

## DISCUSSION

### TROELTSCH IN CONTEXT

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Resistance to scholarly innovation is common when new findings call into question the political reputation of a highly esteemed thinker. It could hardly be otherwise with Ernst Troeltsch, considered by many on both sides of the Atlantic to be a major architect of twentieth-century liberal Protestant ethics. My aim in this essay is to shed light on the current controversy surrounding Troeltsch, particularly as it involves my book, *God and Caesar: Troeltsch's Social Teaching as Legitimation* (New Brunswick 1999).

I see three levels to this topic. First, it involves my replying to Christopher Adair-Totef's review of *God and Caesar*, published in the March, 2001 issue of this journal.<sup>1</sup> Second, this particular debate raises more general questions about the ideological politics of Christianity, including the role of today's Ernst Troeltsch Society. Third and finally, I wish to place this whole Troeltsch matter into the larger perspective of the methodological paradigm shift of which it is a part, a shift associated with the work of Quentin Skinner and other practitioners of contextual interpretation. The parts of this essay correspond to the three levels just outlined.

#### I

Christopher Adair-Totef's review of *God and Caesar* consists of three claims: (1) that the work is full of errors, hence 'shoddy'; (2) that I misread Troeltsch's *Social Teaching* because I am grinding a 'liberation theology' axe; and (3) that I am mistaken that Troeltsch held a racist ideology. I will respond to each of these in the above order.

The reviewer's claim of 'shoddy scholarship' rests upon the application of an inappropriate standard of accuracy regarding details to a work of *God and Caesar's* length and scope, as well as a pattern of distortions and misrepresentations of what I actually wrote. I did not, as the reviewer

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Adair-Totef, 'Book Review of *God and Caesar: Troeltsch's Social Teaching as Legitimation*', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 9 (2001) No. 1: 183–5.

erroneously claims, say anything about what Toennies 'endorses'.<sup>2</sup> Nor did I say that Fischer, Cohen, and Rickert were all at Heidelberg in the 1870s.<sup>3</sup> Nor did I report the official title of Weber's position at Heidelberg.<sup>4</sup> Nor was I mistaken that Weber taught after recovering from his illness.<sup>5</sup> Nor is

<sup>2</sup> According to Adair-Toteff, I erroneously think 'that [Ferdinand] Toennies endorses a modern rational society (*Gesellschaft*) when he clearly prefers the traditional values of the *Gemeinschaft*' (Book Review of *G&C*, p. 184). In fact, here is what I wrote: 'Analysing the process by which a society based on traditional values could become based on reason, Toennies help set an intellectual agenda for his successors before 1914, most notably Georg Simmel and Max Weber' (*God and Caesar*, p. 37). This description, which is part of my review of the academic leaders of Troeltsch's time, says nothing about what Toennies 'endorses'. I described Simmel and Weber as Toennies' successors because, although they were all contemporaries, Toennies' *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887) predated and influenced the major works of Simmel and Weber.

<sup>3</sup> The reviewer disputes my statement, 'In philosophy, Kuno Fischer, Hermann Cohen, and Heinrich Rickert began a Kantian revival in the 1870s centred at Heidelberg' (*God and Caesar*, p. 35). Adair-Toteff writes, 'Fischer did not return to Heidelberg until 1872, Rickert moved to Heidelberg in 1915, and Cohen was never there' (Book Review of *G&C*, p. 184). In fact, as a careful inspection of my above sentence will reveal, I did not state that all three thinkers were at Heidelberg in the 1870s. Rather, I wrote only that they contributed to a Kantian revival at that time, which was centred at Heidelberg. My statement is therefore accurate as regards Fischer and Cohen, and regarding Rickert's affiliation with Heidelberg, though not his chronology. On this last detail I stand corrected.

<sup>4</sup> Adair-Toteff writes, 'She claims that Weber was Professor of Sociology at Heidelberg (he was Professor of Economics).' (Book Review of *G&C*, p. 184) Here is what I actually wrote, '... Max Weber, a professor of sociology at the university' (*God and Caesar*, p. 96). By omitting the indefinite article and capitalizing 'Professor' and 'Sociology', Adair-Toteff gives the impression that I was reporting Weber's official title, which is not the case. Whatever his official title, Weber was nothing if not interdisciplinary, and is commonly labelled in various ways. I refer elsewhere to Weber's work in 'political economy' (*God and Caesar*, pp. 37, 192). Hans Speier called Weber a 'German sociologist and political economist'. Speier, 'Weber, Max', *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1934), vol. 15, p. 386. Craig referred to Weber's work in the emerging field of sociology. G. A. Craig, *Germany: 1866-1945* (Oxford 1978), 198; and Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills considered it appropriate to title their book: *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford 1958). However, I concede that it would have been more accurate to use the term, 'professor of economics'.

