

CHAPTER 4

Shapers of Protestantism: F. D. E. Schleiermacher

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Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768–1834), the ‘father of modern theology’, was a Moravian Pietist pastor and professor of theology whose work in Berlin in the early 1800s transformed Protestant theology in Europe. His legacy for theology in general, and Protestantism more particularly, is twofold. He left not only a large body of theological and philosophical writings, some of whose arguments will be summarized here, but also a conception of how theology is to be studied in the university.

Schleiermacher fundamentally shaped the way theology is studied in Western Europe and North America. Any seminary or faculty of theology or divinity which divides its subject matter into philosophical theology, doctrine, church history, biblical studies and ethics is following a pattern laid down by Schleiermacher in the early 1800s. The relationship between these different subject areas varies widely from institution to institution, of course, but the fundamental pattern of theological study represented by this division into separate areas of expertise is one of Schleiermacher’s gifts to the university. The first section of this chapter will rehearse the main features of Schleiermacher’s conception of theology.

The influence of Schleiermacher’s particular theological and philosophical work can be divided up in a number of ways. In the second and third section we shall look briefly at two areas where his work continues to shape current thinking: his discussions of feeling and consciousness in relation to religion, and his understanding of hermeneutics and language. This means that relatively little weight will be given here to the detail of his dogmatic theology as found in *Der Christliche Glaube* (in English *The Christian Faith*). This is a shortcoming, but one that is compensated for significantly by Schleiermacher’s own ordered thinking. His main dogmatic arguments are summarized in his ‘Introduction’ to *The Christian Faith* and are not so obscure as to require radical reinterpretation by subsequent readers. The discussion here will also pay little attention to his

Dialectics, Ethics, Aesthetics, Sermons or to his shorter works, which (especially his wonderful *Christmas Eve* dialogue) richly reward patient attention.

Schleiermacher had a massive influence on subsequent theologians, whether they agree with him or not. Perhaps the most noteworthy engagement with Schleiermacher is that by Karl Barth. Barth admired Schleiermacher's theology, wrestled with problems thrown up by Schleiermacher's way of conceiving theology, and attempted to repair Protestant theology through a renewed emphasis on God's initiative and sovereignty. The fourth section summarizes some of Barth's criticisms.

Theology as a Subject of Study

Schleiermacher's purpose in the *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study* (Schleiermacher, 1990) is to attempt a set of broad generalizations without omitting or underplaying the particularities of the material he surveys. When Schleiermacher was writing (first edition 1811, revised 1830), great changes were underway in German universities, both in the way they structured the teaching of subjects, and in the content of those subjects themselves. The study of 'History', in the sense now familiar, was in its innovative and fascinating infancy; biblical interpretation was being transformed through the development of new critical methods; philosophy was dominated by the new experimental idealism of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel and the romanticism of Friedrich Schlegel and his colleagues. All of this was taking place against the backdrop of political conflict in Europe in the wake of the French Revolution and the rise to prominence of Napoleon Bonaparte. The relationships between state, church and university were thus topics urgently in need of ordered consideration.

The most arresting features of the *Brief Outline* are the description it gives of the purpose of theological study and the way it divides its subject matter. The purpose of theological study is startlingly simple: it is to serve 'church leadership'. The division is tripartite: (1) philosophical theology, (2) historical theology, (3) practical theology. These are terms with currency in theology today, and although they are to a significant extent influenced by Schleiermacher, some divergences and developments are quickly apparent. The purpose of 'philosophical theology' is to gain an overview or, as he says, a 'general concept', of religious communities or fellowships of faith (Schleiermacher, 1990: §33). Once one has an overview of what religious communities are (or might be), then one can compare actual existing examples with this 'idea'. This comparison is what philosophical theology attempts. The undertaking also has a therapeutic dimension: once one knows what Christianity 'is', one can diagnose deviations from this general concept. Schleiermacher recognizes that this is a risky enterprise, and draws attention to the temptation to identify the particularities of one's own particular tradition with Christianity *per se*. This, he says, is a mistake. Doing philosophical theology means recognizing that within the scope of Christianity

as a general concept, there is room for diversity and disagreement. Without a generous conception of this diversity, it is impossible to make sense of the tasks of 'apologetics' and 'polemics'. These refer respectively to public speech from the particular community to a wider audience and argument within a particular community. At the same time, diversity does not mean lazy tolerance. On the contrary, it requires sustained argument in order to cure 'diseased conditions' in Christianity: that is why apologetics and polemics are required. One of the skills Schleiermacher requires of the theologian is an ability to tell the difference between genuine diversity within Christianity and sick deviation from it. This is not something that can be determined in advance of patient enquiry: Schleiermacher seeks to discern rules for how this might be conducted.

