

ERNST TROELTSCH HIS LIFE AND WORK, by Hans-Goerg Drescher. SCM Press London, 1992. xviii + 453 pp. £40.00.

The renewal of interest in the most influential of early twentieth-century Protestant theologians, Ernst Troeltsch, is hardly surprising. When he published *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions* in 1902 he was already well aware of the intellectual and political problems which the Christian Churches increasingly faced as they encountered the other great world religions, and he was prepared to abandon the orthodox position that the Churches possessed a unique and final self-revelation of God. In practice, however, christian theologians, whether liberal (and often idealist) or orthodox (and often exclusivist) have found it difficult to move away from the conviction that in the last resort Christianity is in some sense 'truer' than the other world religions, and so Troeltsch, as the ablest bearer of bad news from a wider world, was accordingly dismissed into the special hell reserved for those 'liberal' theologians who are known to orthodox commentators not to be 'really Christian'. Christian missiology remained Eurocentric, and it was only after the 1960s that the disintegration of the older Western empires and the failure of the United States to establish itself as the new overlord of Asia compelled self-criticism. Re-enter Ernst Troeltsch, not as a superman, but as a forerunner of theologians like John Hick and Hans Küng. He would have appreciated the extent to which the change had socio-political rather than intellectual causes.

Hans-Georg Drescher, who is Professor of Protestant Theology at Dortmund University, has written a long 'life and thought' account of Troeltsch, solidly translated by John Bowden. Drescher has read and researched widely and provides plentiful information, but he is not a very engaged biographer, especially when he turns to Troeltsch's involvement in German politics at the end of the Great War. Troeltsch, after all, died in February, 1923, when he was still only in his fifty-eighth year. He had lived through a period of German history with which many Germans have still to come to terms, the years from the foundation of the Bismarckian Reich, with which the German Protestant Churches firmly identified themselves, to its collapse in 1918. The Allied victory meant the end of what had been a Protestant Empire, and a weakening of European Protestantism which would continue after the Second World War when the East German Protestant Churches were submerged for forty years in the Russian client-state, the D.D.R. Whether the collapse of the D.D.R. means an opportunity, which had not existed since 1918, for the Protestant Churches to reconsider their traditional habit, not to say theology, of obedience (Gehorsam) to state-authority (Obrigkeit) remains to be seen. Here also, Troeltsch was a fore-runner.

Like most German Protestants at the time Troeltsch entered the war

of 1914 a monarchist with nationalist attitudes, and at the level of theory he remained critical of democracy. Unlike the majority of Protestants, however, he ended the war prepared to accept the Weimar Republic (it is a weakness of Professor Drescher's book (that he throws little light on the rapid change in Troeltsch's outlook towards the end of the conflict). He became involved in the moderate, middle-class German Democratic Party, among whose founders (in November, 1918) was his friend, Max Weber. The party, which aimed to strengthen the political centre against both the radical Left and the extremists of the Right, won 65 seats in the Prussian State Assembly in 1919, and Troeltsch served as under-secretary of state to a Social Democrat Minister of Culture from then until 1921. He looked after church affairs, anxious to break with the Lutheran and Prussian tendency to use religion in order to foster a hierarchical social order and nationalistic politics, but he was not dogmatically committed to separation between the Churches and the State. Rather, he clung to the nineteenth-century ideal of a school in which religion should penetrate everything that was done. At the same time, however, he thought that the Churches should provide their own dogmatic instruction: in the state schools religious education should essentially be historical and phenomenological. In these last few years he was deeply alarmed by what he called 'neo-Romanticism' in both religion, culture and politics, a retreat to irrationalism which he found in Friedrich Gogarten, Stephan George, Ostwald Spengler and Graf Keyserling, for example.

Troeltsch was pre-eminently an intellectual, a historian who knew that claims to special divine revelation, and therefore to special religious authority, had lost their cogency. At the same time, as a consequence of defeat in the first World War, Germany's social structures had been radically weakened; there was no longer any common order which could of itself limit the attractiveness of a mixture of militarist, racialist and anti-semitic ideas which had shown new life all over Europe since the 1890s. Even before his death, Troeltsch could see how difficult it would be to find a German solution, and Europe failed to provide one. Had he lived, one hopes that like that unswerving sculptress, Käthe Kollwitz, already a left-wing pacifist in the first World War, he would have stayed in Germany and protested to the end.

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MATTHEW by Margaret Davies. *JSOT Sheffield Academic Press*, 1993. Pp. 224. Hardback. £30.00/\$50.00.

This commentary breaks new ground in its systematic application to the gospel text of the approach known as reader-response criticism, exploring what the text would have conveyed to its original readers and