<sup>5</sup> Regarding Weber's recovery, I wrote: 'by 1904 he had returned to a light teaching load and "his productivity was in full swing again and rising steeply"' (*God and Caesar*, p. 106, note 57; quotation from Gerth and Mills, 'Introduction', *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, p. 14). The reviewer's critique: '[Benson claims] that he [Weber] continued to teach after recovering from his illness (he resigned his position).' (Book Review of *C&G*, p. 184). The reviewer is correct that by 1904, Weber had resigned his position. However, he is wrong that Weber did not teach after recovering from his illness, at least according to Gerth and Mills, who wrote,

After three and half years of intermittently severe disease, in 1902 Weber felt able to return to Heidelberg and resume a light schedule of work . . . There were, however, repeated setbacks. He was still unable fully to take up his teaching work.

(*From Max Weber*, pp. 13-14)

it clear whether Troeltsch and Weber travelled to the US in 1904 or in 1905, nor do any of these details matter for purposes of my thesis.<sup>6</sup>

I do not claim that my work is entirely free from errors, nor is that a reasonable standard for any work of this length and scope. In my detailed discussion in the above footnotes, I concede the few, minor errors I have made. Such errors are a normal and expected by-product of summarizing tens of thousands of pages of primary and secondary sources in an effort to provide historical perspective on a given topic, in this case, Troeltsch's *Social Teaching*. Errors of this sort have nothing whatsoever to do with 'shoddy scholarship', as every practising scholar who has ever undertaken such a contextual reconstruction knows. In the footnotes, I also document the reviewer's numerous distortions and misrepresentations of what I actually wrote.

Adair-Totef's second criticism, my alleged 'liberation theology' bias, is the real crux of his review. This rests upon a misunderstanding of my methodology. In *God and Caesar*, I undertook to apply Professor Skinner's history of ideologies method to Troeltsch's 1912 magnum opus, *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*, usually translated in English, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*.<sup>7</sup> This involved reconstructing the historical contexts of the work, both the larger political context of late Imperial Germany in which Troeltsch wrote, and the more immediate intellectual context of *The Social Teaching* itself. My principal finding was that *The Social Teaching* appeared to be largely a conservative reply to an earlier history of Christianity by Karl Kautsky, arguably the leading theorist of Social Democracy in Troeltsch's day. This challenged the conventional wisdom in the secondary literature, according to which *The Social Teaching* was an enlightened liberal response to the conservative Martin von Nathusius.

It should be noted that the secondary literature on Troeltsch is overwhelmingly rooted in an older methodology, in which texts themselves are taken as the self-sufficient data of interpretation. I therefore presupposed

<sup>6</sup> Adair-Totef writes, '[Benson claims] that he [Weber] and Troeltsch travelled to the United States in 1905 and 1909 when they went *once in 1904*' (emphasis his, Book Review of *G&C*, p. 184). I concede and hereby retract a proofreading error. Here is what was printed: '... they grew closer and travelled together to the United States in 1905 and 1909. With their families, Troeltsch and Weber shared an elegant estate on the shore of the Neckar River ...' (*God and Caesar*, p. 96) Here is what I intended to say: '... they grew close and travelled together to the United States in 1905. And in 1909, with their families, Troeltsch and Weber ...' As documented, my source was Wilhelm Pauck, who wrote that their single trip took place in 1905 and that they moved into the house on the Neckar in 1909 (*God and Caesar*, pp. 96, 106n; Pauck, *Harnack and Troeltsch*, (Oxford 1968), pp. 71–3. If Pauck was wrong about the year, I will gladly retract that error; however, the reviewer gives no alternative source for his claim that the trip occurred in 1904.

