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Ernst Troeltsch and Robert Neville: Two Methodologies for Discerning Christian Normativity

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The rise of historical criticism of the Bible in the 18th century, and the emergence of historical consciousness, in general, undermined traditional views of the accuracy of the Bible, resulting in various ways of reconciling faith's relationship, not only to historical events but to historical knowledge as well. The historical-critical methodology, as a product of the Enlightenment (*die Aufklärung*), played a significant role in dissolving supernaturalism and its concomitant theory of biblical authority.¹ Modern historical consciousness contributed to the problem of faith and history, and was influenced by modern thinkers, including but not limited to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. In his treatise on the implication of history for the idea of revelation, "*Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft*" ("On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power" [1777]), Lessing states: "The accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason. That, then, is the ugly, broad ditch which I cannot get across, however often, and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap. If anyone can help me over it, let him do it, I beg him, I adjure him."²

¹The historical-critical methodology has many modern thinkers, including but not limited to: Spinoza, Reimarus, Herder, Dilthey, Schleiermacher, Strauss, Hegel, Baur, Semler, and Troeltsch. These thinkers in their own ways seek to overcome the authority claims of the Christian faith or to articulate and advocate those claims on the grounds of Enlightenment rationality. For purposes of this study, I examine modern historical consciousness and how it applies the historical-critical method to literary sources and its relevance and meaning for the comparative study of religions.

² Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Lessing's Theological Writings*, edited and translated by Henry Chadwick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 53. "Zufällige Geschichtswahrheiten können der Beweis von notwendigen Vernunftwahrheiten nie werden. Das, das ist der garstige breite Graben, über den ich nicht kommen kann, so oft und ernstlich ich auch den Sprung versucht habe. Kann mir jemand hinüber helfen, der tu' es; ich bitte ihn, ich beschwöre ihn." *Lessings Philosophie: Denkmäler aus der Zeit des Kampfe zwischen Aufklärung und Humanität in der deutschen Geistesbildung*, edited by Paul Lorenz (Leipzig: Verlag der Dürsch'schen Buchhandlung, [1777] 1909). Lessing's statement reflects eighteenth century epistemological assumptions which present difficult questions for Protestant theological reflection and

Modern historical consciousness includes the conviction that historical events, even though unique configurations of meaning, are always only relatively unique. Particular events are the products of a wider confluence of events that is in turn a fleeting expression of the on-rushing stream of human history. This also includes the incarnation of Jesus Christ as a strictly, relative historical event. However, the Christian faith claims that this event is not only meaningful but also true and universally valid.

I will discuss two methods of discerning Christian normative truth in history in light of modern historical consciousness and the role of a comparative theology in light of religious pluralism. Two thinkers who provide approaches to the study of theology in modernity and late modernity are Ernst Troeltsch and Robert Neville. I argue that Troeltsch accepts the “plausibility” conditions stemming from the Enlightenment, and in the liberal theological tradition of Schleiermacher, and does not deny relativity but struggles with how to discern the normative in the relative.³ In reference to Neville, I examine his theory of normative truth in connection with his theology of symbolic engagement and how religious symbols can be used in interpretive ways, both in principle and in practice. This paper examines the respective attempts of each thinker on ways that they think are appropriate to the claim of Christian faith.

The investigation of Troeltsch focuses on his treatment of the question of the absoluteness of Christianity as developed in his *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte* (1902/1912).⁴ Troeltsch acknowledges the failure of both the

debate even today. See also, Gordon E. Michalson, Jr., *Lessing's "Ugly Ditch": A Study of Theology and History* (University Park & London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985).

³ See Wesley Wildman's *Fidelity with Plausibility: Modest Christologies in the Twentieth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998). In this text, “plausibility” is used in respect to all forms of contemporary knowledge.