The kinds of task undertaken in philosophical theology are elucidation of the ways in which it is distinctive (which involves exploring the meaning of 'revelation' and 'inspiration'), the continuities and discontinuities thrown up by its history (involving 'canon' and 'sacrament') and the relationship of the church to other institutions (involving 'hierarchy' and 'church authority') (§§43–8). Schleiermacher seems to be making a distinction between asking what kind of thing 'revelation' or 'canon' is *in general* and asking what 'revelation' or 'canon' Christian theology claims for itself *in particular*. Philosophical theology has a certain grammatical job that is distinct from, but related to, historical theology. Philosophical theology tries to settle the categories for discussion; historical theology argues about what is placed in these categories. One can already see here the need for further clarifications (which Schleiermacher does not supply at this stage): for example, to what extent are *general* concepts peculiar to a *particular* tradition? It is clear from the acuteness of Schleiermacher's philosophical thinking in other contexts that he well understands the importance of this kind of question. He himself recognizes in other work that there is no 'universal language', but that nonetheless translation between them is possible. In the current context, Schleiermacher implies that it is indeed difficult to say how we get from particulars to generalities, and that general concepts are unstable and open to dispute, but that nonetheless *we do use general concepts*, and sometimes quite successfully. The fact that general concepts are disputable does not mean we should not use them. It does mean that some care is required in their exercise. And philosophical theology is a discipline that exercises precisely this care. There is admittedly a certain circularity here, but it is difficult to see how it could be avoided without giving up *all* attempts at generalization and therefore at any ordering of knowledge whatsoever.

'Historical theology' is the term Schleiermacher uses for those aspects of theological study which describe the particular contents of Christian belief and practice. Under its heading come 'exegetical theology', 'church history' and 'historical knowledge of the present'.

Exegetical theology encompasses questions about the canon of scripture and how it is to be interpreted. It roughly corresponds to what is currently called 'biblical studies', although for Schleiermacher its purpose is exclusively to serve the church. He subdivides it into various categories: 'higher criticism' (determining

what the canon is), 'lower criticism' (reconstructing the original meaning of the text) and 'hermeneutics' (specifying the rules for interpreting the text).

Church history is, for Schleiermacher, a comprehensive category. He calls it 'historical theology in the narrower sense' and its purpose is 'knowledge concerning the total development of Christianity since its establishment as a historical phenomenon' (§149). Part of this means skilfully relating the minute details recorded in documents to what he calls 'a single picture of their inner reality'. Unless this 'picture' is borne in view, one has not history but merely 'chronicle' (§153). One can see that getting a grasp of this 'inner reality' is difficult, but Schleiermacher is clear that this is the task of church history. It has different aspects. One is a description of what he calls 'the church's life', which entails understanding the cultural resources for worship available to Christians at any particular time, and the ways in which being a Christian affects how people live their lives outside worship. Schleiermacher's discussion here (as in so many places) is concerned to avoid one-sidedness: there is a problem either if Christian life is identified with morality in everyday life while worship has become empty ceremony; or if Christian life is identified exclusively with what goes on in worship, while everyday morality is determined by alien non-Christian practices and beliefs. For Schleiermacher, worship and ethics are two aspects of one church life, and while they can be distinguished from each other for analytical purposes, they belong together.

The third subcategory, after 'exegetical theology' and 'church history', is 'historical knowledge of the present'. First in this category is doctrine. Again, 'dogmatic theology serves the leadership of the church' (§198) by showing how current doctrinal formulations arise from historical developments, and at the same time indicating how they inform practice in the present. Dogmatic theology rehearses historical debates so that old confusions are not repeated in the present. Beyond this, Schleiermacher advances some observations about the role and scope of disagreement in matters of doctrine. Schleiermacher is particularly interested in the relation between things that are fixed (and can be reduced to rules) and things that cannot be fixed (and which display spontaneity). In his discussion of doctrine, Schleiermacher explores the relationship between tradition and innovation, orthodoxy and heterodoxy. These are not mutually exclusive. They are two ends of a single continuum and are, moreover, equally important (§204). Tradition is the relatively stable, rule-bound element of doctrine: it can be preserved and handed down in a relatively fixed form. Innovation is the spontaneous, surprising element of doctrine: it is mobile and introduces new modes of expression. The enemy of good doctrine is one-sidedness: orthodoxy is needed for unity; heterodoxy is needed for development (§§203–6). This is obviously a formal point, which makes no attempt to make judgements about particular dogmatic formulations. What, then, are the criteria for testing them? Schleiermacher offers two: their consonance with Scripture and their consonance with other formulations. What form do dogmatic formulations take? Schleiermacher suggests this will depend on 'the existing condition of the philosophical disciplines' (§213). In general, 'dogmatic theology is endless' (§218).

Why? Each theologian has to digest all topics in theology, because they are all related to each other. Skill in dogmatic theology means grasping at some level what it is that binds them together, even if it is impossible to specify concretely what that something is.

This leads to Christian ethics. About this, Schleiermacher is very prescriptive: dogmatic theology has both speculative and practical sides, but this distinction is not an 'essential separation'; it is merely a division of labour between different theological emphases (§223). Schleiermacher notes with disapproval that some theologians fail to acknowledge this, and develop ethics and doctrine in isolation from one other. He diagnoses the problem's origin in the appeal to different kinds of philosophy: 'rational theology' for doctrine, 'philosophical ethics' for Christian ethics. This, he says, is a serious error which needs correcting. It can only be corrected, he suggests, by doing dogmatics properly, and that means that one's style of reasoning needs to be the same for both doctrine and ethics (§§225–7). The church needs one dogmatic theology divided into two aspects (doctrine and ethics), rather than two undivided but separate disciplines.