<sup>7</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, *Die soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (Tuebingen 1923); *idem*, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York 1931; reprint ed., Chicago, 1981).

little contextual knowledge on the part of my readers and spent some hundred pages reconstructing the Imperial German context, particularly as it bore on the Troeltsch–Kautsky debate. I then examined the immediate intellectual contexts of *The Social Teaching* – an earlier foundational essay by Troeltsch entitled, ‘Political Ethics and Christianity’, and Kautsky’s social history of Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Finally, I turned in my culminating chapters to a new interpretation of *The Social Teaching*, now fully informed by an understanding of the political and intellectual contexts in which Troeltsch wrote.

Adair-Totefff finds my reconstruction of Troeltsch’s social-political milieu unconvincing, and overly dependent on ‘three secondary sources’. I am not sure what he means, since I cite over 250 primary and secondary sources. However, I work within the paradigm of Fritz Fischer and Gordon Craig, architects of what is still the scholarly consensus on Imperial Germany. Since this was not the original part of my research, I could not improve on these seminal figures and the more recent historians who build on their work.

My objective here was not to explore in any depth the many issues that are debated by historians of Imperial Germany. On the contrary, it was to identify elements of scholarly consensus as a contextual foundation for my original work in the history of ideas. To this end it was entirely appropriate, and indeed necessary, to rely on diverse materials ranging from untranslated primary sources to encyclopedia articles by eminent experts on various aspects of the Second Reich, including its culture, politics, and economy. I aimed to summarize here the consensus of mainstream scholars, especially as pertaining to the Troeltsch–Kautsky debate. It is not acceptable for a reviewer to simply dismiss this consensus in a single sentence, and then claim it is *my* work that is biased.

What is this picture that the reviewer finds ‘not convincing’? That Troeltsch was actively involved in the National Liberal Party, which opposed women’s suffrage, religious equality for Catholics and Jews, and the rights of labour, while supporting German militarism and imperialism. Nor am I imposing a ‘liberation theology’ agenda on Imperial Germany, since Kautsky and the Social Democrats actively contested all of these issues in Troeltsch’s own day. None of this is controversial, and I gladly acknowledge my indebtedness here to Craig, Fischer and other mainstream historians.

The reviewer also seems to regard this reconstruction of Troeltsch’s historical context as extraneous to the interpretation of his *magnum opus*. However, my contextual chapters are explicitly organized around the central, stated *problematique* of Troeltsch’s book, namely, the revolutionary

<sup>8</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *Politische Ethik and Christentum* (Goettingen 1904); Karl Kautsky, *Die Vorlaeufer des Neueren Sozialismus* (Stuttgart 1895).

movements in Imperial Germany, which Troeltsch referred to as the 'Social Problem'. After introducing this *problematique* in Chapters One and Two of *God and Caesar*, I examine in succeeding chapters the specific social arenas in which it is played out. The first three of these – the German state, universities, and churches – were arenas in which Troeltsch was actively involved while writing *The Social Teaching*. While these institutions reacted to the Social Problem, the fourth – the Social Democratic Party and its leading intellectual, Karl Kautsky – was precisely the focal point and catalyst of the revolutionary movements.

Given Troeltsch's major career involvements in German government, academia, and religion – institutions that were shaken by the Social Problem while he was writing *The Social Teaching*, his historical context alone determined the importance if not centrality of the Social Problem for Troeltsch. However, *The Social Teaching* itself is a repository of independent textual evidence that Troeltsch's interpretation of Christianity was shaped by Imperial German politics. I presented this evidence in great detail in Chapter 12, supported by analyses of related texts by Troeltsch and Kautsky in Chapters 10 and 11.

The reviewer chooses to ignore all of the contextual and textual evidence amassed in *God and Caesar*, which shows that Troeltsch's interpretation of Christianity is a conservative reply to Social Democratic interpreters. By way of counterargument, he simply states that Troeltsch was replying to the conservative Nathusius, and erroneously claims that there are fewer than ten explicit references to Kautsky in *The Social Teaching*. Here, Adair-Toteff overlooks two points.

First, Troeltsch cites Kautsky in *The Social Teaching* more frequently than Nathusius, and, as I wrote, 'Kautsky's interpretation of Christianity is overwhelmingly the main object of Troeltsch's polemic' (*God and Caesar*, p. 10). Second, the explicit references to Kautsky are only the tip of the iceberg, while the Social Problem is the iceberg itself. My book shows that the Social Problem pervades Troeltsch's entire *magnum opus*.

