

Schleiermacher for Lutherans

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Contemporary Lutheran estimation of Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher's thought (1768–1834) can be summarized by what American Lutheran theologian George A. Lindbeck calls “experiential-expressivism.”¹ Schleiermacher, according to the argument, sees religious experience as a pre-linguistic phenomenon. Language later “expresses” the primary experience, thereby linguistically determining the generic experience at a secondary level. Experience is primary; Christian discourse is only accidentally related to experience. In other words, experience is pitted in opposition to Scripture.

The problem with Schleiermacher is not new. Since the early twentieth century, Schleiermacher has been singled out for special attention. In the wake of World War I, theologians in Germany and Switzerland sought to articulate a theology that could counter the cultural-religious alliance with politics that fed Germany's nationalism. Emil Brunner, pastor and then later professor of theology, published a scathing criticism of Schleiermacher in 1924, a second edition followed in 1928, articulating the growing concern among theologians that the “liberal” theology of their predecessors had led to the catastrophic casualties in the trenches of the Great War.² Schleiermacher emerged in Brunner's book as representative of what had gone wrong: a “nature” mysticism connected to a philosophy of identity that stood behind religion's conflation with politics. While Brunner's view contains serious interpretative errors—Schleiermacher's mysticism has to do with the experience of the *Christus praesens* in the church and his philosophy is better aligned with a Kantian critical epistemology than a philosophy of identity—the suspicion remains in Lutheran circles that Schleiermacher advocates the mixing of God in human consciousness.³ Lutherans committed to the externality of God's word are anxious with Schleiermacher's interiority of consciousness. At stake is the gospel and its communication, or God's external word in Scripture.

In this essay I focus on Schleiermacher's concept of the "feeling of absolute dependence" in order to clarify the basic misunderstanding concerning an alleged opposition between experience and word. I will use the phrase to access Schleiermacher's thinking about Christian religious experience and how he connects the reality of Christ to the language of proclamation and doctrine. Hence a clarification of the meaning of the feeling of absolute dependence will show why Schleiermacher required a concept of religion in order to work out his theology, and how theology can account for the experience of Christ in necessary relation to Scripture, preaching, and doctrine. The result will, I hope, inspire Lutherans to appropriate Schleiermacher as conversation partner, one who challenges and inspires dynamic and constructive theological thinking.

In the first part of the essay I consider the description of religion that first introduced Schleiermacher as a major thinker on the world's stage. In 1799, between February and April, Schleiermacher wrote a set of five speeches: *On Religion: Speeches to its Culture Despisers*. Religion is a necessary dimension of human existence, Schleiermacher asserts, and in order properly to make it the object of derision, one should understand what the term means. I frame Schleiermacher's contribution to the concept of religious feeling in the Moravian context of his family and education. Pietism is the historical key to understanding Schleiermacher's sense for religious experience.

In the second part, I clarify the relation between the feeling of absolute dependence that Schleiermacher outlines in the "introduction" to his theological system, the *Christian Faith*, and its Christological determination. In the process I clarify the term of "immediate self-consciousness," and show how Schleiermacher's theory of religious consciousness is intimately related to his understanding that the redemption Jesus gives to believers is communicated through the preaching of the gospel. I connect Schleiermacher's understanding of theology in the context of his participation in the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810. It is significant for the history of modern theology that he assigns to theology a distinctive place among the other sciences (*Wissenschaften*) in the research university.

This is a good time in the trajectory of Schleiermacher scholarship to delve into his thought. Since 1989—the year in which the Berlin wall fell—a Schleiermacher “renaissance” has been taking place. His works are being critically edited in a complete edition, the *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, published by de Gruyter in Berlin.⁴ With new texts made public and older texts now available in a critical edition, scholars over the past three decades have carefully studied the basic concepts of Schleiermacher’s thought, analyzing his distinctive vocabulary and reading his works against a complicated background of post-Kantian, Romantic, and German Idealist thought. Careful work has clarified misconceptions that have accrued since Brunner’s polemical text, and has demonstrated the new directions of Schleiermacher’s thinking in the many areas of his expertise. Interpreters appreciate the interconnections between various disciplines, for example his psychology, his “dialectic” or philosophy, and religion. Furthermore, scholars are beginning to connect Schleiermacher’s contributions to broader discussions in religion, theology, and philosophy, and are thus translating Schleiermacher’s difficult language into more accessible terms.⁵ Finding out what Schleiermacher is up to has never been easier!

The Young Schleiermacher

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher was born on November 21, 1768, in Breslau, a town in Prussia. Crucial to the political dimension of his story is the geographical context. Schleiermacher spent most of his life in Prussia, one of the two most powerful of the roughly 350 German states in existence at that time. Friedrich Wilhelm had consolidated Prussia’s territory between 1640 and 1688. Friedrich II or the Great continued to align military power with the landed aristocracy. He ruled from 1740 to 1786 and it is after him that the theologian Schleiermacher was named.