⁴ *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte: Vortrag gehalten auf der Versammlung der Freunde der Christliche Welt zu Mühlacker am 3. Oktober 1901* (Translated as *The Absoluteness of*

supernatural-exclusive apologetic of orthodox Protestantism and the evolutionary apologetic of liberal Protestantism and insists that theology's method should, therefore, be that of the history of religions (*die religionsgeschichtliche Methode*). However, modern historical consciousness does not entail the conclusion that the results of historical inquiry can be nothing more than a "roaring ocean of trivial relativities, without meaning and purpose in history."⁵ To speak of all religions as "relative" simply means that all historical phenomena are unique, individual configurations. This does not entail "denial of the values that appear in these individual configurations." These values may be "oriented in the same direction," or "may have the power to encounter and influence one another, and may ultimately, as a result of such interaction lead among them."⁶ The problem is not that the relativity of human experience deprives that experience of all normative value. Rather, the problem is how to discern the normative in the relative.⁷

Troeltsch's starting point in *Die Absolutheit des Christentums* is an attempt to establish the absolute validity of Christianity:

Thus Christianity must be understood not only as the culmination point but also as the convergence point of all the developmental tendencies that can be discerned in religion. It may therefore be designated, in contrast to other religions, as the focal synthesis of all religious tendencies and the disclosure of what is in principle a new way of life. That this new life is not synonymous with the realization of a universal principle of religion established by abstraction need not be repeated. Christianity is the culmination point not despite but in terms of its particularity and distinctive features.⁸

Christianity and the History of Religions: A Lecture Delivered at a Meeting of Friends of the Christian World at Mühlacker on October 3, 1901 (Tübingen: Verlag von J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck] 1929). Throughout this study, I will follow the translation of David Reid (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1971) with a close reading and comparison of the original.

⁵ Ibid., 86.

⁶ Ibid., 89.

⁷ Ibid., 90.

⁸ *Die Absolutheit des Christentums*, 114. For other references to Troeltsch's idea that Christianity is the culmination of all religions, see *Religion In History*, 27-28 and 81-84.

He argues that Christianity cannot be thought of as being unsurpassable in an absolute sense, but what can be done is to compare Christianity with “the other great religions” and “measure them all against a standard (*Maßstab*) or criterion which helps to establish Christianity’s superiority.⁹ Troeltsch’s notion is that such a comparison (*Vergleichung*) would result in confirming Christianity’s superiority for Western civilization:

This decision (*Entscheidung*) must be made in favor of a prophetic-Christian theism, as over against the quietism and pessimism of the oriental religions. For whatever Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism may possess in terms of religious depth and ethical astuteness, they have become rigidified in problematic ways and have degenerated into external, formal structures. In comparison, Christianity possesses a much greater capacity for self-criticism and rejuvenation.¹⁰

The same attempt is made in “*Die Dogmatik der religionsgeschichtliche Schule*.” In “*Die Dogmatik der religionsgeschichtliche Schule*,” Troeltsch explains that the first task of a dogmatics based on the history of religions is “establishing on the basis of a philosophy of the comparative history of religions, the fundamental and universal supremacy of Christianity for our own culture and civilization.”¹¹ He further explains this standard or criterion: “Such a standard is not scientifically demonstrable, but neither is it any ready-made prejudice or irresponsible bit of arbitrariness. Rather, it is a decision which grows out of a sympathetic appreciation of these groups.”¹²

However, it is questionable what this standard or criterion is for Troeltsch, and especially if it is only the subjective conviction (*subjektive Überzeugung*) of Christians that their own religion is superior to others. It is also questionable if Troeltsch fully appreciated the different religious groups, especially in reference to his Eurocentrism and

⁹ Troeltsch, “*Die Dogmatik der Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*,” *Religion in History*, translated by James Luther Adams, 95.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

language about “civilized” people. Also, Troeltsch’s lack of a broad knowledge about other religious traditions prevent him from developing a comparative theology, as well as conflicts over the criteria for making value judgments. Will the value judgments arise out of the comparative process, before the process begins, or are they simultaneously applicable to the process? Again, in Troeltsch’s 1923 article, “*Die Stellung des*

Christentums unter den Weltreligionen,” he acknowledges this conflict:

So far as the human eye can penetrate into the future, it would seem probable that the great revelations to the various civilizations will remain distinct and that the question of their several relative values will never be capable of objective determinations.¹³