One cannot do theology without knowing what people in churches actually think. This means that the study of theology will include gathering information about what communities do, in fact, think. And not just one's local church, but all the major denominations at a particular time. This kind of knowledge helps communities correct any one-sidedness from which they may suffer. Schleiermacher calls this area of study 'church statistics' (§232ff.), the last of the subdivisions of 'historical theology'.

The third and final part of the *Brief Outline* after philosophical theology and historical theology concerns 'practical theology'. Practical theology is not to be separated from philosophical or historical theology, but is distinct from them by virtue of its particular emphasis. The practical theologian's job is to teach others about how the church can embody what is said in the more speculative or scholarly aspects of theology (§258). Practical theology is concerned with the relationship between clergy and laity, ecclesiastical hierarchy, the effectiveness of communication of theology and pastoral work.

Schleiermacher acknowledges the danger in saying that there is one discipline of theology, divided up into different aspects. The main danger he identifies is what we would call the problem of deciding the 'core' of theological education. Schleiermacher insists that there can be no definite specification of what counts as core and what counts as specialization (§335). This has to be judged on a case-by-case basis for each student.

Part of the aim of Schleiermacher's work, broadly conceived, is formal: to assist existing debates and provide resources for their development. Doing this requires an account of the rules of debate, the limits of discussion, and the adjudication of boundaries so that one can determine whether a discussion is really part of an existing debate or is better described as starting a new and different one. There is constant pressure in his writing to discern contrary tendencies and to find structures of thinking in which they correct each other rather than become one-sided. This is particularly obvious in his discussion of ethics. As we

have seen, Schleiermacher argues strenuously against the tendency to split dogmatics into theoretical and practical sides. Even so, Schleiermacher's diagnosis here is largely negative: the idea of an integrated dogmatic study, with both speculative and practical dimensions, is something he can only imagine, and he leaves this as a task for future generations.

Schleiermacher's influence on the structure of contemporary university study of theology does not stop with his conceptions in the *Brief Outline*. His way of looking at human experience in *On Religion* is a major resource for some conceptions of what 'religious studies' is. The order of Schleiermacher's argument is from general observations to particular instances rather than the other way round. As we shall see, he starts with a general and universal experience ('feeling'), then moves towards how it is expressed in language, then moves towards how it finds particular expression in communities and finally says how it is expressed most perfectly in Christianity. Any study which begins with 'religion' as a general category, with 'religious language and practice' as a sub-heading, and then 'particular religious languages and practices' as a further specification follows Schleiermacher's lead here.

Feeling, Consciousness and Religion

The most important discussion by Schleiermacher of consciousness in relation to Christianity are his *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* of 1799 (revised 1830) and *The Christian Faith* of 1821 (also revised 1830). This section will take the main argument about feeling from these two works together (Schleiermacher, 1988, 1989).¹

The main purpose of Schleiermacher's *On Religion* is to separate religion from metaphysics and morality (Schleiermacher, 1988: 22–3; Crouter, 1988: xiv; Bowie, 1998: xiv–xv). Why would he want to do this? The short answer is: because of issues raised by two massive influences on German thought, Spinoza and Kant. To understand Schleiermacher we need to understand what Spinoza and Kant had bequeathed to Schleiermacher's time.

Spinoza, in his *Ethics* (1677) argued that the only thing humans can know is the one substance, which is 'God or nature'. There is no separate God, known relationally as in the theological traditions of Judaism and Christianity. There is only the one unified substance, of which humans (and their thinking) are an integral part. Philosophy's task is to explicate the one substance, and explain how its unity is related to its different parts and to give an account of how it is thinkable in philosophy. Metaphysics which posits a separate God (whether known relationally or not) is based on misconceptions about what a 'substance' is or on other faulty premises whose mistakenness can be demonstrated.

Kant, in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), argued that the only things humans can know are the presentations of our minds. The only things of which we have such presentations

are objects in the world. We have understanding when sense experience (provided by objects) and concepts (provided by the mind) are combined. God, however, is not the kind of object which provides us with sense experience. For that reason we cannot have knowledge of God. Rather, God is a product of reason, and is an idea by which we measure our actions in the world. Ideas are not known: they are posited by our minds. Nonetheless, God is an indispensable idea, and is an idea that guides our moral lives. Religion, as considered within philosophy, is the practice of having our lives guided morally by the idea of God.

