness of Christianity. Because of the concept of compromise, Troeltsch became more and more convinced that Christianity was a natural phenomena of Western Civilization alone and manifested all the particularities of its culture. Because of the fact that Christianity was so deeply embedded in its cultural heritage, Troeltsch felt he could no longer justifiably compare it to other religions in general, as he had done in The Absoluteness. . ., and declare it normative. The shift in Troeltsch's thinking has been accurately apprehended by Hans Frei who writes:

In 1923, the individualized aspects of Christianity overshadowed, in Troeltsch's thought, its universal validity. European history has transformed Christianity just as it has, in turn, been transformed by Christianity. The latter could not have become the religion of so subtly developed a people unless it possessed "a mighty spiritual power and truth". This is its primary claim to absolute validity. We cannot do without religion, and this is the only religion we can endure because it has become part of our very being through history. . . . Yet, "this experience is undoubtedly the criterion of its validity, but, be it noted, only of its validity for us."<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup>Hans W. Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background", p. 59.

The researching and writing of The Social Teaching. . . had brought Troeltsch to this impasse. Recognizing that he was not to find a standard, an adequate system of ethics within Christianity, he was faced with the prospect of either finding such a standard within his own culture or to fall into a complete subjectivism. Troeltsch now began to consider and attempt to solve the most difficult question he had ever faced, that of faith and history. This question had actually been at the very foundation of all his work yet he had never directly addressed it. Where can one discover "a place to stand" in the face of cultural and religious relativity? This was the burning question Troeltsch hoped to answer as he wrote his Der Historismus und seine Probleme. We now turn to a consideration of this work.

## Chapter 6

DER HISTORISMUS UND SEINE PROBLEME:  
THE END OF THE QUEST

Throughout this paper, reference has been made to Troeltsch's historicism. Historicism, he believed, was one of the most awesome and fundamental challenges facing the modern world. For the Church, and, more specifically, Theology, to ignore its demands, was to take refuge in the cave of obscurantism. It was Troeltsch's desire to find certainty and validity within Christianity while at the same time operating consistently within its methodological presuppositions. Twenty years before writing Der Historismus und seine Probleme, Troeltsch believed he had solved this problem through the normative apologetic which he developed in The Absoluteness of Christianity. . . . But now, in the last few remaining years of his life, he came to reject such an apologetic. The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches had a great deal to do with the rejection of his earlier work. He wrote:

The further investigations, especially into the history of Christianity, of which I have given the results in my Social Teachings, have shown me how thoroughly individual is Historical Christianity after all, and how invariably its various phases and denominations have been due to varying circumstances and conditions of life. Whether you regard it as a whole or in its several forms, it is a purely historical, individual, relative phenomenon, which could, as we actually find

it, only have arisen in the territory of the classical culture, and among the Latin and Germanic races.<sup>161</sup>

But Troeltsch's failure to find anything absolutely or normatively valid within Christianity was not ultimately based on a study of "the facts" of the history of Christianity. It went much deeper than that, to the level of basic presuppositions. It was finally Troeltsch's devotion to Historicist principles which defeated him in his quest for certainty. This can be borne out by more closely examining his Historicist precepts.

#### I. Historicist Methodology In Der Historismus.

It has been noted previously that Historicism, as a way of writing history, was dedicated to discerning history, "wie es eigentlich gewesen ist". In a strict sense it did not concern itself with questions of ultimate validity or meaning within the historical process, but rather contented itself with the careful examination of "historical individuals". Historical individuals could be considered as a particular group of people, a particular social institution, a nation or even a whole civilization. Ogletree writes, that by "Historical individuals" the Historicist means:

Units of various sorts which can be identified in the historical process, units having a unique, individual and unrepeatable character about them. These include such things as class groupings, religious communities and orders, nations, historical epochs, or, indeed, even something so comprehensive as Western Civilization. In short, any aspect of

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<sup>161</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Christian Thought: Its History and Application, ed. Baron von Hugel. New York: Meridian Books, (1957), pp. 51-52.



the flow of history which has a sort of inner unity can be identified as a historical individual.<sup>162</sup>

Individuality, with its extreme emphasis on the uniqueness of all historical events, was the guiding principle of historicism. It was this very principle which distinguished it as a methodology from both positivism and Hegelianism.

Another concept which played an important role in Historicist methodology, was the concept of Development. It was the process of Development which secured the characteristic individuality of all historical phenomena. To the Historicist, all history was in a state of becoming and would never achieve actual being until the end of history. Everything is in flux because of the ongoing process of separate historical individuals in interaction with one another. Thus, history can never repeat itself for every event is completely new, and as Ranke noted: "immediate to God." The historian is not to pontificate on the ultimate meaning of phenomena, but only to give an accurate account. Only the telos will reveal its universal meaning.