The central role of Kautsky in Troeltsch's ideological universe is consistent with the political ascendancy of Social Democracy in Imperial Germany when Troeltsch was writing *The Social Teaching*. Kautsky promoted unity within the Party by charting a middle way between Eduard Bernstein's revisionism and Rosa Luxemburg's radicalism.

The growing electoral success of the Social Democrats during this period also rested on a vigorous outreach to constituencies beyond the Party's primary social base in the labour movement. They enlisted suffragettes in their leadership, for example, the only German party to do so. Kautsky wrote on behalf of religious tolerance for Catholics and Jews. His writings on the communism of goods in early Christianity and on Thomas More helped to bring Catholics and Protestants into the socialist movement, including some clergy. Critics of Kautsky who depict him as dogmatic and sectarian, such as Dick Geary and Thomas Nipperdey, cannot account for

socialism's spectacular growth before World War I under Kautsky's theoretical leadership.<sup>9</sup>

By contrast with this formidable adversary, who was one of the leading intellectuals in Europe, Martin von Nathusius was a parochial figure for Troeltsch. It was entirely consistent for Troeltsch to critique Nathusius's crude conservatism on the one hand, while undertaking to succeed where Nathusius failed in counteracting Social Democracy's ideological challenge to organized Christianity. This is indeed what Troeltsch accomplished in *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches (God and Caesar)*, pp. 9–10).

Adair-Totefff criticizes my failure to discuss Troeltsch's post-World War I political writings, particularly his *Spektator-Briefe* (1924) and *Deutscher Geist und Westeuropa* (1925). Here he forgets that my topic is *The Social Teaching*, not Troeltsch's entire corpus. Since Troeltsch's post-World War I political views should not to be read backwards into his 1912 work, I provided only a summary treatment of that period based on leading secondary sources.

In any case, Troeltsch never repudiates the conservative thrust of *The Social Teaching*. To be sure, after the war he accommodates to the collapse of the old regime and accepts the Weimer Republic and women's suffrage. In this new political universe, however, Troeltsch's German Democratic Party stood to the right of centre, just as his National Liberal Party had before the war. In *Meine Buecher*, published posthumously in 1924, the post-war Troeltsch explicitly reaffirms the thesis propounded a decade earlier in *The Social Teaching*.<sup>10</sup>

This concludes my reply to the reviewer's unsubstantiated allegation that my critique of Troeltsch reflects a 'liberation theology' agenda of mine, rather than a scholarly reconstruction of Troeltsch's own intentions in writing *The Social Teaching*. I turn now to the reviewer's final criticism, regarding my claim that Troeltsch held racialist beliefs.

Adair-Totefff concedes 'for the sake of argument' that Paul de Lagarde, who called for the extermination of the Jews two generations before Hitler, was, as I put it, 'a notorious architect of what later became Nazi ideology' (*God and Caesar*, p. 2). The reviewer does not dispute that Troeltsch dedicated the second volume of his collected works to Lagarde and praised his blatantly anti-Semitic *Deutsche Schriften*. What he disputes is my argument that Troeltsch himself held a racialist ideology that was influenced by Lagarde. However, Adair-Totefff chooses to ignore the passages from Troeltsch that I quoted in *God and Caesar* in support of this argument, as well as the other scholars I cited who came to the same conclusion, including Robert Lougee, Manfred Wichelhaus, and Hans Gerth and C. Wright

<sup>9</sup> Dick Geary, 'Max Weber, Karl Kautsky and German Social Democracy', *Max Weber and His Contemporaries* (London 1987), 355f.; Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte. 1866–1918* (Munich 1995), vol. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, 'Meine Buecher', *Gesammelte Schriften* (Tuebingen 1925), vol. 4, p. 12.

Mills (*God and Caesar*, pp. 95–8, 106n). Wichelhaus argues that the categories of race and climate are foundational to Troeltsch's sociology (*God and Caesar*, p. 98).<sup>11</sup>

As if he had conceded nothing about Lagarde's anti-Semitism, the reviewer then uncritically cites Troeltsch's claim that Lagarde insisted on 'religious tolerance'. In fact, Lagarde advocated the separation of the world's religions based on race and territory. Troeltsch adopted his racialist approach to the study of world religions, as Wichelhaus observed (*God and Caesar*, pp. 95f, 106n). In 1923, the year of his death and of Hitler's Beer Hall Putsch, Troeltsch proclaimed Christianity as 'the religion of all Europe', effectively delegitimizing European Jewry (*God and Caesar*, pp. 92f, 98, 107n). Fritz Stern argued that Troeltsch, by endorsing Lagarde and his extreme ideas, helped make them respectable (*God and Caesar*, p. 108n). While for obvious reasons, post-World War II Troeltsch scholars have minimized the link between Troeltsch and Lagarde, the Lagarde scholars have independently produced abundant evidence of its significance.