Schleiermacher was born into a family of Reformed pastors. His mother, Elisabeth Maria Katharina Stubenrauch, was the daughter of a Reformed minister and elder sister to Samuel Ernst Timotheus Stubenrauch, who was instrumental in facilitating Friedrich’s studies in Halle and his eventual pastoral career. Gottlieb Schleiermacher,

Friedrich's father, was a second-generation Reformed minister and a military chaplain. He experienced a religious transformation in 1778 when camped with the Prussian army in Pless, near the Moravian colony of Gnadendorf. This awakening would profoundly shape Friedrich's piety and life. From then on, Friedrich's parents infused their household with Moravian Pietism. They educated their three children, Charlotte, Friedrich, and Carl, at home. When Friedrich was fourteen, he went to a Moravian boarding school in Niesky and two years later he entered the seminary at Barby, where he illicitly read Kant and Goethe. A profound crisis of faith at the age of eighteen ensued that would have significant consequences for Friedrich's intellectual and vocational path.

The crisis is documented in an exchange of letters with his father. In a letter dated to January 21, 1787, son Friedrich writes:

Faith is the regalia of the Godhead, you say. Alas! Dearest father, if you believe that without this faith no one can attain to salvation in the next world, nor to tranquility in this—and such, I know, is your belief—oh! then pray to God to grant it to me, for to me it is now lost. I cannot believe that he who called himself the Son of Man was the true, eternal God; I cannot believe that his death was a vicarious atonement.⁶

Daniel Schleiermacher expressed his shock, writing that his son “has crucified Christ, disturbed his late mother's rest, and made his stepmother weep . . . I must, for you no longer worship the God of your father, no longer kneel at the same altar with him.”⁷

The family drama was, however, tempered by Friedrich's request for permission to explore more intellectual possibilities at the University of Halle, the Prussian university infused with Enlightenment commitments. Friedrich's father respected the wish and concluded his letter with a gesture of peace. “I can add no more except the assurance that with sorrowing and heavy heart, I remain your deeply compassionate and loving father.”⁸

Thus Friedrich embarked on an intellectual journey that would permeate his piety with Enlightenment philosophy. He lived for two years with his uncle Stubenrauch in Halle, and then accompanied his uncle to a pastorate in Drossen, finally passing his first theological exams in April or May of 1790 in Berlin (with a grade of “passable”

in dogmatics!). Once Friedrich passed his second theological exams in February 1794, he began a pastoral career—his first post as assistant pastor in Landsberg—that preoccupied him for the rest of his life. Of note is that throughout these early years of travels, Friedrich wrote sketches in philosophical ethics and engaged the thought of Aristotle, Kant, Leibniz, and Spinoza. These writings contain the seeds of ideas Schleiermacher would develop throughout his career as a professor. His concerns in ethics were the ideas of the highest good and freedom, as well as a theory of individuality that could ground ethics in contrast to Kant's universal moral law.

Schleiermacher's appointment in 1796 (until 1802) as chaplain in Berlin's Charité hospital meant that he came into contact with a third intellectual movement that would, in addition to Pietism and the Enlightenment, have a transformative effect on his thinking about religion. He became associated with the Romantics, a circle of poets and writers whose conversation was characterized by "free sociality," and who created a particular rhetoric in order to articulate the fundamental human longing for, but never access to, the "infinite." The designation "Romantic" comes from the German for novel, *Roman*, in particular, the *Bildungsroman*, or stories of individual maturation through struggle, that Goethe had introduced to the literary world. As a welcome guest in the Berlin salons, Schleiermacher became friends with Henriette Herz, the daughter of Moses Mendelssohn, and the Romantic poet, Friedrich Schlegel, with whom he would embark on a project of translating Plato into German, a project that Schleiermacher finished himself. It was at 10 a.m. on his birthday in 1797 that Schlegel arrived with a toast: "29 years old and nothing yet accomplished! . . . I want something written this year."⁹ The two Friedrichs became roommates the following month and Schleiermacher rose to the challenge. In three months of early 1799 he wrote what is largely considered to be the most important defense of religion of the past two hundred years: *On Religion, Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*.

The aim of the *Speeches*, as the text is familiarly called, is to clarify an understanding of religion that Schleiermacher's Romantic interlocutors have not yet considered. They have, according to Schleiermacher, a severely limited concept of religion in mind to

ridicule. Schleiermacher thus opens a way to conceive of religion beyond the two options available in his day. He articulates the memorable phrase: “Praxis is an art, speculation is a science, religion is the sensibility and taste for the infinite.”¹⁰ With this new definition of religion, Schleiermacher shows that the object of derision is, in fact, not religion, but a flawed identification of religion with both rational systems of thought and the moral law. Between Hegel and Kant, between rationalism and morality, religion is actually something quite different: it is an experience.

Schleiermacher thus embarks on the intellectual task of clarifying a concept, while simultaneously nudging his readers to see the truth of the concept for themselves. He orchestrates the speeches as a series of steps in experiencing and realizing that religion is, precisely, an experience of the infinite. Once his interlocutors have experienced religion for themselves, they will have acquired both a true concept of religion and have intimate acquaintance with a phenomenon that is prior to both intellectual reasoning and morality. Religion will be appreciated as constitutive to human existence. Schleiermacher will later work out this concept as the feeling of absolute dependence. At this early Romantic stage, however, he communicates his conviction that a living religion has distinct and unique qualities, coaxing his hearers to “see,” so that they might believe!

