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BOOK REVIEW

Thurner, Mathias, *Die Geburt des ‚Christentums‘ als ‚Religion‘ am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts: Ernst Troeltsch’s Theologie und ihre Quellen im Kontext einer globalen Religionsgeschichte* (Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann 193; Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2021); X+515 pages; ISBN 978-3-11-071735-8; £91 (ebook and hard copy). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110717464>

What better to do towards the end of a year than to read a book about the “Nativity” of Christianity as a religion? Supervised by Michael Bergunder at Heidelberg, this PhD thesis outlines Ernst Troeltsch’s “Theology of Religion” (Part I) and investigates the sources of that Theology (Part II). It concludes that judging by the latter, Troeltsch’s Theology with its notion of Christianity as a religion cannot be understood merely in terms of a continuation of early 19th century (and earlier) traditions but draws on an entirely new, global, perspective on religion, which emerged in the late 19th century.

Thurner begins with a troubling question. He observes that the categorisation of a number of the so-called ‘world religions’, e. g. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, was the result of discourses that emerged under the conditions of 19th century colonialism. However, the category of religion itself is generally considered as emerging from the 18th century Enlightenment and its engagement with Christianity; and the concept of ‘Christianity’ as a religion is considered as having emerged from that Enlightenment discourse. Is this really tenable, Thurner asks? Should we not expect that both these concepts, ‘Christianity’ and ‘religion’, have since the 18th century been subject to the same global colonial (and post-colonial) discourses as the other ‘world religions’? Are they not today shaped by these same discourses and thereby relativised?

The theology of Ernst Troeltsch and an exploration of its sources, Thurner argues, suggest precisely that: The concepts of ‘religion’ and ‘Christianity’ are no exceptions when it comes to their entanglement in global history. Since the mid-19th century the concept of ‘Christianity’ as ‘religion’ *par excellence* and ‘religion’ as a concept born from a Eurocentric and Eurocratic intellectual tradition were beginning to disintegrate. What has taken their place is a global perspective of ‘entangled’ histories and cultural traditions. ‘Religion’ and ‘Christianity’ turned out to be just as prone to the forces of global entanglement as all other ‘world religions’ and they became transformed in the process.

Thurner’s thesis begins (in Part I) by discussing how this perspective emerges in a seminal way in Ernst Troeltsch’s thought. He looks at three key writings of Troeltsch, *Die Selbständigkeit der Religion* (1895/96), *Die Mission in der modernen Welt* (1906) and *Die Stellung des Christentums unter den Weltreligionen* (1922/24). In the first of these Troeltsch argues for an understanding of Religion as a category *sui generis*, an “anthropological *universale*” (p. 24-5), as it had emerged in the context of historical-critical research in the 19th century in contradistinction to a reduction of religion to an ethical (Kant) or philosophical-theological (Hegel) category on the one hand, and an exclusivist claim on religion by the “supranaturalist” Christian churches on the other. For Troeltsch, religion is manifest historically in religions and psychologically in the experience of human beings. *Prima facie*, no religion can claim precedence over any other. This is the basis of a comparative study of religion as outlined by Max Müller during the later decades of the 19th century, which Troeltsch recognises. However by

asking for the criterion (*Beurteilungsmaßstab*) by which religions should be judged, Troeltsch undermines the comparative approach and reverts to a position according to which Christianity is the most accomplished manifestation of religion in world history, the religion *par excellence*, which most perfectly reflects everything that is experienced by human beings when they (psychologically) “experience” religion.

Troeltsch’s “comparisons”, then, are comparisons with Christianity, for example of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. They are selective, since for Troeltsch it also matters how ‘powerful’ a religion is in history, how many members it has, how compelling its teachings are and how potent therefore its potential or real challenge to Christianity can be (thus he ignores religions which he does not perceive as posing a direct challenge to Christianity on any of these accounts; he was criticised for that by his contemporaries). And they are ‘apologetic’, because their outcome has to be to confirm, within the frame of reference of the study of the history and psychology of religion, that ultimately only Christianity can exclusively claim truth, validity and legitimacy. For Thurner, this puts Troeltsch in a theological tradition, represented, for example, by a theologian such as Alois Emanuel Biedermann (1819-1885), that reacts against perceived tendencies to relativise Christianity in historical and comparative studies of religion by identifying Christianity as the principle of religion (*religiöses Prinzip*).