While choosing to ignore this disturbing evidence, Adair-Totefff argues on the basis of a single anecdotal case that Troeltsch was not personally anti-Semitic: 'If Troeltsch was anti-Semitic why had he a high regard for Simmel? Troeltsch, along with Weber, fought hard but unsuccessfully for Simmel's appointment to Heidelberg.' First, I have not argued anywhere that Troeltsch was personally anti-Semitic, only that he held and propagated racialist ideologies. Second, anecdotal evidence of this sort proves little. It is said that Richard Wagner used Jewish musicians in his orchestra. Do we therefore conclude that Wagner was not anti-Semitic?

In summary, here is the picture that emerges from this discussion. Troeltsch wrote within a historical context where Social Democracy was expanding vigorously. The leading theorist of this movement, Karl Kautsky, wrote on the communism of goods practised by Jesus and his disciples, and framed Social Democracy as the heir of this ancient egalitarian experiment. With *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, Troeltsch met this ideological challenge.

This picture accounts for the fact that Troeltsch sometimes appropriates the highly popular vocabulary of his adversary. However, he assimilates this vocabulary to a conservative conceptual framework that includes a racialist sociology of religion indebted to Paul de Lagarde. For example, Troeltsch sometimes advocates equality and even socialism 'in Christ'. Unlike the Christian socialists, however, Troeltsch makes *verbal* concessions as an *alternative* to promoting actual earthly equality between women and men, Jews and Gentiles, Europeans and Africans.

One cannot understand what Troeltsch means by his words unless one understands what he was *doing* by employing them the way he did. And the

<sup>11</sup> Manfred Wichelhaus, *Kirchengeschichts-schreibung und Soziologie im neunzehnten Jahrhundert und bei Ernst Troeltsch* (Heidelberg 1965), 81–2.

key to such understanding is his historical context. Troeltsch's National Liberal Party, notwithstanding the connotation of its name, defended the old regime from the Social Democratic challenge. Consistent with his politics, Troeltsch in his *magnum opus* interpreted Christianity in such a way as to legitimize the power structure of Imperial Germany.

## II

Can it be said that Troeltsch 'won' his debate with Karl Kautsky and the Christian socialists regarding the origins and normative import of Christianity? It can, at least in the sense that Troeltsch's interpretation of Christianity, not theirs, came to dominate the curricula of academic religion departments and seminaries. However, this fact itself raises interesting and important questions about the ideological politics of modern Christianity.

It would appear that the Protestant establishment – who promoted Troeltsch's fortunes and for whom he spoke – has been more conservative than is generally recognized. Conversely, it would appear that many Protestants in Imperial Germany were more attracted to revolutionary interpretations of Christianity than is commonly thought, otherwise Troeltsch would not have devoted *The Social Teaching* to refuting such interpretations. In other words, modern Protestantism – which is widely perceived to stand above the fray of politics – has in fact been highly politicized. Fritz Fischer, who pioneered in the historiography of modern Germany, provided a wealth of documentation of this view in the 1960s and more recent scholarship on the period remains indebted to his work (*God and Caesar*, pp. 52, 63n).

Perhaps the most disturbing chapter in this story is the role of the Protestant churches during the Third Reich. At one end of the political spectrum, leaders of the 'Confessing Church' such as Martin Niemoeller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer mounted heroic resistance to Hitler, some paying with their lives. At the other end, Nazi theologian Emanuel Hirsch and other leaders of the *Deutsche Christen* actively supported Hitler and his policies.

After World War II, it became common to regard the Confessing Church as the typical response of German Protestantism to the Third Reich, and to forget about the large Nazi and collaborationist segment of the churches. Historian, Shelley Baranowski, has pointed out that this 'myth of resistance' conveniently served the interests of NATO during the Cold War, since it facilitated relegitimation of West Germany (*God and Caesar*, p. 13n).

While paying lip-service to the Confessing Church, however, American and Western European elites quietly reinstated some of the same intelligentsia that supported or collaborated with Hitler. The case of Emanuel Hirsch is particularly instructive in this regard, and directly relevant to the matter of Troeltsch studies today.

