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## Supremacy Smugglers? Islam in the Legacy of Theological Liberalism

**ABSTRACT:** This article interrogates the interpretation of Islam in the legacy of theological liberalism. Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) has been labelled the figurehead of such liberalism. Islam is a recurrent referent in his thought, running through his theological and philosophical writings. While studies such as Tomoko Masuzawa's immensely influential, *The Invention of World Religions*, contend that Troeltsch's conceptualization of religion smuggles assumptions of the supremacy of Christianity from theological into non-theological research on religion, I argue that Troeltsch's characterization of Islam clarifies how he both constructs and collapses the supremacy smuggling for which he is criticized. For the current controversies about Islam in the European and the American public square, Troeltsch is important and instructive because he captures both the problems and the promises of the theological thinking that came to be called "liberal" for the study of religion.

Across the study of religion, critiques of liberalism abound. In her seminal study, *The Invention of World Religions*, Tomoko Masuzawa suggests that, through the language of "world religions," liberals secretly smuggled assumptions of the supremacy of Christianity from theological into non-theological scholarship on religion (Masuzawa 2005). Masuzawa has been immensely influential in the study of religion, so much so that many scholars draw on the legacy of theological liberalism only very carefully, only very critically—or not at all. Since Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) has been labelled the figurehead of the theological liberalism that Masuzawa criticizes, he has to bear the blame. Troeltsch is at the center of Masuzawa's concluding chapter, "The Question of Hegemony: Ernst Troeltsch and the Reconstituted European Universalism" (Masuzawa 2005, 309-324). She proposes that Troeltsch's liberalism presents "in the name of pluralism" the "hidden supremacist pretensions" that so much scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth century presumed (Masuzawa 2005, 325). The fact that Troeltsch never claimed the label of liberalism for his interdisciplinary thinking—indeed, he criticized the politics and the practices of liberalism both inside and outside churches (Troeltsch [1924a] 2006, 94-96)<sup>1</sup>—has led neither his defenders nor his despisers to cast doubt on him as a "supremacy smuggler." Given that many scholars know Troeltsch only through Masuzawa's study, her critique of the supremacy smuggling in his conceptualization of religion is a promising point of departure for a study of the interpretation of Islam in the legacy of theological liberalism.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> If not stated otherwise, all translations from primary and secondary literature in German are my own.

<sup>2</sup> In her response to the contributions to a special issue of *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* on *The Invention of World Religions*, Masuzawa (2008) argues that she is interested in the significance of the category of "religions" for conceptual characterizations of "the West." Interpretations of Islam, often couched in a contrast between "occident" and "orient," are crucial for such characterizations.

By analyzing and assessing Troeltsch's interpretation of Islam, I aim to argue that he concurrently constructs and collapses the supremacy smuggling for which he is criticized. For the current controversies about Islam in European and American public squares, then, Troeltsch is both important and instructive because he clarifies the problems and the promises of the theological thinking that came to be called "liberal." Islam is a recurrent referent in Troeltsch's thinking, running through his theological and philosophical writings. Considering all accessible material, I counted more than one hundred references to Islam in Troeltsch's oeuvre of more than twenty-five volumes.<sup>3</sup> The interest in Islam was increasing across Europe in Troeltsch's time (Habermas 2014; for a detailed discussion, see Almond 2010). Since both his theological and his philosophical account of the concept of religion are central to Masuzawa's argument, it is particularly promising to interrogate Troeltsch's interpretations of Islam in these two accounts. Although Troeltsch, the professor of theology, investigates Islam as a religion (rather than a culture), while Troeltsch, the professor of philosophy,<sup>4</sup> investigates Islam as a culture (rather than a religion), both investigations assess Islam as a "Christian trope" (Ralston 2017).<sup>5</sup> They are indicative for whether Troeltsch can or cannot be considered a supremacy smuggler.

Across the study of religion, Troeltsch's thinking has been met with both fascination and frustration, because he was, as Masuzawa announces, a scholar "of a novel sort" (Masuzawa 2005, 309). The novelty of Troeltsch's combination of theological and non-theological approaches to research on religion, including sociology of religion, is still striking today: theological scholars tend to find him too sociological and sociological scholars tend to find him too theological. His interdisciplinary approach that brings the study of religion into theology (and theology into the study of religion) is crucial to the legacy of theological liberalism that can be traced back to Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher.<sup>6</sup> In *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, Schleiermacher turned from "revelation" to "religion" as the core category of theology (Schleiermacher [1799] 1996; see the contributions to Korsch

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<sup>3</sup> The material I considered includes the volumes available in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (25 vols, published 1998-2018) and *Gesammelte Schriften* (4 vols, published 1912-1924) as well as Troeltsch's lectures on *The Christian Faith* ([1912/13] 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Troeltsch's appointment to the philosophical professorship in Berlin was controversial: the theological faculty found him too philosophical and the philosophical faculty found him too theological. The chair he took in 1915, dedicated to the philosophy of culture, "had been handed over to the philosophical by the theological faculty" (Drescher 1992, 126).

<sup>5</sup> Ralston (2017) argues that, for the theologians he treats, Islam is not interesting in itself, but only as a means to make theological or philosophical arguments about Christianity. I will return to Ralston's characterization below.

<sup>6</sup> For the significance of the legacy of theological liberalism today, see the contributions to Lauster, Schmiedel, and Schütz 2019.

and Griffioen 2011). Troeltsch worked in the wake of this Schleiermacherian turn. His scholarship tackled the problem that this turn set up for theologians: once Christianity is taken to be a religion among religions—rather than God’s one and only revelation—the theologian has to establish the supremacy of Christianity. As far as I can ascertain, there is no study that tackles the interpretations of Islam in the legacy of theological liberalism. Although there are differences between the scholars associated with this legacy, Troeltsch’s interpretation of Islam can be considered paradigmatic for liberal-theological approaches to religion. Masuzawa claims that it is the theology that runs through all of Troeltsch’s thinking that causes his secret supremacy smuggling: “With certain benefits of hindsight,” she suggests, “today’s historians of religion would likely judge this final vision of Troeltsch’s as a transgression against the limits of science and scholarship” (Masuzawa 2005, 324). However, what Masuzawa assesses as Troeltsch’s transgressive theo-logy (his thinking and talking about God) might be much more careful and much more critical with claims to supremacy than her suggestive historians of religion would want to see.<sup>7</sup>

## 1 Islam as a Theological Trope

Masuzawa concurs with the characterization of Troeltsch as the theologian of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, the history of religions school that contextualized Christianity in the comparative history of religions (Troeltsch 1913a, 500-524; Masuzawa 2005, 310; see also Chapman 2010a; Chapman 2018). According to Troeltsch, this comparative contextualization pinpointed a paradigm shift in theology from the dogmatic to the historical method: history comes close to “the devil,” he cautions, “who has given it the little finger has to give it the whole hand” (Troeltsch 1913b, 734). If Christianity is interpreted in the context of a comparative history of religions, the interpreter looks for similarities and dissimilarities between Christian and non-Christian religions. As a consequence, Christianity cannot be taken for granted as *the* truth anymore (Troeltsch 1913b, 729-753; Masuzawa 2005, 310-311). Considering Troeltsch’s “Christianity and the History of Religions,” Masuzawa contends: “Historical consciousness had, or was felt to have had, a profound leveling effect on all truth claims..., including the truth claims of religion. It seemed to cut Christianity down to size” (Masuzawa 2005, 312).