One significant term in Schleiermacher’s definition of religion is the objective dimension: the “infinite.” On this point Schleiermacher is frequently misunderstood. Is not the “infinite” already part of subjective consciousness? Is God not mystically merged with the human soul? These criticisms from Lutherans anxious to maintain the externality of the word of God at all costs miss the important objective claim in Schleiermacher’s idea of the infinite. First, Schleiermacher in contrast to his German Idealist colleague, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, was a metaphysical realist. Schleiermacher is committed to a worldview in which objects in the world exist apart from our perceptions of them. Anything that is experienced presupposes a causal reference as the source of the experience. While the infinite cannot be experienced as an object in the world—Schleiermacher shares this idea with Kant—the infinite exists

independently of human perception. When it is experienced, the experience is passive reception.

What is experienced? The “infinite,” Schleiermacher in his German text uses the Latin *Universum*, or universe. Lutherans might again be anxious about this heterodox designation for God. While Schleiermacher later, in his theological works, uses the Christian theological terminology of God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit, at this early Romantic stage, Schleiermacher expresses his ideas in Romantic rhetoric. The term “infinite” means the totality of the world and all objects in it, or the universe as a whole, more than what is on earth, the totality of all there is. The infinite is perceived as a totality. As a Romantic, Schleiermacher insists that human longing is directed towards the infinite: Religion “wishes to intuit the universe, wishes devoutly to overhear the universe’s own manifestations and actions . . .”¹¹ Yet Schleiermacher “solves” the Romantic inability to reach the infinite by insisting that the infinite is the subject of its manifestations. The infinite chooses from an infinite array of possible forms to become manifest in particular forms to individuals. The infinite has “its imprint and its manifestation, in humanity no less than in all other individual and finite forms.”¹² Religious experience is of the infinite as it reveals itself in the finite.

Schleiermacher also takes into account the human subjective dimension. Although the human is the passive recipient of the infinite’s revelation, the individual is able to actually have this experience by appreciating it in subjectivity. Lutherans might again react to the hint of interiority that plagues an accurate interpretation of what Schleiermacher means by the subjective dimension to religious experience. Schleiermacher’s interest is in describing the human features of an experience of reality that includes a dimension of transformation. When humans are touched by God, they are moved in distinctive and surprising ways.

Two terms are part of the technical vocabulary of the subjective dimension: intuition (*Anschauung*) and feeling (*Gefühl*). The capacities that “receive” the experience in the subject are actually two aspects of the one subjective side of experience. When the infinite is experienced, “every intuition is, by its very nature, connected with a feeling.”¹³ Both are dimensions within the

perceiving subject, activated and set into motion when an objective reality reveals itself to the subject.

The two terms have, however, distinct functions within the subject. Intuition is a term stemming from Kant's transcendental analysis of experience as he restricts it to objects of sense perception. Schleiermacher uses the term as the subjective aspect of the referential capacity of the experience. Every experience that comes from an external source, so to speak, is registered as such—as referring to an external cause, within the subjective capacity of intuition. While intuition refers the relatively internal phenomenon to an external cause, the term “feeling” is used to denote solely the internal sentiment of the perceiving subject. Feeling, while referring to moods and affects at various levels of self-consciousness, means in Schleiermacher's religious semantics a subjective state that registers an internal state in an experience. Intuition and feeling are stimulated together in the event of a revelation of the infinite, while the subjective dimension of the experience registers internally both a referent to an external cause (intuition) and an internal state of feeling.

The significant point in Schleiermacher's description of religious experience is to capture religion as an experience with key characteristics. It is, in effect, an awareness of the finite as part of a totality that transcends individual and world. This awareness is distinctive to the individual because it is dependent on the infinite's choice to reveal itself to the individual in this particular way. The intuition and feeling that are generated in the experience do not transpire with the imposition of any categories of the understanding. Schleiermacher uses the vocabulary pair of intuition and feeling in order to underline his point concerning the non-rational and non-linguistic dimension to religious experience. Even the category “God” is avoided as any concrete determination of the object of revelation because it would subsume religion under a rational (either theoretical or practical) operation.