In *Die Mission in der modernen Welt* Troeltsch widens and deepens his approach by contrasting the ethical urge of religions, emerging from their experiential core, to spread (“die Pflicht der Ausbreitung für jeden Bekenner”) with the crisis of religious life in the modern, scientifically determined, world. The spreading of religion cannot just consist of propaganda or advertising, it has to include a sharing of an inner experience. Where the latter is lacking, all kinds of things may be spread, but not religion. Again, Troeltsch here basically identifies religion with Christian religion. It is the faith in and the commitment to God that has to be shared and communicated.

The ‘other’, non-Christian, religions Troeltsch qualifies according to their ‘openness’ to or preparedness for engaging with Christianity. Principally, he distinguishes between “savage and non-civilised” peoples and peoples with “higher religions” (*hochstehende Religionen*), e. g. Muslims, Jews, “Brahmanists” (Hindus) and Buddhists. He questions Christian mission activity among both these groups. The first, he argues, adhere to their religion in a “natural” way and are not open to the idea of religion as a revelation with a liberating and salvific purpose. The second, although deficient compared to Christianity, have nevertheless developed a cultural strength that enables them successfully to resist Christian missionary activity. Troeltsch thinks similarly of Judaism. It will not yield to Christian mission attempts, but it will draw ever closer to Christianity through cultural assimilation. He identifies Christianity with western culture, in which, in the context of a global western colonialism, the whole world will eventually participate. With regard to religion he sees the emergence of an ethical religion common to humanity (*ethische Menschheitsreligion*), in which even non-Christian religions already participate, but in future Christianity will dominate because the majority of the world will be dominated by European or western colonial powers and their culture.

Thus, Troeltsch’s reflection here moves on two levels. On a psychological level he understands religion – all religion! – as an inner experience. In this regard there are no qualitative differences between religions. As he widens his perspective and understands religion more in terms of a global, ethical, religion of humanity, he becomes more and

more appreciative of Hinduism and especially of Buddhism. He even sees in the latter a potential for improving Christianity. But on the other hand, under the strong impression of a rampant western global colonialism, as it dominated the beginning of the twentieth century, he now also understands religion, by which he ultimately means Christianity, as a global social-political force that will contribute to a homogenised global culture dominated by Christianity. Those were thoughts he formulated in 1906. It is interesting to see what became of these ideas twenty years later in *Die Stellung des Christentums unter den Weltreligionen*, after Germany had lost its world status and its colonies and Europe had lost much of its credibility as a beacon of cultural progress.

Die Stellung des Christentums unter den Weltreligionen was conceived as a lecture which Troeltsch planned to give in 1923 at Oxford. Troeltsch never gave the lecture as he died early that year. But the text had been prepared and was published in 1924. In it Troeltsch stood by the way in which he saw the individual religions, but he had revised his universalism. He still emphasised the individualism which the European tradition brought to the concert of world faiths, but he relativised the idea of a special, let alone absolute, validity of that aspect. In his view now no religion could be absolutely judged by another religion. It could only be validated from within itself. But that threw up the question of communicability. What, under these circumstances, would be the point of a ‘competitive’ mission, as Christianity had pursued it throughout the modern age? What could persuade members of one religion to convert to another?

Turner observes in Troeltsch the development of a pluralistic view regarding world religions, which was a general trend in the 1920s (p. 117). Nevertheless, Troeltsch still believed that Christian mission would make sense among tribal religions (“Heidentum der kleinen Stämme,” p. 115), while dialogue would be the preferred approach in the case of the “great, philosophically permeated, world religions.” On the whole, Turner concludes this first part of his thesis, Troeltsch’s view of religion did not substantially develop in the three decades between the 1890s and the 1920s. Already in the 1890s it was based on a concept of religion as a global human phenomenon with no particular link to the history or teaching of Christianity. Yet on the other hand, even in the 1920s Troeltsch still thought of Christianity as the supreme manifestation of religion, which could enlighten ‘tribal religions’ and engage with philosophically enlightened religions such as Buddhism or Islam on an equal or slightly superior footing.