Schleiermacher, in common with his contemporaries, learned from these philosophical arguments, and attempted to repair their shortcomings. Spinoza's arguments were powerful in demolishing the idea that philosophy can arrive at the idea of God, understood as a being separate from the world. Kant's arguments were powerful in the 'Copernican revolution' they created, in focusing not on the objectivity of objects, but on the activity of human thinking in 'constituting' objects of consciousness. After Kant, philosophers like Schleiermacher were concerned to show how consciousness (now, along with language, one of the foci of philosophy) could be explored and explained. Spinoza's account of the world lacked an adequate account of human freedom. It was good at describing the determined nature of reality, but was bad at doing justice to spontaneity, human creativity or moral freedom. Kant tried to address this by suggesting there were two realms: the determined realm of nature, and the free realm of human moral action. Kant, however, was left with the difficult task of showing how these realms related to each other. Both Spinoza and Kant were weak at showing how human feelings, relations and spontaneity are integral to experience. Early nineteenth-century German philosophy, especially romantic philosophy, to which Schleiermacher is a contributor, attempted to correct these defects by redescribing nature as itself spontaneous (and not merely 'active') as well as determined, and human action as freely creative as well as bound by rules. It is in discussions of consciousness and language that philosophers experimented with such corrections.

What romantic philosophers did less carefully was consider religion in the light of these changes. Once 'metaphysics' (i.e., the attempt in philosophy to know God) was abandoned, what might 'religion' entail? Was it to be reduced to morality (as in Kant, as it appeared to the romantics)? Some German philosophers at the beginning of the 1800s argued for a 'new religion' which would unite conceptual rigour and sensual experience; others turned to a worship of nature. Schleiermacher believed he could do justice to the history of Christianity by *redescribing it* in the wake of Spinoza and Kant, rather than having to abandon it in favour of something new (e.g. the erasure of religion by art). The task of *On Religion* and *The Christian Faith* is to show how it can be done.

Schleiermacher, then, set himself the task of a non-metaphysical and non-moral account of religion. He appealed to something his romantic contemporaries, the 'cultured despisers of religion', would have to agree upon: the power of human intuition and feeling. 'Intuition' (*Anschauung*) is a technical term in

German philosophy, and arguments about how it is conceived are a central concern of German philosophy in this period. Broadly, it describes the relationship between mind and world without splitting one from the other. It asks the question: how is the mind 'in' the world? For Schleiermacher, we have intuition because we are linked to the world in a way that transcends our cognitive and practical activity (Bowie, 1998: xvi). We are not merely Spinoza's mechanical effects of a self-relating universe, nor free agents who posit the world through our subjectivity (such as in Fichte). We are both active and receptive agents. We have an immediate feeling (intuition) of being both wholly individual and yet part of a whole that transcends us. This intuition is prereflexive, that is, it is what we have to think about, rather than itself being a product of our thinking (Crouter, 1988: xxxii). Religion is the practice of doing justice to this intuition. Schleiermacher's argument in *On Religion* is that the key category is experience. We experience our bond with the whole (the infinite) but we experience it individually (finitely). Religion is the interplay between the tug towards conceptual thinking (the finite) and the tug towards preconceptual intuition (the infinite). That means that thinking itself is inherently one-sided, and that truly religious understanding means, in a crucial sense, not 'thinking' at all but feeling. This is not irrational wooliness, but an attempt to describe the relation between finite and infinite, at the same time as redescribing Christian religious life. The remainder of *On Religion* tries to show how this general insight can be applied in more and more particular ways: to communication and language, to social life and communities, and finally to Christianity.

The Christian Faith continues this pattern. The 'Introduction' is a variation on the theme of *On Religion* followed by greater particularity. It attempts to redescribe the details of dogmatic theology in line with the fundamental insight that religion is feeling rather than thinking (in the above sense) and that theological reasoning is thinking in the light of this feeling. *The Christian Faith* insists, as its substantial claim about intuition, that faith has at its root a feeling of radical dependence (*Gefühl der schlechthinnigen Abhängigkeit*), which finds its highest expression as God-consciousness. This claim decisively separates Schleiermacher from the pneumatology of Hegel, for whom all experience is necessarily conceptually mediated. For Hegel the idea that there could be a non-mediated consciousness is a mistake. It is worth delving a little deeper here, as Schleiermacher is not at all persuaded by Hegel.

Hegel insists that any experience of the infinite or absolute is mediated by the finite or determinate. In trinitarian terms, following scriptural warrant, the Father is only known through the Son. Developing this insight experimentally, this relationship is universalized in the Spirit and encompasses all knowledge. Knowledge of God is thus knowledge of the Son. Schleiermacher does not agree. The two poles between which he wishes to steer are solipsism (i.e., we do all the world-constituting work in our pure individuality, as for Fichte) and naturalism (i.e., the world is self-constituted and we are just its effects, as for Spinoza). Schleiermacher addresses this by suggesting that we are dependent and receptive upon a prior world we did not create, but that the manner of our response