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout, I distinguish between “theology” (for the discipline) and “theo-logy” (for the doctrine) in order to avoid conceptual confusion as much as I can.

However, Masuzawa casts doubt on the consequences of history for theology. She stresses that scholars like Troeltsch shift from concrete religions to conceptual religion in order to circumvent the cutting consequences of history. Troeltsch does not answer the threat of history to the Christian religion, but the threat of history to religion: he “conjures up, out of thin air, something like ‘religion itself’” which, “without missing a beat, changes the subject” (Masuzawa 2005, 312-313). Masuzawa argues that historians of religion à la Troeltsch assumed “that all human beings without exception were endowed with some ... sensibility” that connected them to the transcendent, whether this transcendent was or was not called God (Masuzawa 2005, 313). Thus, these historians “could take some comfort in the thought that this meant that all human beings were *potential* Christians, even if they were not actually ... so at the moment” (Masuzawa 2005, 313). The shift from the concrete to the conceptual is considered a classic characteristic of the theologies that came to be called liberal.<sup>8</sup> The consequences of the shift, according to Masuzawa, can be understood from the accounts of religion inside and outside the academy that followed the shift since. “In short, by the early twentieth century, liberal Christians like Troeltsch ... were generally prepared to accept the fact of religious diversity... To take this stance has been ... a matter of good public policy ever since” (Masuzawa 2005, 313-314).<sup>9</sup>

The catch of the liberal-theological shift from concrete to conceptual religion is that, if considered through the concept of religion, the scholar’s claim to the supremacy of one religion can remain intact—albeit privately rather than publicly (Masuzawa 2005, 314). Examining Troeltsch’s “The Place of Christianity among the World Religions,” Masuzawa explains:

The elemental assumption here is that different persons and different peoples adhere to different ideas of foundational truth..., and that each of these ideas carries with it its own absolute conviction..., and these separate psychic interiors are mutually inviolable ...; they are private (Masuzawa 2005, 319).

According to Masuzawa, the distinction between private and public is crucial: internally (in the private sphere), theologians defend concrete religion and externally (in the public sphere),

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<sup>8</sup> The category of religion is also what is at stake in the theological critiques of liberal theology past and present. Karl Barth formulated what could be called the neo-orthodox theological critique of “religion” (Barth 2004 [1956], 280-360) and George R. Lindbeck formulated what could be called the neo-neo-orthodox theological critique of “religion” (Lindbeck 1984, 30-72).

<sup>9</sup> She argues that the diversity is shrunk into a unity of experiences that is supposed to be the fundament of all religion and of all study of religion. While “many of today’s scholars would likely contest” it, “it is equally undeniable that the academy of religion scholars as a whole is publicly perceived, justly or unjustly, as firmly allied with this idea” (Masuzawa 2005, 316).

theologians defend conceptual religion, “‘religion itself’” (Masuzawa 2005, 319). Troeltsch, then, exemplifies a “critical juncture” in the research on religion: the turn towards the history of religion that scholarship makes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Masuzawa 2005, 319). What is wrong with Troeltsch’s turn?

Masuzawa insists that the turn is *not* an abandonment of theology. Theology is not criticized but covered, camouflaged, so to speak. But the concept of religion blows the cover. It “came from nowhere” (Masuzawa 2005, 319). Although she only shows the “sudden appearance” of the concept of religion for Troeltsch’s “Christianity and the History of Religion,” Masuzawa’s claim is much more comprehensive:

To be sure, Troeltsch was not the only one to produce the notion of “religion itself,” and others who did so did not derive it from this particular textual moment in Troeltsch. But I have yet to encounter any instance in which this notion is brought up in any other way, that is, other than out of the blue (Masuzawa 2005, 319-320).

For Masuzawa, the concept must come out of the blue in order to do its work: to transfer the transcendent from concrete religion to conceptual religion, “now that the very theology has run up against the wall of its own undeniable historicity” (Masuzawa 2005, 320).

However, while it might be correct for the two articles that Masuzawa references, a survey of Troeltsch’s oeuvre shows that his concept of religion is not conjured up out of thin air. Above all, Troeltsch’s article, “Die Selbständigkeit der Religion,” published bit by bit over the course of one year, is central to his conceptualization of religion (Troeltsch [1895/96] 2009). Although it is difficult to translate—literally: “the self-standing-ness of religion”—the title already announces Troeltsch’s core concern: a definition of religion that avoids reductionism. Hans Joas, who rediscovered the article recently, assumes that if Troeltsch submitted his almost two hundred pages today, “revise and resubmit” would be the best response he could hope for from his peer reviewers (Joas 2018, 26). Nonetheless, Joas argues that Troeltsch’s article is crucial because it avoids two reductionisms in the research on religion (Joas 2018, 26-38). Troeltsch writes (along the lines of the theology of his time) against the reductionism that reduces religion to the natural as well as (against the lines of the theology of his time) against the reductionism that reduces religion to the supernatural (Schmiedel 2017, 39-57). Since he locates religion in-between these reductionisms as both natural and supernatural, immanent and transcendent, Troeltsch can confidently criticize essentializations of religion:

Here it would be a scholastic misunderstanding ... if one would want to find a definition of religion which could fit all cases—as it happened often or all too often, losing its credibility because it was skewed, shallow or superficial. Instead, what one has to find is the crucial point or the crucial points which characterize all ... religion (Troeltsch 1907, 469).

Troeltsch insists that the conceptualization of religion is intertwined with the issue of supremacy. He criticizes Immanuel Kant for his conviction that the Christian is true while the non-Christian is not true—a conviction so ingrained in the thought of Kant's time that, according to Troeltsch, even more knowledge about the history of religions could not have changed it (Troeltsch [1904] 2014, 981).<sup>10</sup> Hence, Troeltsch takes Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher and Georg F. W. Hegel as points of departure to think through the conceptualization of religion (Troeltsch [1895/96] 2009, 368-371; see also Lauster 2013). Although their knowledge of this history was so limited that they could still concur with Kant's conclusion about the supremacy of Christianity, they laid the foundations for the two strategies that Troeltsch claims to connect: one that thinks through the significance of religion for persons and one that thinks through the significance of religion for peoples (Troeltsch [1895/96] 2009, 364-535). Troeltsch conceives of these strategies as a synchronic psychology of religion (à la Schleiermacher), on the one hand, and a diachronic history of religion (à la Hegel), on the other hand. Hence, Troeltsch's category of religion—*pace* Masuzawa—comes not out of the blue, but is embedded in his discussions of (the history of) philosophy and theology.<sup>11</sup> The two strategies that Troeltsch takes from these discussions inform the context for his interpretation of Islam.

