

BOOK REVIEW

**Theology Compromised:
Schleiermacher, Troeltsch, and the Possibility
of a Sociological Theology**

by Matthew Ryan Robinson and Evan F. Kuehn

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Recent Western scholarship in social theory has seen a renewed interest in questions of theology and its relationship with other disciplines. For instance, what does sociology have to do with Christian theology? This is a significant question that leads to more questions: Is there an intersectional relationship between sociology and theology? What role does sociological inquiry have, if any, in the construction of contemporary theology? For hardcore positivists, there are many ways to answer this question. However, the dominant response is that theology must be subject to the scrutiny of the social sciences, especially sociological questions. At least on the surface, sociology and theology have often been viewed as oppositions. The opposition model seeks to isolate Christian theology from public discourse. In *Theology Compromised: Schleiermacher, Troeltsch, and the Possibility of a Sociological Theology* (2019), Matthew Ryan Robinson and Evan F. Kuehn negate the opposition model. Robinson and Kuehn demonstrate how the implications of sociology (social formation) in theological reflection shape the nature and content of Christian doctrine, and vice versa. In other words, Robinson and Kuehn highlight the dialectical, mutual dynamic of the development of theological reflection and societal evolution.

The book is divided into six brief chapters. In Chapter 1, Robinson and Kuehn offer an overview of how systematic theology and social formation mutually respond to and produce one another, drawing chiefly from the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Friedrich Naumann. Following Schleiermacher and Ernst Troeltsch, Robinson and Kuehn reveal the evolving history of theological methods (not to be equated with a vulgar relativism) and the transformation of systematic theology. On the other hand, they also show the dramatic structural transformation of modern society, particularly in the twentieth century. Robinson and Kuehn write,

Taken together, the historicist and phenomenological programmes meant that not only exegesis, but all work in theology now needed to be done historically-critically, and this in turn required of contemporary systematic theology sensitivity to subjectivity-forming factors involved in the cultivation and expression of Christian practice and belief; factors

like class and economy (from Gutiérrez to Rieger), race and empire (from Cone to Kwok), gender and sexuality (from Schüssler-Fiorenza to Tonstad), language and forms of community (from Lindbeck to Hauerwas), health, environment, and others. All of these have presented strong challenges to theology done from on high and give new attention to doing theology “from below,” to borrow Pannenberg’s famous characterization (3).

For Robinson and Kuehn, the history of theology has come out of the reflection and struggle of Christian communities to solve their problems and address social changes (*die soziale Frage*), especially in nineteenth century Germany. In short, any Christian truth-claims at any given time or place are relative to, and only understandable in the specific social context and condition of that time or place.

In Chapter 2, Robinson and Kuehn discuss Ernst Troeltsch’s sociological and theological contributions that are continually overlooked, especially how Troeltsch understands the sociological account of the church (theories of the church) and his theory of compromise. Troeltsch examined the religious crisis of his day in terms of the absoluteness of Christianity versus social complexity, or the possibility of Christian standards of truth and value versus historical contingency. As is well known, Troeltsch developed four sociological forms of religious groups (church, sect, mysticism, and denomination) that are important for understanding his ecclesial approach.

Chapter 3 introduces and discusses Troeltsch’s use of compromise, which is central to his understanding of modern social development. For Robinson and Kuehn, compromise is the guiding principle of his sociological theology. Accordingly, Troeltsch’s notion of compromise, as a governing concept for understanding theology’s functions, is not a loss of human ideals, nor is it simply an inevitability, but rather the possibility of Christianity’s central ideas as a productive, positive mechanism that makes the Christian message relevant in contemporary society.

Chapter 4 extends this pragmatic approach to Christian participation in politics. For Robinson and Kuehn, Troeltsch’s theory of compromise demonstrates first that the practice of compromise connects to the prophetic announcement of human hope, and second that it emphasizes temporary synthesis and communal consensus to overcome theological paralysis, specifically either-or debates in theological discourse.