During the Third Reich, Hirsch served as Dean of the Theological Faculty of Goettingen University. He was a member of the Nazi Party, an



enthusiastic supporter of Hitler, and a reserve member of Hitler's SS. After the war, Hirsch was forced to retire formally from his academic post. Unlike many Nazis whose careers were on the line during the post-war period, however, Hirsch refused to be rehabilitated and remained openly loyal to his Nazi beliefs for the rest of his life. While he could not be officially reinstated as a professor of theology, he was allowed to maintain an informal group of students in his home near the university (*God and Caesar*, p. 6).

In the Introduction to *God and Caesar*, I wrote:

Indeed, it was only after the war that Hirsch published the bulk of his writings. He was to remain a prominent figure in German Protestantism into the 1960s, and was so revered that he was honoured at a [p. 7] major celebration on his seventy-fifth birthday in 1963. . . . On this occasion, the Nazi theologian was presented with a *Festschrift* entitled *Truth and Belief*, to which a number of prominent theologians contributed. Among the contributors were Hans-Joachim Birkner, a co-founder of the Ernst Troeltsch Society, and the late Wolfgang Trillhaas, who had been an eminent member of the Society. In fact, for Trillhaas, Hirsch was 'the last prince' of Protestant theologians. Another prominent Society member, Hermann Fischer, is also cited in the *Festschrift* for his assistance with its publication.<sup>12</sup>

(*God and Caesar*, pp. 6–7)

This link between leaders of the Troeltsch Society and Hirsch, which I first documented in *God and Caesar*, is consistent with what is known about Troeltsch's own politics, especially his relationship to Paul de Lagarde. Given his prominent position in German Protestantism, Troeltsch played an important role in legitimizing Lagarde's proto-Nazi ideology within mainstream Christianity. He thereby helped create an understanding of Christianity that contributed to the subsequent collaboration of many mainstream Christians with the Third Reich.

I wish to conclude this section of the present essay by framing this European sequel to the Troeltsch story within a global perspective. In the second half of the twentieth century, a debate remarkably similar to that between Kautsky and Troeltsch unfolded in the Americas. I am referring to the ideological struggle between 'liberation theology' and its critics. The leading Protestant exponent of this type of theology was Martin Luther King, Jr. Inspired by his ideas, millions of blacks and whites rallied peacefully against racial inequality in the United States. During this same period, John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* brought a related kind of political theology to the white Protestant world, and Christian feminists focused scholarly attention on the gender politics of Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Wahrheit und Glaube: Festschrift fuer Emanuel Hirsch zu seinem 75. Geburtstag*, ed. Hayo Gerdes (Munich 1963).

<sup>13</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids 1972; 1994).

By the 1950s, the Catholic Church had abandoned its taboo against lay Biblical study. Impoverished Catholic congregations in Latin America began reading the Bible and reflecting on their own historical experience in light of Jesus's message of liberation. Empowered by the Gospel, they challenged Catholic complicity with fascist regimes and their links to the US government and US-based transnational corporations. Professional theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez and Juan Luis Segundo, reflecting on the praxis of these 'base communities', gave rise to 'liberation theology' in its classic form.

These revolutionary developments evoked a polemical rejoinder from sociologist Peter Berger that closely paralleled Troeltsch's reply to Kautsky.<sup>14</sup> In the Conclusion to *God and Caesar*, I described this parallel as follows:

Both Troeltsch and Berger advocated a turning towards individual religious experience and salvation as an alternative to popular political variants of Christianity that sought to bring the Kingdom of God 'on earth, as it is in heaven'. Both sought to explain away revolutionary traditions within the Bible and to interpret the religious sphere as independent of politics. Both defended the patriarchal family and patterns of bourgeois privilege in the face of movements for women's equality and social equality generally, advocating spiritual equality as alternatives to material and earthly equality.

In summary, both Troeltsch and Berger interpreted Christianity in such a way as to legitimise the dominant social orders in which they lived, and disputed interpretations of Christianity that challenged those orders.

(*God and Caesar*, p. 215)

It can be said that liberation theology, in a sense, reopened the debate between Kautsky and Troeltsch. This ideological struggle took one form in Troeltsch's Germany, a somewhat different form more recently in the Americas, and will undoubtedly produce still further variations as capitalism, Christianity, and the relationship between the two continue to evolve.