Having thus established that what he refers to as Troeltsch’s “theological concept of religion” was developed early on in Troeltsch’s career and did not substantially change in his later writings, Turner moves on to Part II of his thesis. There he investigates four 19th century thinkers, whose works could be regarded as the main sources of Troeltsch’s concept, the philosopher Eduard von Hartmann (1842-1906, pp. 129-228), the dogmatic theologian Alois Emanuel Biedermann (1819-1885, pp. 229-334), the Buddhologist and Vedic scholar Hermann Oldenberg (1854-1920, pp. 335-440), and the Biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918, pp. 441-480). Only brief outlines of the works of these thinkers and their influence on Troeltsch can be offered in what remains of this review.

Eduard von Hartmann was a leading, though at the same time also much criticised, philosopher in Germany during Troeltsch’s formative years. In his *Philosophy of the Unconscious* (1869), which catapulted him to fame, he showed concern for the future destiny of Christianity (and religion generally) in a world increasingly determined by materialism and lacking philosophical guidance, which a post-Kantian paradigm was

unable to provide. Hartmann proposed a metaphysical monism, a form of Spinozism, which would be a common philosophical basis for both religion (all religion, not just Christianity) and science. Thurner points out that Troeltsch frequently and intensively engages with Hartmann, for example in *Die Selbständigkeit der Religion* (p. 129), but fundamentally disagrees with him as he reads his approach as an attempt to ‘naturalise’ religion, reduce it to a scientifically demonstrable phenomenon. According to Thurner such criticism is not entirely fair, since Hartmann is not exactly a materialist monist as, for example, Ernst Haeckel, but rather more of a “transcendental *realist*,” as opposed to a Kantian “transcendental *idealist*” (p. 201). Troeltsch was certainly appreciative of that (pp. 219-224) and although he can frequently be seen criticising Hartmann, Hartmann’s influence also clearly exerted itself in at least three main areas of his, Troeltsch’s, work: 1. Troeltsch develops his (Christian) theology from a universal concept of religion as an inner human experience. 2. Although Troeltsch rejects Hartmann’s monist identification of the world (nature) with its underlying principle or cause (i. e. “the spirit”, or “Geist”), he nevertheless sees the world (as creation) in unity with its cause, or principle, namely God (as creator). 3. Troeltsch is attracted by Hartmann’s attempt to integrate the history of religion into a teleological philosophy of history, because it promises to overcome a relativist comparative view of religions, which poses a problem for a theology that still has to put Christianity at the pinnacle of the development of world religions (p. 228). At the same time, such a systematic approach to the history of religion became increasingly obsolete in light of the enormous progress in historical and archaeological research.

Alois Emanuel Biedermann was a Swiss Protestant systematic theologian with a very similar approach to theology as Hartmann’s was to philosophy. In particular, he rejects a Kantian epistemology and postulates instead a realism which also applies to religious experience. As a theologian Biedermann had a more direct and less equivocal influence on Troeltsch than Hartmann (pp. 322-333). Under Biedermann’s influence, for example, Troeltsch interpreted Christianity as a religion among religions rather than treating it as a phenomenon *sui generis*, different from all other religions because of it being the one true religion, a view that had been proposed by Albrecht Ritschl and his pupils (p. 323). In fact, for Biedermann as well as for Troeltsch, understanding Christianity as a religion within the (global) history of religion was vital for an attempt to demonstrate its unique role as the one true and ultimate religion (p. 331-332).