In reference to the criterion of “personality” (“*Personlichkeit*”), which Walter Muelder suggests as Troeltsch’s “ultimate validating principle,” Troeltsch concludes: “The conception of personality itself is different in the east and in the west, hence arguments starting from it will lead to different conclusions in the two cases.”¹⁴ As shown, in Troeltsch’s “*Die Stellung des Christentums*,” he is disillusioned with the idea that Christianity is the culmination point for all religions: “My scruples arise from the fact that, while the significance for history of the concept of individuality impresses me more forcibly everyday, I no longer believe this to be so easily reconcilable with that of supreme validity.”¹⁵

Troeltsch’s final years were devoted to studying normative concerns about the relation between Christianity and society of his day. His *Der Historismus und seine*

¹³ Troeltsch, “Die Stellung des Christentums unter den Weltreligionen.” I have followed the translation “The Place of Christianity among the World Religions,” in *Christian Thought: Its History and Application*, edited by Baron von Hügel, 33.

¹⁴ Ibid. See also, Walter Muelder’s unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, “Individual Totalities in Ernst Troeltsch’s Philosophy of History,” Boston University Graduate School, 1933.

¹⁵ Troeltsch, “Die Stellung des Christentums unter den Weltreligionen,” in *Christian Thought: Its History and Application*, 21-22.

Probleme reflects this concern with “European culture” but it, also, offers insights about the nature and complexity of large historical aggregates (including Christianity) and how to reflect on their significance in the present and future. He underscores the complex interaction of religious and social forces from modern ones, as a way of cultural critique. He returns to earlier themes, especially in his essay, “*Was heisst ‘Wesen des Christentums’*” where the essence of Christianity is an entity with an inner flexibility and a productive power for new creation. It cannot be characterized by one word or one doctrine but is “the present awareness of the redemptive presence and holy rule of God, all through the mediation of history, but still a new reality, the rising up of a new life, a creation in the present.”¹⁶ He outlines themes that relate to his historical method, historical understanding, and philosophy of history. Such themes include: the nature of history, the nature of the historian’s knowledge and construction of the historical object, the relation between empirical history and philosophical history, and the need for a new, contemporary understanding of historical phenomena in every age.

Friedrich Wilhelm Graf sympathetically states: “Troeltsch was not a historian in the technical sense of the term but was a historian only insofar as he was a philosopher of culture.”¹⁷ This does not mean that he did not contribute to historical studies but that his scholarly writings are investigations into the past in order to make normative claims and judgments that would have contemporary relevance. Walter Bodenstein, with less sympathy than Graf writes: “Finally, Troeltsch is not a theologian, but an indifferent philosopher of culture, who is interested in Christianity in a phenomenological way.”¹⁸

¹⁶ See “What Does ‘Essence of Christianity’ Mean?” in *Ernst Troeltsch: Writings on Theology and Religion*, edited by Robert Morgan and Michael Pye (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), 168.

¹⁷ Graf, “Ernst Troeltsch: Kulturgeschichte des Christentums,” in Notker Hammerstein, Editor. *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft um 1900* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1988), 131-132.

Some scholars such as Benjamin Reist, following Karl Barth, interpret Troeltsch's "dismissal of the concept of supreme validity of Christianity" as "the death blow for Troeltsch's theology."¹⁹ Mark Chapman, on the other hand, suggests that Troeltsch maintained a much higher "critical distance from his culture" than has been generally acknowledged.²⁰ Chapman also thinks that "at the end of his life, Troeltsch had begun to regard relativity as having values of its own."²¹ Nevertheless, Troeltsch's increased emphasis on individuality moves him from comparing different value systems and argues instead for limiting the question of norms within the confines of each cultural circle considered separately and individually. Troeltsch further argues that universal history "can only be a history of the western cultural circle," and he calls this idea "Europeanism" (*Europäertum*).²² "Humanity as a uniform historical object does not exist, and it is impossible to formulate a history of the development of humankind as a whole."²³ Further development, then, remains within the confines of one's own culture. As a result, the idea of Christianity's "supreme validity" falls into the background and in his late writings he is more concerned with the crisis of modern society in general and the situation of both German and European culture in particular.

The individual character of European civilization, and of the Christian religion which is intimately connected with it, receives now much greater

¹⁸ See Chapter Three, footnote 61. "Troeltsch ist letztlich nicht Theologe, sondern indifferenter Kulturphilosoph, der am Christentum nur phänomenologisch interessiert ist."