Troeltsch totally accepted the concept of "Historical Individuality" as presented by Historicism, but only partly accepted the Historicist's concept of Development. He refused to accept the proposed impossibility of discerning some kind of ultimate meaning within the development of Historical individuals. We are here confronted, once again, with that ambivalent factor in Troeltsch's person which became the basis

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<sup>162</sup>Thomas W. Ogletree, Christian Faith and History. New York: Abingdon Press, (1965), p. 22.

for his quest. In his search for "a vital and effective religious position, which could alone furnish my life with a center of reference for all practical questions and could alone give meaning and purpose to reflection upon the things of this world"<sup>163</sup>, Troeltsch turned toward Theology and Philosophy only to discover that:

The historical studies which so largely formed me, and the theology and philosophy in which I was now immersed, stood in sharp opposition, indeed even in conflict, with one another. I was confronted, upon the one hand, with the perpetual flux of the historian's data, and the distrustful attitude of the historical critic towards conventional traditions, the real events of the past being, in his view, discoverable only as a reward of ceaseless toil, and then only with approximate accuracy. And, upon the other hand, I perceived the impulse in men towards a definite practical standpoint--the eagerness of the trusting soul to receive the divine revelation and to obey the divine commands. It was largely out of this conflict, which was no hypothetical one, but a fact of my own practical experience, that my entire theoretical standpoint took its rise.<sup>164</sup>

He thought he had solved the problem with The Absoluteness of Christianity, but through his increasing attention to historical detail, he was becoming more and more overwhelmed by the uniqueness, the individuality, of historical events. The concept of individuality was devouring his hope for validity within historical development. Troeltsch now turned to a study of the philosophy of history, examining especially the concept of Development.

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<sup>163</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Christian Thought. . ., p. 37.

<sup>164</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Christian Thought. . ., p. 37.

## II. The Rise of Individuality and the Demise of Development.

The first two chapters of Der Historismus. . . were taken up with stating, once again, the challenge of Historiography, and the inadequacy of the orthodox and Hegelian answers to this challenge. In chapter three, by far the longest and most substantial of the entire work, he began to take up for discussion the concept of development. The general question addressed, according to Reist, was "How does one proceed from the empirical use of a specifically historical, logically secured concept of development to a universal idea of growth, in which at the same time our own creative tendency is regulated and objectively substantiated?"<sup>165</sup> Any answer to this question must meet certain criteria, as Drescher observes: "The contemplation of the historical fullness of life must be maintained, without the control of this concrete fullness of historical life through regulative categories being lost."<sup>166</sup> The Historicist's concept of individuality is now given full sway. Any solution must be based upon this fact.

The solution which Troeltsch proposed was located in ethics. The task of the material philosophy is essentially practical and therefore, according to him, essentially ethical. Within any broad material consideration of history must come a

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<sup>165</sup>Benjamin Reist, Toward A Theology. . ., p. 71.

<sup>166</sup>Hans-Georg Drescher, "Ernst Troeltsch's Intellectual Development", Ernst Troeltsch and the Future of Theology, ed. John Powell Clayton (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 29.

questioning of its prevailing values and forms, and it is only here that we find the single possible philosophical solution to the problem of Historicism. Reist observes:

Troeltsch asserted that the ethical is the doorway to the mastering of historicism. There can be no turning back. The "historicizing of all our thought about man, his culture and his values" is here to stay. The only way to deal with it is to become totally involved in it, with an eye toward the possibility of giving it fresh content and new direction.<sup>167</sup>

The way out of the problem of complete purposeless relativism is to be through a recognition of and appreciation for the spiritual potentialities within our own culture. A consideration of Christianity can be of immense importance at this point but only because it is intricately intertwined with Western Culture as a whole. Troeltsch writes:

The individual character of European civilization, and of the Christian religion which is intimately connected with it, receives now much greater emphasis, whilst the somewhat rationalistic concept of validity, and specifically of supreme validity, falls considerably into the background. . . And it is historical facts that have welded Christianity into the closest connection with the civilizations of Greece, Rome and Northern Europe. All our thoughts and feelings are impregnated with Christian motives and Christian pre-suppositions; and, conversely, our whole Christianity is indissolubly bound up with elements of the ancient and modern civilizations of Europe. . . It stands or falls with European Civilization; whilst, on its own part, it has entirely lost its Oriental character and has become Hellenized and Westernized.<sup>168</sup>

Thus Troeltsch stated his argument for the relevance of Christianity. It has validity, but only relative validity,

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<sup>167</sup> Benjamin Reist, Toward A Theology. . ., p. 64.