### III

Given my iconoclastic findings regarding Troeltsch, many academic and media observers have erroneously concluded that I must have approached *The Social Teaching* with an iconoclastic intent. Nothing could be further from the truth. When I first began this research in 1985, in the context of a Ph.D. programme at Columbia University and Union Theological

<sup>14</sup> Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (New York 1979).

Seminary, I accepted the conventional view of Troeltsch as an enlightened liberal.

I inherited this view from my academic adviser, Roger Lincoln Shinn, which he in turn inherited from Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, who promoted Troeltsch's writings in the United States. This was the consensus view among American Protestants, including such political liberals as Harvard's James Luther Adams. By applying Quentin Skinner's contextual methodology to *The Social Teaching*, I had hoped to make new discoveries and some positive contribution to Troeltsch studies.<sup>15</sup> I had no intention of challenging the Niebuhrian paradigm of Troeltsch as a pioneering champion of liberal values.

As my reconstruction of Troeltsch's ideological context proceeded, and as I read *The Social Teaching* in light of that context, it became increasingly apparent that my received picture of Troeltsch could not accommodate the historical record, including the text itself. Troeltsch's relationship to Paul de Lagarde was only one element, albeit a major one, that remained anomalous from the perspective of the Niebuhrian paradigm.

In the Introduction to *God and Caesar*, I wrote:

One might well ask how American religious and political liberals such as Reinhold Niebuhr and James Luther Adams could have overlooked this 'shadow' side of Troeltsch. Conventional methods of text interpretation are undoubtedly part of the problem. Like other classics, *The Social Teaching* has been generally read as if it stands outside and above the ideological debates of the author's time and place. As church historian Roland Bainton put it: 'in many quarters [Troeltsch] is treated as a veritable gospel, and his conclusions are accepted with an uncritical devotion wholly alien to his own spirit'.<sup>16</sup> The present book breaks new ground by applying critical methods of historical and contextual interpretation to this icon of mainstream Protestantism.

(*God and Caesar*, p. 8)

The sort of veneration Bainton describes is not unique to the case of Ernst Troeltsch. Indeed, it is so common that the history of ideas is understood by many to be a succession of 'great books', read without reference to the ideological universes in which their authors were actively involved. The reconstruction of these contexts as a basis for interpreting the 'great books',

<sup>15</sup> Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), 3–53; idem, "'Social Meaning" and the Explanation of Social Action', *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Series IV, ed. Peter Laslett, W. G. Runciman and Quentin Skinner (Oxford 1972), 136–57; idem, 'Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts', *New Literary History*, 3 (1972), 393–408; idem, 'Hermeneutics and the Role of History', *New Literary History*, 7 (1975–6), 209–32; idem, preface to *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge 1978), vol. 1, pp. ix–xv.

<sup>16</sup> Roland H. Bainton, 'Ernst Troeltsch – Thirty Years Later', *Theology Today* 8 (April 1951), no. 1: 71.

as practised by John Dunn, Quentin Skinner and others, is therefore revolutionizing the secondary literatures.

Methodological inertia helps to explain why interpreters of Troeltsch, including German interpreters who may grasp his original social and political context better than their non-German counterparts, fail to apply methodically such knowledge in interpreting *The Social Teaching*. For example, German scholars indicated to me in 1988, when I presented some preliminary findings to the Troeltsch Society Congress in Augsburg, that they had been aware of Troeltsch's debate with Kautsky. From the perspective of a contextual method, this debate and the historical circumstances out of which it arose are central to illuminating the obscurities of Troeltsch's great book.

Yet in spite of the pervasive textual evidence of the importance of this debate, none of the Troeltsch Society members had undertaken to systematically interpret *The Social Teaching* in light of it, nor did they cite any other research comparable in this regard to mine. For those employing older scholarly methods, this powerful interpretive key remains unused, and the single most important door to Troeltsch's intentions in writing his *magnum opus* remains unopened.

What is at stake here is of more than antiquarian interest. The extent to which Christianity plays a constructive or a destructive role in the public affairs of the twenty-first century depends, in part, upon the lessons the churches learn from the previous one. Confronting the past – its horrors as well as its triumphs of democracy and human liberation – is of course more than a matter of scholarly methodology. But historians of ideas have a role to play, and how we choose to carry on our work helps shape the world we all will inhabit.