¹⁹ Benjamin A. Reist, *Toward a Theology of Involvement: The Thought of Ernst Troeltsch* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 197-198.

²⁰ Mark Chapman, *Ernst Troeltsch and Liberal Theology: Religion and Cultural Synthesis in Wilhelmine Germany* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 9-11.

²¹ Mark Chapman, "Der Historismus in England und England in *Der Historismus*," in Ernst Troeltschs "Historismus," 197.

²² Troeltsch, *Gesammelte Schriften*, III, 706.

²³ Ibid.

emphasis, while the somewhat rationalistic concept of validity, and specifically of supreme validity, falls considerably in the background.²⁴

Kathryn Tanner and S. Mark Heim interpret Troeltsch as merging Christianity with European culture or society.²⁵ What is more striking than his departure from absoluteness or validity for all times and places to an acknowledgement of the relativity of all religions is the claim that “from being a Jewish sect Christianity has become the religion of all Europe. It stands or falls with European civilization.”²⁶ The later Troeltsch writes that Christianity’s primary claim to validity is thus the fact that only through it have we become what we [Western civilization] are, and that only in it can we preserve the religious forces that we need.”²⁷ Troeltsch’s final position is thus:

Christianity’s validity is a validity *for us*. It is God’s countenance as revealed to us; it is the way in which, being what we are, we receive, and react to, the revelation of God. It is binding upon us, and it brings us deliverance. It is final and unconditional for us, because we have nothing else, and because in what we have we can recognize the accents of the divine force.

But this does not preclude the possibility that other racial groups, living under entirely different cultural conditions, may experience their contact with the Divine Life in quite a different way, and may themselves also possess a religion which has grown up with them, and from which they cannot sever themselves so long as they remain what they are. And they may quite sincerely regard this as absolutely valid for them, and give expression to this absolute validity according to the demands of their own religions feeling.²⁸

He further states that this conviction that a truth which is, “in the first instance, a truth for us does not cease, because of this, to be very Truth and very Life.”²⁹ This conclusion is interesting and can be interpreted differently. If Christianity is valid for Western

²⁴ *Christian Thought: Its History and Application*, 24.

²⁵ See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 62-102-103; S. Mark Heim, *Salvation: Truth and Difference in Religion* (New York: Orbis, 1995), 173,188.

²⁶ *Christian Thought: Its History and Application*, edited by Baron von Hügel (New York: Meridian Books, 1985), 54.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 26-27. Italics mine.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

civilization, Islam can be considered as valid for Arabs; or Hinduism, Buddhism, or Confucianism for Asians; or Judaism for Jews. While Christians in the West understand religious truth in Christian terms, other traditions may not think of religious truth in the same way. For non-Western people, religious truth may be expressed in terms of the religious traditions that they have also “grown up with.” Troeltsch may be interpreted to mean that each religious tradition possesses truth or a “multiplicity of religious truth.” He writes: “In our earthly experiences the Divine Life is not One, but Many. But to apprehend the One in the Many constitutes the special character of love.”³⁰ Several contemporary scholars address the question of religious truth, and seek to answer related questions such as: “How can something be ‘very Truth’ for us and not for all mankind? Are human beings fundamentally different in the various cultures?”³¹

Neville is among several contemporary scholars engaged in these questions. Like Troeltsch, Neville agrees with historical inquiries, but, contrary to Troeltsch, he does not make the *religionsgeschichtliche Methode* determinative for theology. Instead, Neville advances an axiological hypothesis to thinking which is founded in valuation. His axiological hypothesis states: “Truth is the properly qualified carryover of value from the object of interpretation into the interpreting experience.” He explains the role of valuation at the imaginative level of thinking and relates it to his theory of normative truth in religious symbols. Neville accepts the plausibility conditions of public, non-confessional discourse, coupled with a conviction that all theological claims are contextual. As such, he begins with Troeltsch’s methodological presuppositions but achieves more normative theology than Troeltsch, especially on ways in which God is engaged in symbolically

³⁰ Ibid., 35.