In accordance with the three monotheistic religions, Islam traces itself back to Abraham. According to Troeltsch, the “prophetic reformation (*prophetische Reformation*)” is the root of all of the Abrahamic religions (Troeltsch [1898a] 2009, 698). They are siblings (Troeltsch 1913c, 351). As siblings revolving around scriptures that give guidelines for each and every believer (Troeltsch 1913c, 352), these three religions demonstrate what Troeltsch

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<sup>10</sup> In German-speaking scholarship, it is still contested whether Troeltsch should be considered a Kantian or a post-Kantian. Mark Chapman points out that at the time of Troeltsch “many theological debates were disguised as competing interpretations of Kant. ... Kant had thus unwittingly become a great polemicist for the most diverse theological systems. In the process, Kant's own ideas were often contorted beyond all recognition” (Chapman 2001, 81). Accordingly, Troeltsch might be assessed as a post-Kantian theorist with a Kantian terminology.

<sup>11</sup> In addition to the philosophical and theological analysis, Troeltsch traces the discovery of the concept of religion back to the Wars of Religion that raged across Europe in the seventeenth century. If asked where the concept comes from, Troeltsch would answer with reference to the deism which developed in England “under the impact of the fights of religion (*Religionskämpfe*)” (Troeltsch [1922] 2004, 332-333). Deism, he argues, is conceptualized in order to find the common core of all confessions which could then be marshalled against the fighters who mistake their individual confessions for the common core. For Troeltsch, the English deists discovered—invented (?)—religion.

describes as the “welthistorische Bedeutung des Prophetismus,” the significance of prophetism for world history (Troeltsch 1924a, 42). Mohammed, the founder and focus of Islam, is a true prophet (Troeltsch [1912] 1998, 225). Islam’s universality is due to his prophetism (Troeltsch [1898b] 2009, 627; see also Troeltsch 1913c, 351-352). In the history of religion, then, Islam is one of the world religions so that the proselytizing of Muslims—whether by Christians or by non-Christians—must be stopped (Troeltsch [1907] 2014, 503-504; Troeltsch 1913d, 802). Islam is an important and instructive step in a history of religions that displays a development towards universalization and individualization.<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, Islam is inferior to Christianity for Troeltsch (Troeltsch 1913c, 352). Islam’s thinking and talking about God—what Troeltsch calls the “finsteren, fatalistischen, ächt semitischen Allah,” the fatalistic, sinister and semitic Allah (Troeltsch [1895/96] 2009, 527; repeated in Troeltsch [1912] 1998, 226)—concentrates on God’s omnipotence so much so that it can characterize the transcendent only as “absolute will” and “arbitrary will” (Troeltsch [1912/13] 1991, 120-121). As Troeltsch argues in his lectures on *The Christian Faith*: “The great will of God, alongside which nothing else can stand, is the great pathos of Islam. ... The grandiose concept of the will overwhelms everything. Before this will, there can only be fear” (Troeltsch [1912/13] 1991, 132). In contrast to Islam, Christianity characterizes the transcendent as both “*Wille*” and “*Wesen*,” whereby the “eternal essence” points to the trustworthiness of God: in Christianity, God is not arbitrary (Troeltsch [1912/13] 1991, 121).<sup>13</sup> Because of this contrast, Christianity cannot be considered a religion of the law, while Islam is tied to the letter of its “sacred code of law (*heiliges Gesetzbuch*),” the Qur’an (Troeltsch [1912] 1998, 226).

For Troeltsch, Islam is bound by the law. The law makes Islam particular rather than universal (Troeltsch [1912] 1998, 193). Individually, salvation is tied to the achievement of the person. It is not God’s grace, but the accomplishment of a life in accordance with the guidelines for beliefs and behaviors stipulated in the Qur’an that saves the Muslim (Troeltsch [1912] 1998, 194). Collectively, the significance of the letter of the law makes Islam a “national religion” (Troeltsch [1895/96] 2009, 527-528). The close connection of religion

<sup>12</sup> Troeltsch admits that the assumption of a development in the history of religion is indeed “a belief (*ein Glaube*), albeit a belief that can be grounded on a progress in the development of the human spirit that can be seen sporadically (*stellenweise*)” (Troeltsch [1895/96] 2009, 456). He concludes that individualization and universalization are the core characteristics of this development (Troeltsch [1895/96] 2009, 515-516; see also Lauster 2013, 436-437; Joas 2018, 34).

<sup>13</sup> *Wille* and *Wesen* are the core concepts Troeltsch uses in German. In their difference from Christianity, Troeltsch claims, Judaism is like Islam and Islam is like Judaism—both are bound by the law, particular rather than universal (Troeltsch [1912/13] 1991, 132).



with the nation (and of the nation with religion) is evidenced by the fact that with the expansion of Islam infidels are not converted, but simply taxed for the sake of the empire's expansion (Troeltsch [1895/96] 2009, 527-528). Correspondingly, Islam is spread through war (Troeltsch [1924b] 2006, 111-112), because as a religion of the law it cannot allow for a differentiation of religion from politics or economics (Troeltsch 1913e, 158-159; Troeltsch 1924b, 29; Troeltsch [1924c] 2006, 158-159).

Troeltsch's portrayal of Islam is paradigmatic for his theological method. Instead of isolating the Christian from the non-Christian by taking for granted that Christianity is true, the method of the history of religions school requires a comparison between the Christian and the non-Christian. Based on the scholar's account of developments in the history of all religions, she can evaluate which religions have and which religions have not (yet) accomplished these developments. For Troeltsch, the decisive developments are the universalization of religion, on the one hand, and the individualization of religion, on the other hand. If universality and individuality are taken as criteria to evaluate religions, Troeltsch concludes, Islam is superseded (Troeltsch [1895/96] 2009, 515-516). Christianity is the absolute religion.