is spontaneous and unique to each of us (Bowie, 1998: xvii). We have a (spontaneous, individual) feeling of radical (receptive, universal) dependence. The formula 'feeling of radical dependence' is designed to perform this double task. Schleiermacher associates the feeling of radical dependence with the concept of God, through an account of 'God-consciousness'. This means that 'God' refers both to what can be known (in so far as it is mediated) and what cannot be known (in so far as it is what gives rise to 'knowing', and therefore itself unknowable). For Hegel, this would require acknowledging that God is, at least, partly unintelligible, which he (with Spinoza) rejects. For Schleiermacher, it requires admitting that intelligibility rests upon the unintelligible, which he (with the early Schelling) accepts. Schleiermacher is therefore more Augustinian and less Spinozist here, in so far as he thinks theology involves speaking what cannot be spoken. What evokes our thinking cannot be thought, and we should not confuse the response that is evoked from us with the idea that we ourselves are the prevenient agent of the world's reality. The triumph of the concept in Hegel is a trinitarian theology dominated by the Word; the feeling of absolute dependence in Schleiermacher is a trinitarian theology oscillating brilliantly between Creator and Spirit, but (problematically for orthodox theology) with no intrinsic need for the Word. A properly trinitarian theology need not be forced into either position here: whether it finds itself concerned with intelligibility or unintelligibility, or with both in human action, depends upon which person of the Trinity is currently the focus of discussion.

The Christian Faith elaborates an interplay of opposites (God and world, sin and grace) and shows how they are handled *together* in human consciousness. Every major doctrine is to be redescribed, according to this pattern, as the elucidation of the consciousness we have of these opposites and how we respond in self-consciousness and action. This 'interplay of opposites' structure is Schleiermacher's substitute for trinitarian theology, and it has some startling consequences. Most strikingly, the order of topics does not follow the creed (Father, Son, Spirit, church, eschaton) but something quite different: creation, God, sin, grace. The order of the second section is particularly experimental: the state of humanity, the person and work of Christ, justification and sanctification, the church, Scripture, sacraments, the eschaton, redemption, Trinity. It is worth noticing that although Schleiermacher's theology is dominated by human action (consciousness and response), and although this topic normally comes under the topic of pneumatology, the Spirit is not itself a topic for Schleiermacher. This omission is interesting: is it because Schleiermacher is untrinitarian, and oblivious to the necessity of doing justice to the Spirit? Or is it because Schleiermacher is so attuned to the Spirit-filled nature of human action that the whole discussion is pneumatological, and thus the Spirit cannot be merely a topic in it?

Schleiermacher's focus on feeling is a way to avoid being trapped in a theology reduced to metaphysics or morality, and his handling of consciousness reflects romantic debates about how descriptions of knowledge and action are rooted in questions about how the infinite is related to the finite.

Hermeneutics and Language

Schleiermacher's contribution to hermeneutics continues to teach philosophers about key issues in language and meaning. Although Schleiermacher's work in this area was famously rehearsed and recovered in Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* of 1960, recent work by Manfred Frank and (in English) Andrew Bowie makes the relevant texts available in ways that throw the principal issues into sharp and informative relief (Schleiermacher, 1977; Bowie, 1998).

Schleiermacher loved rules. 'Pleasure in truth is pleasure in rules, joy in agreement of individual things with the rule' (Crouter, 1988: xxii). And more than rules, he loved exploring why having a good set of rules is insufficient for performing the task that the rules are for. Rules need to be applied, and applying rules is a skill or art (*Kunst*). A skill is something one learns by practice, not by learning more rules; if this were not so, there would be an endless regression with rules governing rules. The interpretation of texts, not least Scripture, is something governed by rules. It is the task of the philosopher to elaborate these rules in as succinct a way as possible. Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is partly such an elaboration. At the same time, rules are applied by specific persons at specific times in individual ways. They exercise skill and make judgements in ways that are not reducible to rules, but indicate the freedom and spontaneity of the interpreter. Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is partly an exploration of the implications of acknowledging such freedom and spontaneity.

Schleiermacher uses many pairs of words to develop his hermeneutics. Explaining their tasks highlights the central issues. The main pairs are: grammatical and technical interpretation, formal and organic function, intuition and feeling, receptivity and spontaneity, dialectic and hermeneutics, transcendental and transcendent, divinatory and comparative method (Bowie, 1998: vii–xxxi).

Grammatical and technical interpretation refer to the two poles of interpretation: the general and the individual. Grammatical interpretation concentrates on an individual *example* of a general usage. Technical interpretation concentrates on an *individual* example of a general usage. In grammatical interpretation, people are just users of language. In technical interpretation language is just the tool with which people express themselves individually.

The relationship between 'formal' and 'organic' function, a distinction from the *Dialectics* of 1811, addresses the question: how much of 'meaning' is provided by the world, and how much by each person? By 'organic' function, Schleiermacher draws attention to the way the world encounters each person differently: it cannot be specified in advance. By 'formal' function, he means the aspects that are clearly the same for each person. Judgement is what happens when the formal meets the organic. This means that the problematic distinction between 'analytic' and 'synthetic' judgements (Kant) can be repaired by a *single notion of judgement*, which includes a distinction between formal and organic functions (Bowie, 1998: xxi). One can speculate about the implications this has for scriptural interpretation. Instead of distinguishing 'literal' from 'imaginative'

(allegorical, spiritual, figurative) interpretations, it makes more sense to have a single notion of interpretation, with both literal and imaginative functions always present. This means even the most literal approach has an imaginative aspect, and even the wildest fancy of the imagination is about *this* text rather than another.