³¹ Owen Thomas, *Attitudes Toward Other Religions: Some Christian Interpretations* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 73.

shaped thinking and practice. Although Neville appreciates Troeltsch's attempt to recover appropriate senses of philosophy for theology, he fails to recognize the abiding significance that Troeltsch's analysis of the interconnectedness and context-relatedness of all historical phenomena has for any theology that would successfully mediate the Christian faith to modern historical consciousness. Neville does, however, offer creative insights for theology that make possible a critical comparison of truth claims regarding the validity of Christianity in and for a historically-conscious age. As such, Neville examines questions about the extent to which religious traditions approximate truth against identified norm(s). He goes further than Troeltsch by explicitly engaging world religions and examining them on their own terms. Although both thinkers stand in the tradition of Schleiermacher, Neville further develops the comparative work of Troeltsch.

For Neville, comparative theology is both historical and constructive and is rooted in more than one tradition. Furthermore, a theology that is comparatively-based is vulnerable and open to correction as a result of the comparative process. Whereas Troeltsch would agree with Neville's insistence that Christian theologians who apply the history of religions approach remain existentially committed to their own tradition and detached enough to critically observe and make judgments of their religion and the one(s) being compared, there is no indication in *Die Absolutheit des Christentums* that Troeltsch embraces a theology that is open to the possibility of being radically changed and challenged as a result of the comparative process. Also, in this text, it is questionable whether or not Troeltsch would embrace Neville's idea of multiple religious identity, as Troeltsch seeks to clarify what Christian concepts mean for Christianity as a result of the comparison.

Although Neville's methodological approach is different from Troeltsch's, Neville maintains that theology, as with other disciplines such as sociology, philology, the history of religion, and comparative studies, is historically contextual. "It [theology] is, therefore, to be understood within a large, hermeneutic frame."³² This frame must include the entire context of world religions; hence, terminology may need to be re-shaped, re-fashioned, and/or revised to be fluid enough to make comparisons possible. This is a task of theology and although the term "theology" has its origins in Western religious tradition, "its claim for truth is more universal, objective, and critical than a mere appeal to a traditional claim."³³

Neville's use of the term "divine" is also important because it bears on other topics such as the human condition, personal and social transformation, and the nature of ultimate reality to flesh out his theory of normative truth in religious symbols with its implications for a comparative theology. His preference for the term "divine" or "divinity" factors into his methodological attempt to engage pluralism and the diverse concepts in religions that refer to God, gods, or ultimate realities. In addition, it relates to his thinking about history, culture, individuality, and society "in general." Neville's comparativist emphasis grows out of the conviction that the contemporary problem in theology is "to construct a concept of divinity that functions to organize the multitudes of concepts, symbols, images, and referring practices so that the questions of agreement, disagreement, and truth can be formulated."³⁴

In *Symbols of Jesus: A Christology of Symbolic Engagement* (2001),

³²Neville, *Behind the Masks of God: An Essay Toward Comparative Theology* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 29. Brackets mine.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 9.

Neville presents a theory of religious symbols with the claim that religious symbols can participate in the divine realities to which they refer and yet must be broken, in a Tillichian sense, as to not become idolatrous or demonic. The symbols properly understood can be true or false and symbol systems such as myths, theologies, or liturgical symbols can be used to engage divine realities while internally exhibiting the semiotic structure of reference, meaning, and interpretation. He writes: “The new purpose for studying religious symbols is as a hermeneutic entry for theology, that is, for attaining religious truth in critical, correctable ways.”³⁵ Religious symbols are distinctive because they are true and broken. For Neville, they are true when they refer to or carryover value for religious referents (what he calls “infinite/finite contrasts”).

On the other hand, religious symbols are “broken” and should not be literally identified with the divine. Neville analyzes both the meaning structure of religious symbols (how religious symbols are interpreted both extensionally to other symbols within semiotic systems and intentionally in actual interpretation, and in theological, practical, and devotional contexts within which religious symbols are interpreted. In this respect, his theory of religious symbols is an important contribution to hermeneutics and theological method, but can also be transformative in helping people get on the right path. With proper engagement, Neville’s theory parallels Jonathan Edwards’ emphasis on the “fruits of the spirit.”³⁶

Neville acknowledges two important traits concerning religious symbols. “One is

³⁵ Neville, *The Truth of Broken Symbols* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), xiii.