Of course, Troeltsch's evaluation of the history of religions raises suspicions. Since his evaluative criteria correspond to Christianity, Christianity is *by definition* in the pole position of the development that the history of religion displays. Troeltsch's theology, then, is supersessionist.<sup>14</sup> However, it is crucial to note that it is Troeltsch's paradigm shift from the dogmatic to the historical method that allows for such suspicions in the first place. Without the "devil" of history that "takes the whole hand," Christianity would still be simply taken for granted as the one and only revelation of God. Moreover, Troeltsch admits that interpretative evaluation is not irrefutable evidence: "Certainty is always a matter of faith" (Troeltsch [1895/96] 2009, 436). Throughout his career, he becomes less and less convinced of his own conceptualization of absoluteness. The differences between the 1902 and the 1912 edition of

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<sup>14</sup> As Vincent Lloyd (2011, 29) argues: "Love opposed to law: that is the quintessential image of supersessionism." The contrast between love and law—with the Christian religion being the religion of love and the non-Christian religion being the religion of law—runs through the history of Christian theology, particularly its interpretation of Judaism. Since the Reformation, Protestants have interpreted Paul in a way that turned Protestantism as a religion of love against Catholicism as a religion of law, thus identifying Catholicism with the Judaism with which Paul grappled in his time. Biblical scholars have clarified convincingly that these interpretations are, to say the least, incorrect (see the classics Stendhal 1963; Sanders 1977). Nonetheless, these interpretations have had a huge impact on theology past and present (Svenungsson 2016). Although, historically, Islam comes after Christianity, the supersessionist approach has also been applied to Islam. Islam has been interpreted as a religion of the law by Christian theologians, even though both Qur'anic and post-Qur'anic texts counter such supersessionist interpretations by pointing to the significance of God's "loving compassion (*rahma*)" (Siddiqui 2012, 159).

his study on the absoluteness of Christianity, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums* (detailed in Troeltsch [1902/12] 1998), indicate Troeltsch's loss of confidence. In a review of a publication that recommends his study as the solution to the problem that Schleiermacher set up for theology, Troeltsch admits: "I have to confess that ... I have become conscious of the problems in my own position" (Troeltsch [1913] 2004, 666).

It could be concluded, then, that Masuzawa is correct. Troeltsch's interpretation of Islam demonstrates that the turn to the history of religions smuggles the supremacy of Christianity from theological into non-theological approaches to the study of religion. Troeltsch's "hidden supremacist pretensions" survive this liberal-theological turn. There seems to be a lot of life left in the supremacy smuggling. But there is more to Troeltsch's turn.

Throughout his interpretation of Islam, he insists that the investigation of similarities and dissimilarities between religions requires that there is something that these religions share (Troeltsch [1898b] 2009, 627). While most theological thought is concerned with the isolation of the Christian from the non-Christian (Troeltsch [1898b] 2009, 627), Troeltsch is interested in the shared something.<sup>15</sup> To account for it, his turn from concrete religion to conceptual religion is instrumental (Troeltsch [1895/96] 2009, 382-446). Only if the scholar abstracts from the differences that distinguish Christian and non-Christian religions, can she adumbrate what connects them: "transcendence (*Transzendenz*)" (Troeltsch [1898a] 2009, 702). Described differently, God reveals Godself in all (Abrahamic) religions.<sup>16</sup> Theologically, the assumption that God reveals Godself in all religions is neither shocking nor surprising today—indeed it might be a stance of what Masuzawa mocks as "good public policy"—but it has crucial consequences. According to Troeltsch, the revelation of God inside rather than outside history, *through* the history of religions, requires the scholar to think history as unfixed and unfinished.<sup>17</sup> It cannot be closed; it is "unabgeschlossen," open and open-ended (Troeltsch [1898a] 2009, 701). Pointing to the dynamic developments of Christianity past and present, Troeltsch insists that the corollary of the open and open-ended history of religions is that religions are "undefinable" (Troeltsch [1898a] 2009, 701). From

<sup>15</sup> Masuzawa refers to the "affinity, if not identity, of all religions" in Troeltsch's thinking (Masuzawa 2005, 315).

<sup>16</sup> However, Troeltsch still distinguishes between "higher" and "lower" religions. The distinction is highlighted where Troeltsch encourages mission of lower religions and discourages mission of higher religions (Troeltsch [1907] 2014; Troeltsch 1913d).

<sup>17</sup> In *The Christian Faith*, Troeltsch refers to a turn from the "mechanic" to the "dynamic" concept of revelation (which includes "reproductive revelation") to make his case for revelation through history (Troeltsch [1912/13] 1991, 39-51).

his theological to his philosophical writings, Troeltsch insists on what Friedrich Wilhelm Graf has convincingly (albeit untranslatably) captured as “systemkonstitutive Unabgeschlossenheit,” the openness that is constitutive for the system (Graf 1984, 230). Admittedly, Troeltsch explicates this openness only for the Christian religion rather than the non-Christian religions (Schmiedel 2018). But if the openness is due to the transcendent, a God who reveals Godself in *all* religions, then *all* religions are beyond conceptual control.

The consequence of Troeltsch’s turn from concrete religions to conceptual religion is that Islam too is to be interpreted as undefinable. Both the openness and the open-endedness of Islam call any comparative history that claims to be capable of evaluating religions into question. Supremacy, on Troeltsch’s interpretation, is a stopgap, provisional rather than permanent. Troeltsch’s thinking and talking about God points to both the problems and the promises of his theology for today, because it concurrently constructs and collapses the supremacy smuggling for which the legacy of theological liberalism has been criticized.

To summarize, Troeltsch approaches Islam in the context of a conceptualization of religion that criticizes both theological and non-theological reductionisms. Masuzawa is correct that Troeltsch’s shift from concrete to conceptual religion secretly smuggles the superiority of Christianity from the theological to the non-theological study of religion. Troeltsch’s interpretation of Islam as a religion of the law that lacks universality and individuality, then, cannot be circumvented by pointing to the fact that he is caught in the clutches of the clichés about Islam that were communicated at the time. The claim to supremacy is integral to the method that deduces criteria from the development of religions throughout history in order to evaluate this development. However, Christianity cannot claim straightforward supremacy because Islam is also accepted as a revelation of God. Islam, then, ought to be approached like Christianity—which is to say, historically rather than dogmatically. But here Troeltsch does not follow his own method through: Islam is described and defined, while Christianity remains undefinable. What would have happened to Troeltsch’s supremacy smuggling if he had interpreted Islam as open and open-ended? In a letter written in 1900, Troeltsch talks about a visit to Constantinople that offers a glimpse of a response: “It was straightforwardly wonderful, the most splendid and the strangest that I have ever seen. I was in the area of a foreign religion for the first time” (Troeltsch [1900] 2009, 754). The alterity that he encounters—in German, Troeltsch uses the superlative of “fremdartig” which could also be rendered as “most alien”—might explain his conclusion that “Islam is not such a bad religion” (Troeltsch [1900] 2009, 754).