Religion is a distinct sort of experience. What can we expect to experience? The movement of the second speech represents Schleiermacher's long index finger, pointing to possible candidates in nature and history. He urges his listeners to look that they might also taste and see (Ps 34:8). Schleiermacher rests on one evocative scene:

It is as fleeting and transparent as the first scent with which the dew gently caresses the waking flowers, as modest and delicate as a maiden's kiss, as holy and fruitful as a nuptial embrace; indeed, not *like* these, but *is itself* all of these. A manifestation, an event develops quickly and magically into an image of the universe. Even as the beloved and ever-sought-for-form fashions itself, my soul flees toward it; I embrace it, not as a shadow, but as the holy essence itself. I lie on the bosom of the infinite world.¹⁴

The erotic rhetoric, resonating with the Christian mystical tradition of nuptial "happy exchange," reveals Schleiermacher's young passion in the experience of intimate love. The focus, however, is on seeing the experience as it is experienced, not on its subsequent articulation or even explanation. It is an experience that precedes the rational act of expression. It is fleeting, and when captured by linguistic articulation, it is fixed into two constituent parts: intuition and feeling. Language is inevitable, as Schleiermacher will later make clear in the *Christian Faith*. Language is a necessary part of culture and religion. When one is born into a particular community, language is already there, constructing the concepts and conceptually shaping possible experiences in culturally particular ways. Yet the experience of love's unity precedes description and explanation. Love between two people, and eventually love for humanity as a whole is the note on which the second speech ends.

In 1802 Schleiermacher returned to Gnadensfrei. He reminisced about the maturation he had undergone since he had first encountered the Moravians at age nine. A letter written to his publisher Georg Reimer¹⁵ dated to April 30 summarizes his self-understanding.

Here it was for the first time I awoke to the consciousness of the relations of man to a higher world . . . Here it was that that mystic tendency developed itself, which has been of so much importance to me, and has supported and carried me through all the storms of skepticism. Then it was only germinating, now it has attained its full development . . . And I may say, that after all that I have passed through, I have become a Herrnhuter again, only of a higher order.¹⁶

After a crisis of faith, he had begun a process of personal discovery, academic education, and vocational training, all of which contributed to his developing identity as a theologian who speaks about religion

out of “the inner, irresistible necessity of my nature; it is a divine calling.”¹⁷ Some might call this an existential leap into authenticity, others a maturation. Yet the striking autobiographical passage suggests that the mystic piety of the Moravians, a piety devoted to Jesus, remained constant throughout. What had changed were the intellectual expressions of that piety. He had learned the Enlightenment categories of subjectivity, Kant’s critical philosophy, and the Romantic longing for the infinite, and appropriated these languages in order to articulate in more truthful and accurate ways what he had experienced deep down as the particular way in which the infinite had revealed itself to him and to Christianity as a whole: the person of Jesus Christ.

The early Schleiermacher mirrors in some ways Luther’s own dramatic Reformation breakthrough. In his way he opens what both theologians saw as the main point about religion: an encounter and relationship with the living God. The encounter had been precipitated by the formation in the older language and categories of religion. The crisis of faith had been prepared by anxiety, intellectual frustration, and experiential implausibility that the God of ancestral faith did not satisfy the quest for the gracious God. Yet for both Luther and Schleiermacher, the long search for religious truth was moved by an awareness that consolation could be found, precisely, in the religion that they had outgrown. “Religion helped me,” Schleiermacher tells the cultured despisers, “when I began to examine the ancestral faith and to purify my heart of the rubble of primitive times. It remained with me when God and immortality disappeared before my doubting eyes.”¹⁸ God and immortality would return. Both Luther and Schleiermacher’s body of work attest to the theological power of their new found certainty (although Schleiermacher would temper his explication of the concept of immortality with critical reason!).

In the above section I have focused primarily on the early Schleiermacher in order to access the expression of religion that would inform his later theological work. It is to the later Schleiermacher of the Berlin years to which I now turn, in order to convey aspects of his theology of interest to Lutherans: ideas about the experience of Christ in the Christian community,

The Later Schleiermacher of the Berlin Years

The second half of Schleiermacher's life can be called the "Berlin years." Although he had spent time in Berlin as a young Romantic, Schleiermacher's move to Berlin from Halle on December 31, 1807, was permanent. He would work there as pastor and professor until his untimely death of pneumonia on February 12, 1834. In this section I contextualize Schleiermacher's theological focus on the "feeling of absolute dependence" in the context of his Berlin years. What we see in the context of university reform is Schleiermacher's new vision for theology as an academic discipline, for which he carries the honorable title, "father of modern theology."

Schleiermacher's hospital chaplaincy in Berlin had ended abruptly. He was removed to a post as court chaplain in a north Prussian coastal town, Stolp, because of a love affair with Eleonore von Grunow, wife of a Lutheran minister (and muse of his *Soliloquies*, published in 1800). There, Schleiermacher drowned his sorrows by writing a lengthy book on ethics, translating Plato into German, and publishing a 200-page text in 1804 that would catch the king's attention: *Two Provisional Reports Concerning the Condition of the Protestant Church in Relation to the Protestant State*.¹⁹ The work addressed the split between Lutherans and Reformed, and proposed a liturgy that would facilitate a joint communion. The Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm III (reigned 1797-1840), too, was concerned about the Protestant rift. He was from the reformed wing of the Hohenzollern dynasty—the Swabian branch was Lutheran—and he wanted to take communion with his Lutheran wife, Queen Louise. Although Reformed, the king ruled over a population in the territory of Brandenburg that was predominantly Lutheran. Thus Schleiermacher's early ecumenical work favorably predisposed him to the king, who decided that Prussia needed the services of this young Reformed pastor and theologian.