³⁶ Edwards argues in his *Religious Affections* that affections are essential to religion but must be tested. He proposes “twelve signs” whereby true piety can be distinguished from false piety. In the third part of *Religious Affections*, he describes the positive signs of the holy affections. These “fruits of the Spirit” (faith, hope, love) are marks of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the person having true Christian faith. See Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, Edited by John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University, 1959), 117ff.

that the use of religious symbols is an activity of interpretation, a semiotic practice.”³⁷

Questions that relate to the nature of religious symbols are signs include: What do they symbolize? How do they refer in symbolizing? What kinds of meanings are involved? How can they be interpreted and under what conditions? Under what conditions are they true or false?³⁸

The other trait involves symbols as instruments of salvation, and Neville adds that “even if their primary value is soteriological instrumentality, they still are representations and should be examined regarding their truth.”³⁹ The role of the imagination is also important in the process of engaging the symbols. In a tremendous tribute to Neville, Wesley Wildman writes:

Just as Plato imagined a particular thing having value by virtue of its participation in a form of far greater goodness, truth, and beauty, so Neville pictures a flow or a ‘carry-over’ of value from the sign-object of value from that which is engaged to the wielder of the sign, which furnishes the ontological ground for the kind of transformative potency of signs that human beings are familiar with from reading powerful books and listening to wonderful music. This dynamic carry-over is precisely truth, for Neville, and the fact that value flows through engagement both to sign and sign wielder explains why he simultaneously affirms strongly objective and strongly subjective sorts of truth. In this way, he is able to develop a theory of religious symbols in which potent signs have double reference, both to an object and to the state of the sign-wielder’s soul.⁴⁰

Troeltsch would agree with Neville’s appropriation of the symbols in faith communities by directing attention to the close interrelationship between the types of society that predominate in a given historical period and cultural life. For Neville and Troeltsch, people can be religious, in this sense, and the role of “cult” becomes

³⁷ Neville, *The Truth of Broken Symbols*, 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1. See also Neville, *Symbols of Jesus*, Chapter One.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Wildman, “Neville’s Systematic Theology of Engagement,” in *Theology in Global Context: Essays in Honor of Robert Cummings Neville* (New York and London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 6.

important.⁴¹ Devoid of bad connotations where people leave family and friends, “‘cult’ is simply education, the taking on of a culture or way of life by practicing its element.”⁴²

Troeltsch, influenced by Luther, and Neville as an ordained elder in the Methodist Church, are parts of traditions that promote piety and social concerns. In Troeltsch’s autobiographical writings, he writes that philosophy and theology gave him a chance to “tackle both metaphysics and the exciting historical problems at one and the same time.”⁴³ He further states: “I was inspired by the interest in reaching a vital and effective religious position, which could alone give meaning and purpose to reflection upon the things of this world.”⁴⁴

Moreover, Neville sees himself as a “doctor of the church” and a “Confucian-Christian” and his religious understanding is shaped by a study of western and eastern religious traditions. Both Troeltsch and Neville attempt to find meaning in life (which includes culture), and more broadly, what one does in reference to the Ultimate.⁴⁵ The question of what one does in reference to the Ultimate is linked to the question of ethics and personal and social transformation. Hence, Troeltsch’s and Neville’s constructive views are instructive and challenging for contemporary theologies, showing them to be shaped and influenced by religious, economic, social, and political situations and practices. Also, they can be evaluated in terms of the public interests and purposes they

⁴¹ For Troeltsch, he is careful to include sociological distinctions in his work. In his original classic, *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (1912) he distinguishes between church, sect, and mysticism. The English translation did not include “groups” in the title. Also, in *Die Soziallehren*, the influence of Max Weber is evident in Troeltsch’s sociological thinking, especially with his ideas of “church,” “sect,” and “mysticism” as primary typologies of religious life. Weber was Troeltsch’s colleague and housemate in a two-family duplex during Troeltsch’s years at Heidelberg as professor of Theology.

⁴² Sermon preached by Robert Neville at Daniel L. Marsh Chapel (September 7, 2003): “Beliefs, Works, Cult.” Texts taken from Romans 13:11-14; James 2:14-17.