<sup>168</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, Christian Thought. . ., pp. 53-54.

that is, "validity for us."<sup>169</sup>

### III. Final Recourse To Skepticism.

With, however, the position of religion limited to its role fully within the historicity of its particular culture, how is one to overcome the problem of relativism? Ultimately, Troeltsch believes, the problem of relativism (which is really the problem of Historicism) can never be solved. The overwhelming individual and unique character of all historical phenomena precludes such a possibility. However, in the realm of the practical, we can find a place to stand. This can be achieved by a synthesis of cultural values which we find at the center of each individual civilization. Troeltsch writes:

Chinese, Indian, Mohammedan, Hellenic, Mediaeval, and Modern cultural atmospheres and individual systems of thought, mysterious and original, which express themselves even in Science and Religion. Here there is nothing independent of time and universally valid except the stimulus and obligation to create a system of culture.<sup>170</sup>

Troeltsch recognized that such a synthesis could not be developed from an a priori. This, of course, would be a violation of the concept of Individuality. Rather, he wrote, it must come from "a posteriori construction which essentially demands a knowledge of the premises, history, and destiny of the particular sphere of culture."<sup>171</sup> He continued:

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<sup>169</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Christian Thought. . ., p. 55.

<sup>170</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Christian Thought. . ., p. 106.

<sup>171</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Christian Thought. . ., p. 118.

Such a synthesis must try to discover and mentally assimilate the premises and bases of its own existence, as they have been shaped in unconscious processes the geographical and biological conditions of its own sphere of life; the logical necessity of the development which it has undergone; the interplay of Necessity and Chance. Definite possibilities and methods are thus indicated from the very first and for every synthesis.<sup>172</sup>

Troeltsch intended to compliment his volume: Der Historismus. . ., with another work which would have, on the basis of a material examination of the History of Western Civilization, attempted just such a synthesis of cultural values. Unfortunately, death intervened, and he was not to finish the work. We can only speculate as to what the nature of this work might have been, yet it is not unreasonable to think that it would have been in line with the methodological procedure used by Weber in his Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. The results Weber achieved in this work, concerning economic values of Western culture, were not unlike what Troeltsch envisioned for his own volume.

But even if Troeltsch had completed this work and achieved the synthesis of cultural values for which he sought, this would in no way hide the fact that he had been defeated in his search for some ground of supreme validity. Any such hope of finding supreme validity within historical development, had been swallowed up by the concept of Individuality. Rather than developing, or at least opening a way around the problem of relativism, Troeltsch demonstrated further its seemingly

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<sup>172</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, Christian Thought. . ., p. 118.

indissoluble character. It was here that his quest ended.

As Benckert writes:

Am Wichtigsten blieb ihm die Frage nach dem Massstab zur Wertung geschichtlicher Gebilde, Das Ergebnis: es ist weder Deduktion noch Konstruktion eines allgemeinen Wertsystems möglich, weil das historische Einzelgebilde zu individuell, der Gesamtprozess aber verwickelt und ohne eindeutig erkennbares Ziel ist. . . So allein sind Skepsis und Relativismus zu überwinden.<sup>173</sup>

Troeltsch ultimately could only point to faith as the ground of assurance, and even here it could only be a relative faith i.e., faith that the synthesis of cultural values is true for us. The tragedy is that he wanted certainty more than anything else ("Give me a place to stand"), yet he was robbed of it by his own chosen methodology ("All is in flux"). He never found a solution and was, as his friend Friedrich Meinecke observed, "In every moment, both a skeptic and a believer; simultaneously analytical and constructive: in need of faith and thirsty for life."<sup>174</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion.

In conclusion, we should comment on the meaning of Troeltsch's "failure" for his own work and ours as well. The characterization of the end of Troeltsch's quest as a failure is only meant to include his ultimate inability to discover any supreme validity among the various phenomena of universal history. In no way is this meant to be applied to Troeltsch's life and work as a whole for as Drescher notes: "It is too

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<sup>173</sup>H. Benckert, "Ernst Troeltsch", p. 1046.

<sup>174</sup>Wilhelm Pauck, Harnack and Troeltsch. . ., p. 50.

scanty a label to stick over the life-work of this great theologian and historian and it hands him over to a quick and pejorative criticism."<sup>175</sup> While it is true that he failed to solve the general problem of the relationship between Faith and History, he certainly succeeded in demonstrating where many of the problem areas are and where the work needs to be done. Today, theologians are increasingly beginning to appreciate the importance of the Faith/History question in coming to grips with theological problems, and we are consequently seeing a renewed interest in Troeltsch's work, as Drescher correctly observes:

The problem of the open and historical character of the basic criteria of theology, a responsibility which must be accepted in all theological work, found in his writings an exemplary expression which will continue to have significance for the future of theology.<sup>176</sup>

The problems which Troeltsch addressed are still with us today, and we must, if we wish to solve them, manifest the same courage that Troeltsch did in his quest. As we proceed in our own quest for such a solution, we must stop and pay tribute to the memory and intellectual legacy of Ernst Troeltsch.

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<sup>175</sup>Hans-Georg Drescher, "Ernst Troeltsch's Intellectual Development," p. 30.

<sup>176</sup>Hans-Georg Drescher, "Ernst Troeltsch's Intellectual Development," p. 32.



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