Hermann Oldenberg was an Indologist, whose seminal works on Buddha (1881) and Vedic religion (1894) are still considered groundbreaking because of their comparative philological methodology (pp. 335-340). By using these works Troeltsch demonstrated an ambition to participate in a discourse on religion that went beyond the confines of a narrow, Christian, western, history of religion. However, in Thurner’s view, Troeltsch missed the opportunity to use Oldenberg’s findings to paint a fair picture of Hinduism and Buddhism. Troeltsch, thus Thurner, tended to use Oldenberg to reaffirm his master narrative of a history of decline of Arian religion in India. Because Troeltsch wanted to present Christianity as the most highly developed religion in the history of religions, he did not make best use of Oldenberg’s detailed historical analyses but uses him merely to reinforce Orientalist constructions (p. 439), for example, the pessimism and atheism of Buddhism, or the polytheism of Hinduism.

From Troeltsch’s perspective the immediate context of Christianity was not that of the history of Asian religions but of Judaism. The leading scholar, who provided him with

historical groundwork in this regard, was Julius Wellhausen. Troeltsch even saw his own work as an attempt to provide Wellhausen's approach with a theoretical basis (p. 441). Wellhausen had pioneered the study of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) against the backdrop of a history of Ancient Israel. This had consequences for both the study of Judaism and of Christianity. For Troeltsch it provided an opportunity to study the emerging "ethical monotheism" (p. 476) of the biblical prophets as a stage towards Christianity and to point to the fact that religion cannot be reduced to a mere aspect of culture. The counter-cultural religion of the biblical prophets and early Christians was a phenomenon in its own right, as far as Troeltsch was concerned. In fact, by focusing on individual personalities such as prophets Troeltsch moves in the direction of explaining the progress of religion from the influence of 'religious virtuosos' (p. 477), a Weberian idea. As a consequence, he takes up Wellhausen's tendency to focus on the contribution of outstanding individuals in opposition to the unreceptive collective, be it Judaism (as in Wellhausen's history of ancient Israel), the pagan environment of early Christianity, or a global world dominated by the polytheism of tribal religions and the pessimism of life philosophies provided by religions such as Buddhism or Confucianism. Against all this, western Christianity, represented by technologically and philosophically educated and ethically grounded and informed individuals, stands out. It is not least Wellhausen's historical study of ancient Judaism that enables Troeltsch to present Christianity as the unequivocal high-point in a global history of religion (p. 480).

Thurner concludes with a summary (pp. 481-493) in which he emphasises once more the global perspective of Troeltsch's theology of religion. In his conclusion he reiterates his thesis that "Ernst Troeltsch's concept [sic!] of 'religion' and 'Christianity' has to be understood as part of a global negotiating process about 'religion' and – looked at from a historical perspective – cannot be claimed as a case that demonstrates continuity with the concepts of religion and Christianity developed by the 'European Enlightenment' in the 18th and early 19th centuries" (p. 492).

Judging by the evidence laid out in this monograph this seems to be partially true. It is obvious that Troeltsch was aware of groundbreaking developments taking place in the study of religion world-wide and was reading widely not only on the history of religion in the west but also elsewhere in the world, particularly in Asia in the areas of Hinduism and Buddhism. However, what Thurner's study has also shown that his primary interest lay not in these areas per se. Rather Troeltsch seems to have used his knowledge about these religions only to the extent that it could support his argument for a superiority of Christianity. Moreover, some areas he seems to have ignored entirely, for example the role of Chinese religion. On the other hand, the importance he attached to the study of Ancient Israel, and the lessons he drew from that, brings him firmly back into a fold of traditional thinking about Judaism and Christianity.

The impression this reviewer has got from reading Thurner's thesis is that Troeltsch did not so much open up to a global perspective on religion but reacted by reaffirming traditional western thinking about the superiority of Christianity. Admittedly, he had to situate this now within the process of a global colonial expansion of the west, but by identifying western scientific and technological culture with the global culture of the future and allotting a place for modern Christianity in this culture he seems to have merely linked up with views on Christianity that had dominated the west for several centuries, since the beginning of the modern age in the 15th and 16th centuries.

That said, Thurner's study is clearly an achievement and shows Troeltsch's views on religion in a new light. In addition to students of Troeltsch and those who study religion generally it can therefore be especially recommended to those who study the phenomenon of religion in Late Antiquity. Thurner's thesis maps out one of the turning points in the contemporary study of religion, from a perspective that is still influenced by ancient and late-ancient accounts to a contemporary, global, perspective.

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