The king first appointed Schleiermacher to a teaching and pastoral post in the Lutheran university of Halle. When Napoleon conquered Prussia in 1806, he shut down the University. Schleiermacher left for Berlin, and would soon be appointed the king's court chaplain, a post that involved partnering with the Lutheran minister at Trinity

Church (*Dreifaltigkeitskirche*) in Berlin, a large and ecumenical Lutheran-Reformed congregation founded by Wilhelm's grandfather. For the rest of his life, Schleiermacher preached weekly at the church. He was so famous as a preacher that on his death, 20,000 people lined the streets of Berlin to see his coffin pass.

The first years in Berlin proved to be exciting. Schleiermacher's appointment at Trinity Church officially began on June 11, 1809. A few weeks earlier, on May 18, 1809, he married Henriette von Willich, the widow he had consoled after the death of her husband in 1807. In 1808 Schleiermacher published an essay, *Occasional Thoughts on Universities in the German Sense with an Appendix Regarding a University Soon to Be Established*. The essay caught the eye of Wilhelm von Humboldt, the linguist and philosopher who was also responsible for founding the new flagship university in Prussia, the Friedrich Wilhelms University of Berlin.²⁰ This text articulated the organizational vision for the sciences, *die Wissenschaften*, and the pursuit of knowledge in the research university. Schleiermacher, in addition to beginning to teach theology in 1808, was drafted by Humboldt to help translate vision into institution. Schleiermacher was appointed the first dean of the theological faculty after its official opening in 1810, and eventually served as university rector from 1815 to 1816. In addition to pastoral and professorial responsibilities, Schleiermacher also participated in political affairs of the day and contributed lectures as a member of the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences. The Berlin years represent a time of extraordinary work output in the form of lectures, publications, sermons, staggering indeed even for someone who slept only four hours a night.

In order to gain an understanding of what Schleiermacher means when he calls theology a "positive science," we need to consider his proposal for knowledge that facilitated the organization of the University of Berlin. Schleiermacher conceived the unity of the distinct disciplines in the university, the "universe" of sciences (*Wissenschaften*), as the idea of knowledge. This is a speculative idea that Schleiermacher divided into two distinct areas: ethics as the aspect of knowledge having to do with the principles of how humans act in culture and history agency, and physics, having to do

with the realm of nature.²¹ These two fundamental areas of study would represent all of reality from two perspectives non-reducible to each other. The academic pursuit of knowledge requires the demarcation of disciplines that carves out an aspect of reality to study; truth has to do with the relation between thought and being. Schleiermacher further structured ethics and physics into distinct “real sciences,” meaning that these disciplines would pursue knowledge about finite reality. A theoretical and an empirical component structured each of the real sciences. The task of another set of tools, the technical and critical disciplines—notably dialectic and hermeneutics—was to connect theory with empirical research, and data with corresponding theory.

Theology, too, was a science, specifically a *positive* science.²² Along with two other positive sciences, namely, jurisprudence and medicine, theology was a particular type of knowledge that had to do with an institution existing outside of the university. Positive meant having a function in the church, government in the case of law, and hospitals in the case of medicine. Schleiermacher’s legacy for theology has to do with envisioning the organization of theology from the goal of serving church leaders to improve the church’s practical tasks of preaching and caring for souls. In order to be able to know the situation of the contemporary church that is in need of improvement, one must know the church’s past that has shaped its present. Biblical exegesis and church history are the two historical disciplines that produce knowledge about the church’s past in order to work out knowledge of the contemporary church, both its doctrines and its morals, the tasks of dogmatic theology and Christian ethics. Informing the entire historical conception of theology is the discipline of philosophical theology. Schleiermacher thought that history required specific concepts that could facilitate the study of history in the first place. Hence philosophical theology had its task to propose concepts relevant for Christianity, such as revelation and canon, in order for the historical task to acquire conceptual precision. Finally practical theology served as theoretical discipline for conceiving theories for church improvement that could then be applied in concrete ministerial situations by pastors, or in administrative situations by church leaders.²³ This five-part division

of theological education into philosophical theology, biblical studies, history of Christianity, systematic theology, and practical theology is Schleiermacher's legacy that exists today.

Schleiermacher was committed to an educated clergy. It is in the context of explaining the function of the two sites for theological education, the university and the church, that he articulates the famous comment: The individual who is perfectly attuned equally to both an ecclesial interest and a scientific spirit is a "prince of the church."²⁴ Yet in reality a theologian tends to emphasize one of the two poles, whether by personal affinity or by ecclesial necessity, while keeping the other pole in view.

Schleiermacher was also committed to a professoriate in which each professor would have at least two sub-fields of theology as areas of specialization.²⁵ By his own specializations in New Testament and dogmatic theology, Schleiermacher modeled his vision that theologians should also have a view of the whole field of study. Theological formation includes the requirement to "think through" the subject matter for oneself, and this thinking through requires active appropriation of and integration of different areas into theological knowledge.