In Chapter 5, Robinson and Kuehn discuss Hans Joas’ theory of value formation with reference to Troeltsch’s work (Joas’ Troeltsch interpretation). For Robinson and Kuehn, Joas’ theory of the historical genesis of values contributes directly to the development of the parameters of Troeltsch’s understanding of religious groups and society. In examining Joas’ promising re-application of the work of Troeltsch, Robinson and Kuehn believe it will overcome the challenge of vulgar historicity, especially the task of defending a universal ideal such as the concept of human rights based on human sacredness. Furthermore, Robinson and Kuehn argue that religious organization has always been about comprehensive systems of meaning.

In the final chapter, Robinson and Kuehn explore another German sociologist Niklas Luhmann to read Troeltsch's theory of compromise. Since compromise and communication are social phenomena intimately bound up with one another, Robinson and Kuehn argue that community forms through compromises achieved in communication. Despite all risks, Robinson and Kuehn contend, this theoretical lens (Schleiermacher, Troeltsch, Joas, and Luhmann) shows that all religion, including Christian theology, is historically situated, and that all meaning is temporal and contextual (theological reflections and interpretations), without giving up the universal significance of the Christian message.

By translating the works of Schleiermacher and Troeltsch and utilizing the contemporary sociological thoughts of Joas and Luhmann, Robinson and Kuehn have made fresh forays into the thoughts of Schleiermacher (the functional differentiation of religion) and Troeltsch (the theory of compromise). They offer a unique insight into the social historiography of Christian doctrines on the one hand, and how to overcome the trap of vulgar historicity or relativism on the other. In the context of non-Western theologies, however, does it have a future with the emergence of post-colonial and de-colonial thought? Following Dipesh Chakrabarty's notion of 'provincializing Europe,' *Theology Compromised* is a concrete example of provincializing western Christian thought. As mentioned above, Robinson and Kuehn give a compelling account that all Christian doctrine is historically and contextually constructed. Like de-colonial thought, *Theology Compromised* reveals that there is no zero-point epistemology. Zero-point epistemology suggests that one knowledge fits all, 'first in Europe and then elsewhere.' Similarly, contextual theologians contend that 'there is no such one theology fits all.'

Nevertheless, this in no way diminishes the caliber of this book. Robinson and Kuehn have written a richly detailed and compelling account, and smartly situate Christian theology as tapping into broader social forces by pointing out that while religious meaning might change, its ideals are consistently affirming its universality. This book is a must-read for those who want to understand the uneasy relationship between sociology and Christian theology. It contains important intellectual history, suggestive integrative theoretical ideas, and might indeed inspire young scholars to return to German Protestant theologians and social thinkers as they engage contemporary debates within sociology and theology. It promotes the integration of ideas from relevant disciplines in seeking to resist a straightforwardly oppositional view between sociology and theology. As demonstrated in the book, Robinson's and Kuehn's project is rooted in the evangelical Protestant tradition, yet it is not afraid to learn from a broad array of social sciences, specifically sociology. It has a great deal to offer not only the small group of those interested in the history of Christian doctrine and its sociological implication, but also the much larger group of scholars, especially non-Western scholars interested in the possibility of sociological theology. Robinson's and Kuehn's creative analysis of the work of two important German thinkers and practitioners, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Ernst Troeltsch, also helps us see the possibility of sociological theology. By way of reading Troeltsch's reception of

Schleiermacher, Robinson and Kuehn make an original contribution to debates about how theology can use and think with the tools of social theory in the 21st century. *Theology Compromised* is an invigorating reminder that the church can be one of the most adaptive, supple institutions in history in its fluid--- Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda. Needless to say, *Theology Compromised* is comprehensive, insightful, and provocative, and offers various nuances (Joas' affirmative genealogy and Luhmann's concept of transcendence) and methodological insights, especially for the pluralistic world.

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