## 2 Islam as a Philosophical Trope

The connection of Christianity with Europe (and of Europe with Christianity) is central to Troeltsch's philosophy. Elaborated during the Wilhelmine and Weimar epochs, Troeltsch's conceptualization of "cultural circles (*Kulturkreise*)" connects cultures with religions and religions with cultures.<sup>18</sup> Masuzawa argues that

Once the Christian religion is ... fused with the historical destiny of Europe ..., there resurfaces anew, in Troeltsch's writing, the question of the universality of Christianity... This resurgence, as might be expected, is not without some ominous implications (Masuzawa 2005, 321).<sup>19</sup>

With reference to "The Place of Christianity among the World Religions," Masuzawa pinpoints three of Troeltsch's claims: Christianity shaped Europe in the past; Christianity shapes Europe in the present; and, without Christianity, Europe will end in catastrophe. Moreover, since Christianity is connected to such a central cultural circle as Europe, the circle itself is a manifestation of God. "What is most remarkable here," Masuzawa explains, "is not the ... self-congratulatory appraisal of Christian Europe ... but rather the forcefulness of the fusion" of Europe with Christianity and of Christianity with Europe (Masuzawa 2005, 322).<sup>20</sup> According to Masuzawa, the corollary of Troeltsch's forceful fusion is his account of Europe as a culturally superior "totality" (Masuzawa 2005, 322).<sup>21</sup> Christianity belongs to Europe as much as Europe belongs to Christianity. Masuzawa again:

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<sup>18</sup> For Troeltsch's conceptualization of cultural circles, his mammoth studies on historicism (Troeltsch [1922] 2008 and Troeltsch [1924] 2006) are crucial.

<sup>19</sup> Masuzawa argues that Troeltsch's "view ... is consistent with those of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers' intent on appropriating Christianity ... exclusively for the West while drawing a delicate line of separation between European Christianity and its Semitic-Oriental origin" (Masuzawa 2005, 320). For Troeltsch, however, the line between origin and outcome is much more blurred than she admits. Troeltsch considers the Jew Jesus to be "the classic" of Christianity which means that Christians have to return to him again and again (Coakely 1988; Schmiedel 2017, 250-260).

<sup>20</sup> Masuzawa refers to Troeltsch as an advocate for European "Christendom" (Masuzawa 2005, 322). However, if European Christendom is understood as the identification of Christianity with culture across the continent of Europe, Troeltsch is rather a critic of Christendom. He insists on the difference between Christianity and culture, the identification of which he sees as "pure superficiality" (Troeltsch [1895/96] 2009, 406; see also Joas 2018, 29-30).

<sup>21</sup> Masuzawa argues that according to Troeltsch, the "identity" of either a non-European Christian or of a non-Christian European "has to be presumed essentially split" (Masuzawa 2005, 322). However, her argument rests on a hidden shift from the question of religion as a characteristic of peoples to religion as a characteristic of persons. Troeltsch refers to a *cultural circle* here. Nowhere is it stated that his argument holds for each and every person in the circle.

In sum, the question of ... the universality of Christianity is finally brought to a standstill, as the problem comes to rest in a state of profound ambivalence. On the one hand, it is no longer tenable, if one is to remain consistent with the lessons of history, to count on the future hegemony... But on the other hand, the dream of unity and universality remains very much viable (Masuzawa 2005, 318).

According to Masuzawa, Troeltsch claims that each cultural circle has its religion and each religion has its cultural circle. What she calls “the European expansion project,” then, is invested or injected with the significance of the supremacy of Christianity by Troeltsch (Masuzawa 2005, 323). “Perhaps in the end,” Masuzawa adds, “even the return of the ... universality may not have been out of reach” (Masuzawa 2005, 324).

However, Troeltsch’s “The Place of Christianity among the World Religions”—the only text that Masuzawa references for reflection on Troeltsch’s conceptualization of cultural circles—is taken from a series of lectures that he had prepared for delivery in England and Scotland in the aftermath of the world war (Hübinger 2006). Troeltsch was the first German scholar who had been invited to the United Kingdom since the war ended (Chapman 2010b). What runs through the lectures that Troeltsch never delivered because he died prior to his journey is a passionate plea for the reconstruction of European culture on a continent devastated by conflict: “Europeanism (*Europäismus*)” is Troeltsch’s central category (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 164; 1020-1048; see also Schmiedel 2015). While Masuzawa reads Troeltsch’s text as a text about empire, its context suggests that it is a text about the end of empire. Troeltsch’s core concern is the (re)construction of Europe, it is less about external colonialization than about internal communication.

Troeltsch’s core concern comes through in his conceptualization of the cultural circle of Europe, where Islam appears again and again. Throughout, his philosophical interpretation of Islam repeats his theological interpretation of Islam. Rather idiosyncratically, Troeltsch claims that Islam “arabicized (*arabisiert*)” its monotheistic predecessors, turning the resulting religion into a political principle with military power (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 1045). According to Troeltsch, it is *the* limitation of Islam that it intertwines economics and politics with religion (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 1045). Whereas the history of Christianity during the Middle Ages shows how “powers that are dependent on each other make pacts”—pacts that retain (at least) an analytical distinction between the religious and the non-religious realm—Islam is characterized by their complete and comprehensive identification.<sup>22</sup> The principle of the caliphate is a case in point for Troeltsch (Troeltsch 1924a, 62).

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<sup>22</sup> In German, Troeltsch writes “Vereinerlebung” (Troeltsch 1913e, 158).

The comparison illustrates that the Middle Ages are crucial for Troeltsch's characterization of the oriental and the occidental cultural circle. First and foremost, Troeltsch announces that "Middle Ages (*Mittelalter*)" is not a useful category for historiography. "For between what should it be the middle?" (Troeltsch [1903] 2014, 71). As a category, he argues, it is arbitrarily couched between two periods, although it is not the middle between them in terms of its character. To account for the character of "the so-called Middle Ages" (Troeltsch [1903] 2014, 71), Troeltsch had coined the concept of "*Einheitskultur*" in his *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*: a unified and unifying culture in which one cannot distinguish between the religious and the non-religious realms of society (Troeltsch 1912, 223; see also Köpf 1993). Church exercises comprehensive (catholic) control. Prior to the European Enlightenment, this culture of unity characterized both the oriental and the occidental cultural circle.

The reason for their convergence during the Middle Ages is to be found in their roots. In his review of Hermann Graf Keyserling's *Das Reisetagebuch eines Philosophen*, Troeltsch insists that the two cultural circles that correspond to the three Abrahamic religions—orient and occident—have a "common characterization (*gemeinsames Gepräge*)" (Troeltsch [1920] 2011, 488). "Hebraism (*Hebraismus*)" and "Hellenism (*Hellenismus*)" are at the core of all Abrahamic religions, a core that impacted the development of both occidental and oriental cultural circle up to the culture of unity in the Middle Ages (Troeltsch [1920] 2011, 489). However, in Europe the Enlightenment—according to Troeltsch, prompted and provoked by the Wars of Religion that raged across the continent during the seventeenth century—ended the culture of unity (Troeltsch [1903] 2014, 72-73). By contrast, Islam has sustained the unified and unifying culture. For the comparison between oriental and occidental cultural circles, then, the past displays similarities, while the present displays dissimilarities. The European Enlightenment distinguishes the one from the other. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Troeltsch's interpretation of Islam(s) past and present, it shows that the fusion of Christianity with Europe and of Europe with Christianity might not be as forceful as Masuzawa suggests.