What is the task of theology? To find the "essence of Christianity." Essence is a term Schleiermacher uses in order to point to the living power of Christianity that informs and shapes and is manifest in every historical moment of Christian history. The term connotes a metaphysical power (*Kraft*) that is manifest temporally in its diverse appearances (*Erscheinungen*). The theological task is at once an ecclesial appreciation for this living quality that permeates the Christian tradition. And it is the academic inquiry into the historical permutations of Christianity from Bible through church history to contemporary church as well as philosophical construction of key concepts that are pertinent to studying history. Both empirical and "speculative" projects occur in relation to each other: the historical yields information about the speculative idea, while ideas are conceived in order to be applied to the historical material. Furthermore, the task includes a critical dimension. The contemporary church situation is evaluated by applying the speculative idea of the essence of Christianity in order to diagnose how the church can

better manifest the essence. Theology has the flourishing of the church in view.

While the “essence of Christianity” is the task of theology, the term also conveys what Schleiermacher understands to be the key component of religious experience. Schleiermacher introduces his concept of religion in the “Introduction” to his *Christian Faith*. The Introduction, which comprises §§ 1–31, is a clarification of key terms “borrowed” from other non-theological disciplines that help focus the distinctiveness of Christianity in relation to the realm of ethics or human agency. This clarification is often confused with the theological section of the *Christian Faith* that Schleiermacher does not begin until § 32.

The introduction has also been misunderstood as a non-theological theoretical foundation for theology. The perceived threat is the tainting of the distinctive truth of Christian proclamation with alien idioms. This criticism is easily addressed when one surveys the architectonic of the introduction in relation to the theological system of the *Christian Faith*. In the introduction, the terms “essence of religion” and “essence of Christianity” are assigned minimal definition. The definitions are meant to bring other disciplines to bear on theology, like ethics and philosophy of religion that also treat the subject matter of human agency in history. In this way, theology has conversation partners in the university about a subject that is important to it. Religion is, in fact, a necessary and non-reducible dimension to human existence. Theology acknowledges this to be the case, and does so in a way that tries to convince other disciplines too.

The center of the introduction is § 4. In this paragraph, Schleiermacher concludes his previous discussion concerning the dimensions of the soul by laying out the key concept of religion as the feeling of absolute dependence. The proposition states, “The common element . . . in piety . . . is this: the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or, which is the same thing, of being in relation to God.”²⁶ In other words, Schleiermacher relates religious experience to its cause that exists outside of the realm of self and world: the “Whence.” It is important to note that Schleiermacher added the final clause of the proposition (“the consciousness... of

being in relation to God”) only after his 1820 first edition had encountered criticism concerning the unusual terminology of “Whence.” This term as it occurs in the introduction is not yet identified with the God of historical Christianity because, as Schleiermacher goes on to claim, God as a Christian term is only available when studying the history of Christianity. At this point in the introduction, the analysis focuses on the psychological structure of the soul in which a feeling registers the passivity of all of existence. Finite consciousness, the aspect of consciousness that has temporal and spatial limitation, registers the self’s relative freedom and relative dependence in relation to the world. Immediate self-consciousness, the aspect of the soul that grounds temporal consciousness as the continuity of the self through time, is an awareness that there is no instance of absolute freedom in the world. Rather, the negation of the feeling of absolute dependence refers absolute freedom to the whence of the feeling of absolute dependence: the self experiences itself together with the world in absolute dependence on an external cause.²⁷ The feeling of absolute dependence is the feeling that all of existence is a gift.

The pressing question for Lutherans at this point is: how does feeling relate to language? Does feeling occur at a pre-linguistic level that is only at a secondary stage couched in particular Christian discourse? In order to answer this question we need to consider how Schleiermacher defines the essence of Christianity in the introduction to the *Christian Faith*. Schleiermacher is careful to introduce concepts only as they become relevant in his analysis. The structure of consciousness is the first step in analyzing the particular area of the soul that registers religious feeling. In a second step, Schleiermacher specifies the essence of Christianity in order to introduce the person at the center of all Christian history and reflection: Jesus of Nazareth. Schleiermacher defines Christianity in § 11 as “a monotheistic faith . . . [that] is essentially distinguished from all other such faiths by the fact that in it everything is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth.”²⁸ To the person of Jesus of Nazareth is attributed the work of redemption. Jesus is the Redeemer who accomplishes the redemption of the world. Schleiermacher’s position is, in short, a maximal attribution of redemption to Jesus.

Yet how does the feeling of absolute dependence relate to Jesus' person and work?

This is the crux of the question concerning experience and language. How does Schleiermacher connect feeling with the redemption that Jesus accomplishes? There are two steps in the answer to this question. The first has to do with the basic psychological account that Schleiermacher gives of two states of the soul. This discussion is included in the introduction to the *Christian Faith*, and therefore is not considered the subject of theology, but of a general account for the purpose of connecting psychology in theology to ethics and the study of human soul and agency in ethics and philosophy of religion. Thus the basic concept is introduced that will then in the theological section of the *Christian Faith* be explicated in terms of Jesus' work.