Intuition and feeling, covered in the previous main section, are terms whose job is to describe the relationship between world and mind. The term 'feeling' (along with 'divination') is understood by some readers to indicate that Schleiermacher thinks interpretation is about empathetic identification between reader and author. This is a distortion. 'Feeling' describes a person's *being part of* the world in a way that defies thinking because it is what makes thinking possible. The relationship is 'intuited' rather than thought.

Receptivity and spontaneity refer, as a pair, to the fact that when we make judgements, we use rules. The rules are received. Our use is spontaneous. We do not make up the rules: if we did, others could not make sense of us. Our use of them is not rule-bound: if it were, there would be an endless regression of rules for using rules. Interpretation is the skill of using the rules of interpretation.

Hermeneutics and dialectic refer respectively to the individual and universal aspects of understanding. Hermeneutics is the business of determining what a particular person is trying to say. Dialectic is the business of determining the principles behind the skill of making judgements, or the foundations of the art of entering into dialogue. Hermeneutics is concerned with meaning of statements; dialectics is concerned with whether they are true. Truth is not a metaphysical entity 'out there', but the product of a certain kind of reasoning about whether statements accord with what a particular community takes to be true. Schleiermacher thus puts 'community' and 'universal' on the same level, in matters of making judgements of truth. Judgements of truth are always made according to the criteria of a particular community (Bowie, 1998: xx–ii).

The difference between 'transcendent' and 'transcendental' in Kant (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A296/B352–3) is made problematic by Schleiermacher. For Kant, 'transcendent' refers to the transgression of limits, and thus does not refer to objects of experience at all, whereas 'transcendental' refers to space, time and concepts – that which limits sense data in the conditioning of something thought. Schleiermacher does not make a separation between the 'transcendent basis' of our being and the 'transcendent basis' of our thinking. This is because thinking is part of being; it takes place *after* intuition, which is already the indication that mind is in the world. The conditions for judgement are the same as the conditions for there being a world. Because of the role played by 'feeling' in Schleiermacher's thought, 'transcendent' and 'transcendental' are, in some sense, the same thing (Bowie, 1998: xxiv–v).

The difference between divinatory and comparative methods concerns the relationship between rules and their application. Divination is the ability to understand what someone means without exhaustive rules. We have already seen how there cannot be exhaustive rules: skill is always needed to apply them. What is the character of this skill? 'The *divinatory* method is the one in which

one, so to speak, transforms oneself into the other person and tries to understand the individual element directly' (Schleiermacher, 1998: 92). Notice the 'so to speak' in this phrase. It is an indication of the struggle Schleiermacher has to *explain* the aspect of interpretation that cannot be reduced to rules. It is contrasted with 'comparative' method, which treats someone else as 'something universal' and measures whether and how far they depart from other things that are similarly universal. Comparing different performances of the same musical score would be an example of this. Divination draws attention to the fact that individuals can relate to others *as individuals* (rather than treating them as instances of something general). Comparison draws attention to the fact that individuals all share something *in common*. The crucial thing is that divination and comparison belong together: they may not be separated from each other. Without comparison, divination has no way of knowing whether it has made a mistake: it is not subject to any higher criteria of correction. Without divination, comparison cannot know that an individual is, in fact, an example of something universal: it would just have an infinite regression of rules that determine whether something is an example, without ever applying this rule (Schleiermacher, 1998: 93). Taking divination and comparison together means one can make interpretations and test them.

How do all these matters affect actual interpretation of Scripture? This is an important question, not least because there does not seem much relationship between the interpretation of Scripture and *The Christian Faith*. In general, for Schleiermacher, philosophical considerations indicate that interpretation is an infinite task. The role of historical criticism is particularly interesting here. Historical criticism is not undertaken in order to resolve difficulties or solve problems about what something means: this cannot be done, because 'no language is completely present to us, not even our own mother tongue'. We cannot completely eliminate difficulties about meaning even in everyday sentences. Rather, historical criticism is useful because it provides 'ongoing instructions' for interpretation: it keeps the debate about meaning alive (Schleiermacher, 1998: 14–15). Interpretation of Scripture is an infinite task because we do not have a secure starting point: 'Beginning in the middle is unavoidable' and 'we must be satisfied with arbitrary beginnings in all areas of knowledge' (Bowie, 1998: xxxvi, xxvii). Particular conceptions of what a passage of Scripture means are handed down, and can be tested against other interpretations. There are rules for doing this, but no rules for applying these rules: only the skill of the interpreter. There is thus no theory for deciding whether an interpretation is any good, only particular judgements by other skilful interpreters.