⁴³ *Ernst Troeltsch: Writings on Theology and Religion*, edited by Robert Morgan and Michael Pye, “Introduction” (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁵ Neville, “Responsibility,” Sermon preached at Daniel L. Marsh Chapel (September 20, 2001): Texts from I Timothy 2:1-7 and Saint Luke 16:1-13.

serve.⁴⁶

At the beginning of *Die Absolutheit des Christentums*, Troeltsch writes:

It may be taken for granted that the modern world, in the great and dominating forms it has assumed since the eighteenth century, represents a unique type of culture. As such it stands in contrast to the culture of antiquity and to the medieval Catholic Church from the latter of which the culture of early Protestant orthodoxy did not make an altogether clean break.”⁴⁷

At the end of *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*, he offers a response to the modern world’s “unique type of culture”: “The old theories no longer suffice” [in the modern world] and “new theories must be constructed, composed of old and new elements.”⁴⁸

Similarly, Neville understands that Christianity is living in a new age, and he “courageously takes on the theological problems raised by the determinate reality of nature as interpreted by the modern sense and argues that theological claims must always be intelligible to the most recent expressions of scholarship in the natural and social sciences.”⁴⁹ Amos Yong and Peter Heltzel continue: “Following Ernst Troeltsch and

⁴⁶ Hermann Deuser, “Theology of Creation, Covenant, and Trinity,” *Interpreting Neville* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 223-243. Troeltsch, “What Does ‘Essence of Christianity’ Mean?” (*Was Heißt ‘Wesen des Christentums?’*,” 1903/1913) and “The Significance of the Historical Existence of Jesus for Faith” (“*Die Bedeutung der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu für den Glauben*,” 1911) in *Ernst Troeltsch: Writings on Theology and Religion*, edited by Robert Morgan and Michael Pye (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977). The Apocalypse of John Chapter 11: 15, NRSV.

⁴⁷ Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte*, translated by David Reid (London: SCM Press, 1972), 45. “Es darf als anerkannt gelten, daß die seit dem 18. Jahrhundert zu großen und beherrschenden Gestaltungen entwickelte moderne Welt einen eigenen Kulturtypus darstellt neben der Weltkultur der Antike und neben der Kultur der katholischen Kirche, von der ja diejenige des alten orthodoxen Protestantismus sich nicht allzuweit entfernt hat.” *Ernst Troeltsch: Kritische Gesamtausgabe Band 5: Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte (1902/1912): Mit den Thesen von 1901 und den handschriftlichen Zusätzen von Trutz Rendtorff in Zusammenarbeit mit Stefan Pautler* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), 112.

⁴⁸ Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*. I have followed the translation by Olive Wyon, *Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* (New York: Macmillan, 1931).

⁴⁹ Amos Yong and Peter G. Heltzel, “Robert Cummings Neville and Theology’s Global Future,” in *Theology in Global Context: Essays in Honor of Robert Cummings Neville*, 35.

Rudolph Bultmann, Neville rejects the supernatural, absolutist metaphysics of much traditional theology because it is no longer plausible in light of modern science.”⁵⁰

In light of Neville’s rejection of propositional theology, Wesley Wildman rightly asks: What kind of theology is Neville’s?⁵¹ He also answers that it is “a theology that is significantly alien to all of the concrete theological traditions within major religions. At the same time, it shares many conceptual affinities with those religions, from Methodism to Confucianism, and can make ready use of their liturgical and ritual practices, whatever they might be, for the sake of enriching engagement with ultimate reality in terms of each religion.”⁵² Wildman further offers a “bolder” answer, namely: “Neville’s system may well be the most extensively developed strictly naturalistic theology in the history of such efforts.”⁵³ The theological methods of Troeltsch and Neville provide an on-going debate, but their attempts are excellent examples of Count Nicholas Zinzendorf’s famous phrase: “*Der Glaube erfordert Bereitschaft zum Wagnis und viel Treue.*” (“Faith needs daring and much loyalty.”)

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Wildman, “Neville’s Systematic Theology of Symbolic Engagement,” in *Theology in a Global Context: Essays in Honor of Robert Cummings Neville*, 25.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.