Schleiermacher introduces the basic concept of two possible states of the soul in § 5. The feeling of absolute dependence, or in other words immediate self-consciousness, exists in two possible relations to temporal consciousness. One permutation is when temporal consciousness, the consciousness existing in time and space, inhibits the feeling of absolute dependence. This situation can occur when the self is bogged down by worries, by physical ailment, by limiting historical and political conditions, in short any situation in which consciousness is prevented from manifesting a feeling of absolute dependence. Schleiermacher will eventually, in the theological section of the *Christian Faith*, identify this state as "sin." The opposite relation, when immediate self-consciousness permeates sensible self-consciousness "with ease" is eventually deemed the state of redemption.²⁹ Redemption means that at every moment in a human life, the self is oriented as a whole to an awareness that all of existence is grounded in God. Gratitude is the response to the gift.

Again we must carefully follow Schleiermacher's logic as he carefully develops the terms of his analysis. While basic psychological analysis succeeds in delineating two possible states, the theological analysis relates Jesus to redemption. In a subsequent paragraph, § 14, Schleiermacher explains how a person can come into Jesus' proximity and thereby have access to his redemptive action.³⁰ The subject of

this paragraph is the issue of how one enters into community of Jesus. This is crucial for Schleiermacher because it is only in community with Jesus that his redemptive influence can be experienced. Hence we see that, although reading the introduction forward from feeling to Christian community in which the discourse is specific about Jesus and redemption, the whole analysis actually prefers to acknowledge the existence of Christianity in its constant intimate center on Christ. Schleiermacher rehearses the classic Pauline emphasis on how one comes into contact with Jesus: through the word of preaching consistent with the biblical witness.³¹ Faith comes by hearing (cf. Rom. 10:17). When the gospel is preached, it communicates Christ's person that is also his work of redemption. Coming into proximity of Jesus means having one's consciousness transformed in such a way that the feeling of absolute dependence permeates everyday activities "with ease."

While the introduction to the *Christian Faith* contains the important paragraph insisting on proclamation that communicates Jesus' redemptive influence, the theological section further develops this idea. Schleiermacher insists that church proclamation is the only way by which the person of Jesus is rendered present to the community. It is his presence that is redemptive. Schleiermacher insists on this point in § 100: "And thus the total effective influence of Christ is only the continuation of the creative divine activity out of which the Person of Christ arose."³² Proclamation is intrinsic to the way in which Jesus becomes present in the community and mediates redemption to it. The person of Jesus is "now mediated by those who preach Him; but they being appropriated by Him as His instruments, the activity really proceeds from Him and is essentially His own."³³ While preaching is the work of pastors in the church, it is to Jesus that redemption must be attributed. Jesus is sole source and cause of redemption, it is through preaching that the redemption he offers by virtue of his person can become a reality to those who hear the gospel.

To sum up: The basic concepts of sin, redemption, and the communication of the person of Jesus that transmits redemption to hearers are first defined in the introduction to the *Christian Faith*. In this location, there is an insistence on the Christological parameters

couching sin, redemption, and the communication of redemption. Yet the concepts are introduced with a minimal content in order to demonstrate their relevance to a broader discussion about human subjectivity, agency, and religion. Schleiermacher develops his concepts in meticulous steps. The overall emerging picture, even in the early parts of the introduction, in no way determines religious consciousness in independence from the particular, and in Schleiermacher's case, Christian determination. Schleiermacher keeps to a minimal description because at this stage in his argumentation, he wants to prevent any rational determination to religious content. The content in Christianity is determined solely by the particular influence of Jesus of Nazareth. The later theological sections make this Christological point crystal clear.

Conclusion

There are many more rich points in Schleiermacher's theology that merit discussion. Some discussion should even be critical, yet only after Schleiermacher is interpreted correctly. Specific issues concern his rejection of the canonical status of the Old Testament, and his restriction of the person of Jesus to the historical Jesus of Nazareth, both of which entail erosions of an Athanasian doctrine of the Trinity.

The main point to underline, however, is that Schleiermacher's basic theological commitments represent continuity with the Christian tradition regarding the centrality of Jesus' person for the universal work of redemption and the preaching that accomplishes this communication. Schleiermacher's concept of religious experience can furthermore help Lutherans appreciate that Christian communication has an experiential component: the glimmer of a new state of consciousness when the feeling of absolute dependence permeates sensible self-consciousness with ease. Lutherans can learn from Schleiermacher that redemption is not merely the hearing of the external word but that there is a subjective dimension to the reception of redemption. When Christ is rendered present in proclamation, a personal and communal transformation is felt at the depths of subjectivity.

The new creation available in Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17) means to become more truly human.

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NOTES

1. See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Theology and Religion in a Post-liberal Age* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster, 1984), 21. Lindbeck's book was re-issued in 2009 in a 25th Anniversary Edition.

2. Emil Brunner, *Die Mystik und das Wort Der Gegensatz zwischen moderner Religionsauffassung und christlichem Glauben dargestellt an der Theologie Schleiermachers*, 2nd edn. (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1928).