In hermeneutics, Schleiermacher is more interested in the conduct of argument and disagreement in scriptural interpretation than he is in actual interpretation of Scripture. Put differently, he is concerned to articulate the ethics of scriptural interpretation. This could mean that Schleiermacher abdicates his responsibilities as an interpreter in favour of endless generalizations about how interpretation might take place, should anyone actually wish to do any. This is not the case. Schleiermacher's context is one in which there is no shortage of

scriptural interpretation, and it has been made more complex by the rise of historical criticism. He himself was a pastor, and he delivered sermons each Sunday. Many of them are published, and it is obvious that Schleiermacher did a great deal of scriptural interpretation in contexts of worship. In these one sees Schleiermacher's struggle to correlate his reading of Scripture with the theological task which he sees so clearly (assisting church leadership), a difficulty exemplified by his almost complete ignoring of the Old Testament (Barth, 1982: 16; DeVries, 1996: 55). The task of the hermeneutics is different. His task is to assist the community of interpreters to disagree well and argue fruitfully. Here, as in so many other places, it is clear that Schleiermacher considers the discipline of hermeneutics to be in the service of the leaders of the church.

Barth on Schleiermacher

Karl Barth's critique of Schleiermacher in his *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* is important (Barth, 1972; cf. Barth, 1982). While it is true that Barth did not possess the same facility in philosophy as Schleiermacher, and although one needs to acknowledge that Barth had neither the detailed knowledge of romantic philosophy, nor access to the texts readers enjoy today, his criticisms are worth hearing. They provide a great deal of help in understanding why Schleiermacher continues to fascinate and trouble theologians today. We will focus on Barth's account of Schleiermacher's handling of Christology and the Trinity.

The main question Barth asks is this: how do *On Religion* and the introduction to *The Christian Faith* relate to the substantial dogmatic discussions in *The Christian Faith*? Put differently, what is the relationship between Schleiermacher's general observations and overviews and the nitty-gritty? Barth's judgement is that the relationship is a problem. To summarize in advance, Barth thinks that Schleiermacher's general observations tend to pre-judge dogmatic questions in a decidedly untheological fashion, and when they do not, they produce contradictions. We will now look briefly at how he arrives at this view.

'The Christology is the great disturbing element in Schleiermacher's doctrine of faith', Barth suggests (Barth, 1972: 431). 'Jesus of Nazareth fits desperately badly into this theology... He obviously gives Schleiermacher... a great deal of trouble!' (p. 432). Barth suggests that because of the grand sweep of Schleiermacher's theology, and its conception of dogmatics as the elucidation and elaboration of human *consciousness* of God, Jesus has to fit the scheme. Jesus fits badly and Barth notes that this is an indication of the high quality of Schleiermacher's theological instincts, because he does not quite allow the big overview to crush the particularity of Jesus. Barth suggests that although Schleiermacher wanted to proclaim Christ in the Christological sections of *The Christian Faith*, the overarching theme of consciousness makes this difficult. The difference between God and humanity (two different actors) gets subsumed into

a single consciousness (of one human actor) (Barth, 1972: 431–2, 457–62). Barth insistently poses the question of difference: both God's trinitarian difference (between Father, Son and Spirit) and the ontological difference (between creator and creature). He even constructs a little test: in a genuinely trinitarian theology, when one describes the divinity of one person (for example, the *Logos*) one finds one's account inextricably describing the divinity of another (say, the Spirit). 'Reformation theology, starting in reverse fashion, from the *Logos*, passes this test: as a theology of the Word it is at once a theology of the Holy Spirit . . .' (Barth, 1972: 460). Schleiermacher's theology does not start with Christ, but starts with human consciousness. In trinitarian terms, it privileges human response to God, which makes it a theology of the Spirit. But whereas starting from the *Logos* ensures the divinity of the Spirit in Luther's theology, for example, it is not clear to Barth that starting from the Spirit in the way Schleiermacher does ensures the divinity of the *Logos*. Barth is emphatic: Schleiermacher does indeed insist on the divinity of the *Logos*, but this divinity *does not follow from Schleiermacher's argument*. Rather, it is asserted, and in a way that sticks out like a sore thumb (Barth, 1972: 461).

Barth's point is this: Schleiermacher manages to work out a modern Christology which is integrated into a broader modern theology but he finds it exceptionally difficult. It is to this difficulty that Barth wishes to draw attention: why so difficult? Schleiermacher, for Barth, does much good work in describing Christ as mediating God and humanity, but the notion of mediation does not itself tell us that Christ is divine. The Reformers did this much better: 'The sole mediation which enters into consideration there is the recognition of the Father in the Son through the Spirit in the strict irreducible opposition of these "persons" in the Godhead'. In other words, mediation is not enough: it is *how this mediation is described* that matters: 'Schleiermacher immunized the concept of revelation' (Barth, 1972: 464). How does this happen? By considering Christology under the broader heading 'The State of the Christian as Conscious of the Divine Grace' (*The Christian Faith*: §§91–105). Barth worries that putting things like this suggests that Christ gets functionalized as a way to determine the state of the Christian, albeit a special and the most important way. It is true that Schleiermacher uses words like 'only' as in the summary at the head of §91: '*We have fellowship with God only in a living fellowship with the Redeemer . . .*' but for Barth the force of this 'only' comes merely from the insistent tone used by Schleiermacher and is not intrinsic to his description of Christ (Barth, 1972: 471).

