

Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) was one of the leading liberal Protestant theologians of the late Wilhelmine Empire. First he taught in Heidelberg, and from 1915 onwards he occupied the old Friedrich Schleiermacher chair (1768-1824) in Berlin which had been transferred to the philosophical faculty. Troeltsch supported a thoroughly historical way of doing theological research. This attempt to transform theology into a scientific enterprise made him a controversial figure in ecclesiastical and traditional theological circles. Outside theology, he was held in high esteem. He was deemed to be the greatest philosopher of history after Hegel, and his *magnum opus* “The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches and Groups” (1912) is one of the classics of early sociology of religion.

Because of the dominance of Barthian theology in the twentieth century, Troeltsch's work did not get the attention and appraisal it deserved. [Karl Barth made a clear-cut distinction between Christian religion and the somewhat elusive “Word of God”. This opened a gulf not only between the true revelation and religion(s), but also between Christian theology - or, more precisely, his way of doing theology - and the (scientific) study of religion. By implication, the endeavour of scholars like Ernst Troeltsch, who took this scientific approach was thought bound to end in deadlock.]<sup>1</sup> However, with the establishment of the “Ernst Troeltsch Foundation” in 1981 and the preparation of a critical edition of his works, the (theological) climate seems to be changing in favour of a more historically and empirically oriented way of theologizing. His work is a fine example of a reflexive approach to the study of religion within a theological context.

Much of his work was concerned with the position of religion in the Western world. History was not pursued for its own sake, but in favour of a better understanding of actual problems. Ultimately, Troeltsch's venture would have to lead to a cultural synthesis integrating the great forces of the Western world. One of these powers was the Christian religion which in Troeltsch's view defends the inherent value of the individual person against the dehumanizing forces of capitalism and state bureaucracy.

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<sup>1</sup> Include or delete?

It is by no means an easy task to present a cultural synthesis. At the end of *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, published shortly before his death, Troeltsch wrote that it is a “creative act” (*schöpferische Tat*) which has to be carried out by thoughtful and courageous persons. His famous dictum that history has to be overcome by history also implied an active political commitment to shaping historical development. He supported the new order after the breakdown of the *Kaiserreich* and became Assistant Secretary of State in the Ministry of Education and Science. In his letter of condolence to Troeltsch’s wife, the first President of the Weimar Republic acknowledged that the German people had lost a scholar of exceptional importance and a man who with all his strength had devoted himself to the political and cultural renewal of his fatherland.

In Germany, the creation of a new 20-volume critical edition of Troeltsch’s works is transforming current understandings of Troeltsch as cultural historian, philosopher of history, and political theorist. This edition is the first comprehensive collection of Troeltsch’s works. (The standard collection, the *Gesammelte Schriften*, which appeared between 1912 and 1924, consisted of four volumes and was not comprehensive.) The introductions to the new critical edition have provided new information and research about Troeltsch’s cultural and political context and activities in Heidelberg and Berlin. In short, a Troeltsch renaissance is underway in both Germany and Anglophone contexts, and the knowledge produced by these efforts is relevant for classic and current questions in the fields of religious and theological studies.

#### *English Literature & Websites*

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[http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Ernst\\_Troeltsch.aspx](http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Ernst_Troeltsch.aspx)

*German*

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