According to Troeltsch, "totalities (*Totalitäten*)"—like the totality of the cultural circle of Europe—cannot be isolated from each other (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 246). On the contrary, the scholar has to take the "interweavement (*Verschlingung*)" of these totalities into account in order to arrive at their characterization (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 246). The interweavement is so ingrained in history that the scholar would, if she followed it through to the end, conclude with humanity as a totality (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 246). But Troeltsch is

careful *not* to follow it so far. “Humanity” is conceptualized differently in different cultural circles which is why Troeltsch characterizes it as a “conceptual chimera (*Begriffsgespenst*)” (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 246). “What do we know about humanity?” (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 378). There have been encounters between Europeans and non-Europeans, but in order to assess humanity as a totality, humanity would have to be unified in principle and in practice. Troeltsch is under no illusions about the character of such a unity: “Should it ever eventuate, it would be political-social events that could result in a new ideal, which would differ from anything that is a fixed and finished truth for us Europeans today” (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 379).<sup>23</sup> Troeltsch’s conceptualization of cultural circles is a tool of “European de-centering” rather than of European centering, as Austin Harrington convincingly clarified (Harrington 2004, 484). Troeltsch, then, cautions—*pace* Masuzawa—against the Eurocentrism that smuggles supremacy (Harrington 2004; Harrington 2012; Harrington 2016). Behind such Eurocentrism lurk, as Troeltsch pithily puts it, “the conqueror” and “the colonizer” (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 1025).

If Troeltsch’s philosophy is about de-centering rather than centering Europe inside and outside the academy, his insistence on the difference between oriental and occidental cultural circle is much more critical and much more careful with claims to supremacy than Masuzawa recognizes. Through Hebraism and Hellenism—the prophetic reformation is still the central category for Troeltsch—the Islamic orient is connected to the Christian occident as much as the Christian occident is connected to the Islamic orient. However, the connection is not enough to presume a common cultural circle, because such a presumption would smuggle supremacy by imposing the standards of the one onto the standards of the other. There is no universal history for Troeltsch (Harrington 2016, 244-255). Cultures—European and non-European—are embedded and embodied in contexts which can be distinguished according to different paths of diachronic and synchronic development. The European context differs from the non-European context. But the difference does not allow for claims to supremacy of the one over the other. There is no a-historical—which is to say, universal or universalized—criterion to assess the differences of developmental paths. History is not universalizing but de-universalizing. For Troeltsch, Europeanism is the opposite of Eurocentrism. In order to find the values that are valid for a people in a cultural circle, the scholar needs to study the history of the cultural circle: “we do not have to marshal humanity

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<sup>23</sup> In German, Troeltsch writes: “Sollte eine solche jemals eintreten, dann wird es durch politisch-soziale Ereignisse zuerst geschehen und dann eine neue Idealbildung hervorrufen, die sicher anders sein wird, als alles, was heute für uns Abendländer ausgemachte Wahrheit ist.”

every time” (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 379). Troeltsch points to Gotthold E. Lessing’s “Parable of the Rings” here, in which Lessing “burst through his own humanity-rationalism in an unnoticed but noticeable way” (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 379).

Troeltsch’s comparison of orient and occident is crucial to his conversation with Carl Heinrich Becker, who is commonly considered a founding father of Islamic studies in Germany. Academically, both thinkers were concerned with past and present conceptualizations of cultural circles. However, Becker criticized the distinction between the occidental and the oriental circle that Troeltsch had drawn in his conception of Europeanism. In “Der Islam im Rahmen einer allgemeinen Kulturgeschichte,” a study that approaches the interpretation of Islam within the context of cultural history, published in 1922, Becker argues against Troeltsch’s distinction by drawing attention to the overlap of both circles in the history and heritage of antiquity: “Hellenism (*Hellenismus*)” (Becker 1922, 23; 24; 34). Crucially, Troeltsch concurs with Becker that orient and occident concur in Hebraism and Hellenism. He even agrees that Islam cultivated these commonalities—particularly the philosophy of the Greeks—in a superior way (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 1044). Since the philosophy of the Greeks is crucial to Europe—Troeltsch accepts that Hegel starts the history of humanity with the Greeks, albeit only if “humanity” is melted down to European rather than non-European humanity (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 1044)—Europe would not be Europe without Islam. “I can only concur with the highly interesting study,” Troeltsch concludes about Becker’s “Der Islam im Rahmen einer allgemeinen Kulturgeschichte” (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 1045-1046). Islam is Europe’s “nearest neighbor” (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 1044).

However, *methodologically*, Troeltsch insists, there is a difference between the descriptive and the prescriptive scholarly standpoint: the historian is no philosopher of history and the philosopher of history is no historian, although both need each other. For a philosopher who is interested in the (re)construction of a cultural circle in the present rather than the past, the conceptualization of culture is not backward-looking but forward-looking—it is about the *future* (Chapman 2001, 138-186). Accordingly, Troeltsch writes about the commonality between orient and occident: “First and foremost, however, this is only ... commonality of the foundations (*Grundlagen*), but not of the purposes (*Ziele*)” (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 1045).<sup>24</sup> The purpose of the development of the orient differs from the purpose

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<sup>24</sup> Historically, Troeltsch argues, the differences in the engagement with the common roots of Hellenism and Hebraism between the three Abrahamic religions must have causes themselves, “which ... means that the matter was different in Islam from the very beginning” (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 1045-1046).



of the development of the occident. Hence, from the standpoint of the philosopher, Troeltsch criticizes Becker's conclusion that orient and occident could be considered one cultural circle (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 1044).