3. See for example my analysis of two contemporary Lutheran theologians, Oswald Bayer and George Lindbeck, that focuses on their reading of Schleiermacher in the disjunctive terms of either external word or human experience: "Transformations of Luther's Theology in View of Schleiermacher," in *Transformations in Luther's Theology: Historical and Contemporary Reflections*, ed. Christine Helmer and Bo Kristian Holm (Arbeiten zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte 32; Leipzig: EVA-Leipzig, 2011), 104-121.

4. The standard abbreviation for this work, used hereafter, is KGA.

5. In addition to Theodore Vial's excellent introduction, *Schleiermacher* (London: T&T Clark, 2013), see the following two accessible works: Catherine L. Kelsey, *Thinking About Christ with Schleiermacher* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Terrence Tice, *Schleiermacher* (Abingdon Pillars of Theology; Nashville: Abingdon, 2006).

6. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Life of Schleiermacher as Unfolded in His Autobiography and Letters*, trans. Frederica Rowan, 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1860), 46-47.

7. Cited in Vial, *Schleiermacher*, 7.

8. Vial, *Schleiermacher*, 7.

9. Cited in Kurt Nowak, *Schleiermacher Leben, Werk und Wirkung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 88.

10. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers (1st edition)*, ed. and trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 23.

11. *On Religion*, 22.

12. *On Religion*, 23.

13. *On Religion*, 29.

14. *On Religion*, 32 (italics in published translation).

15. This publisher is now the present-day Walter de Gruyter in Berlin, responsible for publishing the critical edition of Schleiermacher's works.

16. Schleiermacher, *The Life of Schleiermacher*, 283.

17. Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 5.
18. *Speeches*, 8.
19. I follow Brent Sockness's translation of the German title, "Zwei unvorgreifliche Gutachten in Sachen des protestantischen Kirchenwesens zunächst in Beziehung auf den Preußischen Staat," in *Schriften aus der Stolper Zeit* (1802-1804), ed. Eilert Herms, Gunter Meckenstock, and Michael Pietsch, KGA I/4 (2002): in Brent W. Sockness, "The Forgotten Moralists; Friedrich Schleiermacher and the Science of Spirit," *Harvard Theological Review* 96, no. 3 (2003): 319.
20. "Gelegentliche Gedanken Über Universitäten in deutschem Sinn Nebst einem Anhang über eine neu zu errichtende," in *Friedrich Schleiermacher, Universitätschriften; Herakleitos, Kurze Darstellung des theologischen Studiums* (ed. Dirk Schmid; KGA I/6, 1998).
21. Brent W. Sockness beautifully defines ethics in "The Forgotten Moralists," 347: "As the speculative 'science of the principles of history,' ethics investigates and develops the most basic concepts necessary for understanding and orienting praxis in the distinctively human world—the domain of culture and history constituted by the activities of the human spirit. On this expansive view of ethics, moral philosophy is more than a normative theory of human action. It is also a foundational science supplying the rest of the human sciences with their enabling principles."
22. This paragraph is a summary of the basic divisions that Schleiermacher assigns to the theological task in his *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study* (1811/1830), trans. Terrence N. Tice (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990). To be cited as BO.
23. Schleiermacher originally proposed a model of theological education that assigned practical theology to distinct seminaries independent of the university. See Johannes Wischmeyer, "Friedrich Schleiermacher: Son apport théorique et pratique à la foundation de l'Université de Berlin (1805-1813)," *Revue D'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 91, no. 1 (2011), 39.
24. BO § 9 (p. 5).
25. See Wischmeyer, "Schleiermacher," 34-35.
26. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, trans. D. M. Bailie et al (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1999), § 4, proposition (p. 12). To be cited as CF.
27. "Therefore in any temporal existence a feeling of absolute freedom can have no place . . . But the self-consciousness which accompanies all our activity, and therefore, since that is never zero, accompanies our whole existence, and negatives absolute freedom, is itself precisely a consciousness of absolute dependence: for it is a consciousness that the whole of our spontaneous activity comes from a source outside of us . . ." CF § 4,3 (p. 16).
28. CF § 11, proposition (p. 52).
29. The significant passage in § 5 occurs under corollary 4: "That is to say: as the emergence of this higher self-consciousness at all means an enhancement of life, so whenever it emerges *with ease*, to enter into a relation with a sensible determination, whether pleasant or unpleasant, this means an easy progress of that higher life, and bears, by comparison, the stamp of joy. And as the disappearance of the higher consciousness, if it could be perceived would mean a diminution of life, so whenever it emerges *with difficulty*, this approximates to an absence of it, and can only be felt as an inhibition of the higher life" (p. 24; italics in published translation.)
30. CF § 14, proposition (p. 68): "There is no other way of obtaining participation in the Christian communion than through faith in Jesus as the Redeemer."

31. CF §14,1 (pp. 68–69): “And so from the beginning only those people have attached themselves to Christ in His new community whose religious self-consciousness had taken the form of a need of redemption, and who now became assured in themselves of Christ’s redeeming power... This, moreover, is what has ever since constituted the essence of all direct Christian preaching.”

32. CF § 100,2 (p. 427).

33. CF § 108,5 (p. 491).



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