Good theology, as Barth sees it, needs constantly to remind itself and its readers that it is trying to do justice to something that is *other than itself*. Theology must always be open to correction, repair and revision and, more importantly, must be open to contradiction by God. Schleiermacher's account of dogmatics as a description of Christian consciousness is one-sided: it successfully captures the *thinkability* of human response to God but does insufficient justice to God's *objective revelation*. This is a significant shortcoming, because Christian hope is rooted in a salvation made possible precisely because God is different, and not subject to the world as we are. The more confidently theology 'knows' things,

the less it gives cause for hope beyond what we know from our tragic historical experience.

Barth is by no means the last word on the matter. For example, Barth tended to see philosophy and theology as distinct disciplines: Schleiermacher could have taught him the need to develop *Christian philosophical arguments* rather than allow philosophy *per se* to be considered in opposition to dogmatic theology. It is important to correct Barth's criticisms by paying more attention to the romantic philosophy that gave Schleiermacher not only his vocabulary but provided his theology with its basic argumentative tools. Schleiermacher well understood the unthinkability of the infinite: it was a central topic in romantic philosophy. Like his contemporaries, he was concerned to show how the thinkable finite relates to this unthinkable infinite. He was sure that the parts of philosophy that address this question are theologically significant. In this, Schleiermacher stands in a line of theologians that include Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas: the question, of course, is how well his (untrinitarian) account of the Trinity discharged these tasks.

Schleiermacher's approach to hermeneutics is especially relevant to understanding how he conceives of the task of dogmatic theology. His skill in hermeneutics is probably unmatched by any prior or later figure. He understood that because Scripture is written and interpreted, there cannot, *pace* Barth, be any absolute 'over and against' between revelation and history, only a recognition that the infinite is knowable – although by definition not absolutely – through the finite. Instead of saying Schleiermacher fails to acknowledge God's objective difference, it might be better to say that he does not adequately elaborate the theological significance of God's *unthinkable difference from the world*. This retains Barth's insight – that purely human hope is almost no hope – and helps do justice to Schleiermacher's romantic conceptual heritage. Schleiermacher understands Christian dogmatics as *finite thinking in relation to the infinite*, and not as the elaboration of objective revelation over and against the fragility of merely human knowledge. Schleiermacher teaches that dogmatics is merely human knowledge, and that the interpretation of Scripture is a human art.

Perhaps the problem with Schleiermacher for contemporary theology is that grammatical questions sometimes concern him at the expense of substance and that at other times his substantial theology is too experimental. Substantiating this, however, requires detailed engagement with his work.

Conclusion

Schleiermacher was arguably the best philosophical theologian since Aquinas. Comparing Schleiermacher with Aquinas has its pitfalls, but it helps throw some of the main issues into relief. Three things are worth mentioning in this connection.

- 1 Schleiermacher tried to address the major topics in theological education of his day. Like Aquinas he suggested an order for tackling questions, and did so with a view to improving the quality of theological education, particularly in the area of theological reasoning.
- 2 Schleiermacher relied very heavily on philosophical reasoning that is not straightforwardly Christian. As Aquinas used Aristotle to help interpret Scripture, so Schleiermacher used German idealist and romantic philosophy. This accounts for his reliance on categories like ‘consciousness’ and ‘subjectivity’ and the elaboration of practices of artistic creativity and their relation to rules.
- 3 Schleiermacher is subject to the same queries and criticisms as Aquinas. What is the relationship between biblical interpretation and philosophical reasoning? To what extent do the particular philosophical resources not just assist but prejudice dogmatic questions? What are the limits to speculation? How far do the powerful structures overdetermine the particular questions under consideration? Asking these questions helps show why some critiques of Schleiermacher are so passionate: at stake is not merely whether his theology is persuasive, but whether it is genuinely theological.

Just as Aquinas is for many the authoritative voice of medieval Christian theology, so Schleiermacher is the authoritative voice of modern Christian theology. Theology in the twenty-first century has learned from both, but is no longer either medieval or modern. Yet the questions it tackles are inherited questions: what is the relationship between Christ and the *Logos*? How is the Trinity an image of the relationship between infinite and finite? What have human and divine action to do with each other? What is the difference between Christian and non-Christian descriptions of the world? Schleiermacher’s voice is audible in many, if not all, twentieth-century engagements with these questions, but the answers he gives are perhaps not as decisive as the way he organizes their presentation and discussion.

Schleiermacher shows the fruitfulness of good Christian philosophical arguments. At the same time, he shows the thrill and danger of experimentation in doctrine. Whether or not one wishes to do the kind of theology Schleiermacher did, his work helps us to understand how modern theology has taken the form it has, and why it receives the criticisms one finds in post-modern theology, whether broadly orthodox or radically experimental, or both.

Note

- 1 In this section I rely heavily on the arguments in Bowie (1998) and Crouter (1988).

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