Regardless of how Troeltsch describes and defines the purposes of cultural circles—for Europe, he sees it in the development towards personalism (Polke 2018)—his philosophical argument repeats his theological argument: the history of cultural circles is open and open-ended. Can there be a rapprochement of Christianity with Islam? Can there be a rapprochement of Islam with Christianity? What will the future look like? For a prognosis about the future of humanity, Troeltsch argues, Islam is “one of the most impenetrable mysteries, about the solution of which even the most renowned experts ... can only make conjectures” (Troeltsch 1913e, 159). He himself remains skeptical. Throughout his writings, both negative and positive scenarios can be found; the negative one talks about colonization and conflict, while the positive one talks about communication and compromise (Troeltsch 1913d, 801). Troeltsch's scenario of compromise shows that he still sees Christianity as superior: “it is ... thinkable that Islam ... undergoes a development similar to Christian Europe ... that could bring it into inner contact (*Berührung*) with us, given the common theistic foundation” (Troeltsch 1913d, 801).<sup>25</sup> He suggests that all three Abrahamic religions could find unity in their central concerns which “would in no way preclude that one could have one's own characteristic position, but could possibly lead to contact” (Troeltsch 1913d, 802). He adds: “How else could one think about the future development?” (Troeltsch 1913d, 802).<sup>26</sup>

Again, it could be concluded that Masuzawa is correct. Troeltsch's interpretation of Islam demonstrates that his conceptualization of cultural circles sustains the supremacy smuggling from the theological into the non-theological approaches to the study of religion. Troeltsch's “hidden supremacist pretensions” are still alive in the conceptualization and characterization of cultural circles. However, again, there is more to Troeltsch's comparison between oriental and occidental cultural circle. In his lectures for England and Scotland, he explains that “there is nothing timeless” about cultural circles except their “drive (*Drang*)” to create culture in the first place (Troeltsch [1924a] 2006, 85). They remain “mysterious (*rätselhaft*)” (Troeltsch [1924a] 2006, 85). The reference to mystery suggests that Troeltsch's allocation of a religion to its culture and of a culture to its religion retains his theology in his

<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Troeltsch speculates about a “modernized (*modernisiert*)” and “europeanized (*europäisiert*)” Islam, suggesting that he takes both to be synonymous (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 1045).

<sup>26</sup> Troeltsch points to the Parliament of World Religions with its congresses in Chicago (Troeltsch 1913d, 803).

philosophy. Troeltsch invests cultural circles with the transcendent. Described differently, the revelation of God runs through the histories of cultures (connected to their religions) and through the histories of religions (connected to their cultures). According to Troeltsch, then, God also keeps cultural circles open and open-ended.

The decisive difference between his theological interpretation of Islam and his philosophical interpretation of Islam is that the supremacy smuggling is *not* integral to Troeltsch's conceptualization of cultural circles. Troeltsch insists on the difference between the oriental and the occidental in order *not* to impose European standards on non-Europeans (or non-European standards on Europeans). There is no stopgap of supremacy left. Again, then, Troeltsch's thinking and talking about God points to both the problems and the promises of his philosophy for today, because it concurrently constructs and collapses the supremacy smuggling for which he has been criticized.

To summarize, Troeltsch approaches Islam in the context of a conceptualization of cultural circles that aims to reconstruct European culture in the aftermath of the world war. In as much as each culture has its religion and as each religion has its culture for Troeltsch, Masuzawa is correct that he invests Europeanism with theological significance. Moreover, he secretly smuggles the superiority of Christianity into his account of Europeanism. Troeltsch's interpretation of Islam as a culture that lacks any differentiation between the religious and the non-religious, sustained and spread through war, is in the clutches of the clichés about Islam that were communicated at the time. However, Troeltsch's claim to supremacy is not integral to his method of cultural comparisons. On the contrary, Troeltsch differentiates the oriental cultural circle from the occidental cultural circle in order to avoid Eurocentrism undermining his Europeanism. But, again, Troeltsch does not follow his own method through: Islam is described and defined, while Christianity remains undefinable, although the investment of both cultural circles with theological significance should have kept both of them open and open-ended. In the letter written in 1900 about the visit to Constantinople, Troeltsch continues the train of thought about Islam. The Turks he met were the "most decent people", but "to live with such a religion" is possible for non-Europeans but impossible for Europeans (Troeltsch, quoted in Albrecht 2009, 754). Although the sentence sounds like supremacy smuggling again, Troeltsch's conceptualization of cultural circles suggests it is aimed at European de-centering rather than European centering. European culture must not be imposed on non-Europeans, while non-European culture must not be imposed on Europeans.

### **3 Transgressive Theo-logy**

Troeltsch studied Islam by reading secondary rather than primary sources, but mastered the manifold materials that were published about Islam inside and outside Germany in his time (Rendtorff 1998, 25). However, when he was asked to examine a doctoral dissertation that also covered Islam in 1910, Troeltsch declined: “It is ... impossible for me to examine the dissertation because the sections on Islam go beyond my knowledge,” he responds to the request from his dean (Troeltsch [1910] 2016, 381). Assuming that Troeltsch was not only avoiding yet another commitment, the care and caution he displayed here could and should have had more impact on his interpretations of Islam. In these interpretations, Islam is what Joshua Ralston calls a “Christian trope” (Ralston 2017).

In a succinct study of the role of the references to Islam in a number of Reformed theologians from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, Ralston shows that there are three shared habits in the referencing of Islam that run through all of them: Islam is referenced to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity; Islam is referenced to discredit one’s opponents in the debate about Christianity; and Islam is referenced in a comparison between the doctrines of both religions (Ralston 2017, 773-775). While the comparison could open Christianity for dialogue with Islam, it demands much more engagement with Islam than the theologians Ralston has treated allow for. Troeltsch’s thinking is not investigated by Ralston, but it displays continuity to all of the habits he analyzed. For Troeltsch, Islam is not interesting in itself. Instead, it is a way to get to the issue that is interesting in itself, which might be why Islam is approached indirectly rather than directly. In Troeltsch’s theological interpretation of Islam, the characteristics that are seen as positive are those that are shared with Christianity and the characteristics that are seen as negative are those that are not shared with Christianity.

Troeltsch aims to account for the supremacy of Christianity through historical analysis. In Troeltsch’s philosophical interpretation of Islam, however, the reconstruction of Europeanism in the aftermath of the world war is the core concern. Here, the comparison between the occidental and the oriental cultural circle aims for the critique rather than the confirmation of claims to supremacy. Nonetheless, throughout Troeltsch’s thinking, Islam remains a theological and a philosophical Christian trope.

While Masuzawa has strikingly shown the supremacy smuggling in a lot of the scholarship on religion that came to be called liberal, in her account of Troeltsch, the

criticism goes too far and too fast. Given that the *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* of Troeltsch's writings fills more than twenty-five volumes, I am uneasy with the comprehensive conclusion she draws from her reading of two of his articles.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Masuzawa has not taken any of the studies about Troeltsch into account. Most of these studies are published by theologians, but is that enough of a reason not to read them?<sup>28</sup>

Masuzawa's critique of theology might be the central cause of her, at best, imprecise and idiosyncratic interpretation of Troeltsch. Towards the end of *The Invention of World Religions*, she admits that she has cast theologians as "petty criminals" (Masuzawa 2005, 328). Although she concedes that her casting might be unfair to theologians because it equates theology "with dogmatic stances of Christian hegemonic assumptions" (Masuzawa 2005, 328), this concession is not enough for her to read and reflect on theology:

I can only add that I personally do not know how today's theologians stand on these issues that troubled Troeltsch, for example, and I do not understand theology ... adequately enough to entertain any definitive views regarding its relation to ... whatever is called "study of religion" (Masuzawa 2005, 328).

A short survey of the theological studies published in the last twenty or thirty years—especially studies on Troeltsch—could have confirmed that theologians have filled libraries with the question of how theology relates to the study of religion. Interestingly, it is the scholars who work in the wake of Troeltsch's interdisciplinary thinking that have been especially concerned with interrelations of these disciplines. Their concern with the possibilities and the impossibilities of normativity in both theological and non-theological research on religion comes close to Masuzawa's.

What is at stake here is ... whether the world religions discourse can be in any way enlisted ... on the side of historical scholarship. Or, put another way, whether the idea of the diversity of religion is not, instead, the very thing that facilitates the transference and transmutation of a particular absolutism (Masuzawa 2005, 326-327).

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<sup>27</sup> To be precise, Masuzawa mentions the English translations of Troeltsch's *The Social Teaching of the Christian Church* (2 vols., Troeltsch 1981) and "The Dogmatics of the History-of-Religions School" (Troeltsch 1991a), but only "Christianity and the History of Religion," (Troeltsch 1991b) and "The Place of Christianity among the World Religions" (Troeltsch 1923) are discussed in any detail (Masuzawa 2005, see also Masuzawa 2000).

<sup>28</sup> The critique of theologians by scholars of religion comes close the critique of scholars of religion by theologians. Here, Masuzawa mirrors John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason. Second Edition* (Milbank 2006). Interestingly, both take Troeltsch to be the example of their enemy: Masuzawa sees him as a theologian in the disguise of a scholar of religion. Milbank sees him as a scholar of religion in the disguise of a theologian.

When Masuzawa concludes that “we have good reasons to suspect that the discourse of world religions came into being precisely as a makeshift solution to the particular predicament that confounded European Christianity at the end of the nineteenth century, that is to say, as a covert way out of the profound conceptual difficulty confronting Europe,” she might be correct for a lot of scholars that have been labelled as liberal (Masuzawa 2005, 327). However, for Troeltsch, the case is more complicated and more complex.

History, including the comparative history of world religions, is indeed a challenge for Troeltsch’s supremacist stance. Although he confines the concept of absoluteness throughout the course of his career—from the absoluteness of Christianity to the absoluteness of Christianity *for us*—he becomes less and less convinced that Christianity can be considered absolute at all. Consequently, he elaborates on the conceptualization of cultural circles in order to ask and answer—in a philosophical rather than a theological register—which way(s) of life can and which way(s) of life cannot be characteristic of Europe in the aftermath of the world war.

The fact that he approaches the question by way of a comparison of oriental and occidental cultural circles is instructive for today’s public and political debates about a so-called “clash of civilizations.” Samuel P. Huntington posits that since the end of the Cold War, politics has been driven by conflicts between civilizations. Religion is central to civilizations—“most important,” he insists (Huntington 1993, 24-25)—because “religion discriminates ... among people” (Huntington 1993, 27). Through religion, people decide who counts as insider and who counts as outsider, which is to say: who clashes with whom. Whatever one thinks of Huntington’s clash, is it simply re-coding the eighteenth and nineteenth century quest for the absolute (Huntington 1993; 1996; see also Adib-Moghaddam 2011)?

Both Troeltsch’s way of conceptualizing and Troeltsch’s way of comparing cultural circles need to be criticized, but his methodological awareness already distinguishes him from today’s constructors of civilizations. Methodologically, Troeltsch is much more sophisticated. Countering the assumption that cultural circles can be confined, he contends that there has been change and contact between civilizations. While such contact might be either conflictual or convivial, civilizations can never be approached from a neutral standpoint because any and all standpoints are always already shaped by culture. Crucially, for Troeltsch, the consequence is to be careful and critical with any claim to supremacy, including claims to the supremacy of one’s own standpoint. He demands European de-

centering rather than European centering. In any case, with the temperatures raised in the European and the American public square, Masuzawa's critique of the quest for supremacy is crucial both inside and outside the academy. But the critique of Troeltsch needs to acknowledge—as I have aimed to argue—that his interdisciplinary thinking is *both* problematic *and* promising. He concurrently constructs and collapses the supremacy smuggling for which the legacy of theological liberalism is criticized.

Crucially, it is his theo-logy—his thinking and talking about God—that offers the most promising pointers for research on religion today. Troeltsch points to the “notion of God (*Gottesgedanke*),” pitting the more open “notion” against the closed “concept” and the closed “concept” against the more open “notion” (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 376). For Troeltsch, then, God reveals Godself through history, but the revelation cannot be controlled conceptually (Coakley 1988, 81-87; 96-99). In his lectures for England and Scotland, Troeltsch tackles the lack of conceptual control with regard for the role of religion in the public sphere (Chapman 2001, 178-186). He argues that a God who reveals God through history is both immanent and transcendent, somewhat knowable and somewhat unknowable. There can be no conclusive conceptualization of criteria to evaluate religions (as opposed to cultures) or cultures (as opposed to religions), because God is ultimately unknowable (Coakley 1988, 82). Hence, the notion of God calls each and every claim to absoluteness into question (Troeltsch [1922] 2008, 377; see also Schwöbel 2000; Schmiedel 2015). Troeltsch's theo-logy, then, can undergird a critique of supremacy smuggling because it keeps thinking about God open and open-ended. Such openness in the interpretation of God is characteristic of the legacy of theological liberalism. It allows for both criticism and self-criticism when comparing what is Christian to what is non-Christian (von Stosch 2012), and can thus call any and all supremacy smuggling into question. The fact that Troeltsch has not followed this openness through in his interpretations of Islam, should not cloud the cutting edge of his theo-logy.

In conclusion, then, what could be called Troeltsch's theo-logical deconstruction of the clash of civilizations makes Masuzawa's genealogy of supremacy-smuggling liberals not only more complicated and more complex, but also casts doubt on Troeltsch as the figurehead of a liberalism that camouflaged its claim to supremacy in the language of world religions. Such doubt might prove pertinent to think through the promise of Troeltsch's interdisciplinary legacy for today, regardless of whether it is or is not labelled “liberal.” Troeltsch's theo-logy is, Masuzawa suggests, transgressive of today's standards of science and scholarship because it takes the claim that God reveals God through the history of religions seriously. But Troeltsch's theo-logical transgression probably could and perhaps

should be a way of tackling supremacy smuggling in the name of the transcendent inside and outside the academy.<sup>29</sup>

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