

HPRS5905/6905

—
MODERN
CHRISTIAN
THEOLOGY

Schleiermacher I

The background is a solid blue color. A white cross is centered on the page, with its vertical bar extending from the top to the bottom and its horizontal bar extending from the left to the right. A horizontal white line, resembling a tear in paper, runs across the middle of the image, slightly above the center of the cross. A dark blue rectangular box is positioned in the lower right quadrant, partially overlapping the cross and the torn paper line. Inside this box, the text "CAN RELIGIOUS TRUTH BE GROUNDED IN EXPERIENCE?" is written in white, uppercase, sans-serif font. Below the text, a thin white horizontal line spans the width of the box.

CAN RELIGIOUS TRUTH BE GROUNDED IN
EXPERIENCE?

CAN RELIGIOUS TRUTH BE GROUNDED IN EXPERIENCE?

The question at the centre of this lecture is one of the most consequential in the whole of modern theology: can religious truth be grounded in our experience?

Before Schleiermacher, the standard answers to the question of religious foundations were two: Revelation, mediated through Scripture and tradition, and Reason, exercised in natural theology and philosophical argument.

Both of these foundations had, by the close of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the Enlightenment, come under sustained pressure — the first from historical criticism, the second from Kantian epistemology.

CAN RELIGIOUS TRUTH BE GROUNDED IN EXPERIENCE?

Sources
of
Religious
Certainty

Revelation –
e.g. Scripture as
certain

Historical criticism made
Scripture relative to its context,
meaning that universal rules are
difficult to draw from it with
certainty.

Rationalism –
e.g. our reason
as certain

Kantian noumenal /
phenomenal distinction drew a
thick line between knowledge
available to reason (e.g. this
world) and knowledge not
available to reason (e.g. God).

CAN RELIGIOUS TRUTH BE GROUNDED IN EXPERIENCE?

Schleiermacher's move was to perceive that a third possibility existed, one that had been obscured by the arguments that had emerged between those who defended a traditional Christian vision based on scripture and the rationalists.

This move was to ground religion in a distinctive mode of human experience that was irreducible to either cognition (reason) or morality (scripture).

To understand this proposal in its depth and its difficulty is to understand the epistemological wager on which the entire tradition of modern theology has been staked.

FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER (1768-1834)

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher was born in 1768 into a Reformed Protestant household shaped by Pietism.

His early education among the Moravian Brethren in Germany gave him a Christian background in which heartfelt, experiential religion was prized above doctrinal correctness, and where emotion was a central component to Christian worship.

On moving to Berlin, he came into contact with the vibrant social circle of the Berlin Enlightenment and with the Romantics, fundamentally influencing the development of his work.



FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER (1768-1834)

The mix of these two inheritances, pietism and romanticism, meant that by the time he composed probably his most famous work, the “*On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*” in 1799, Schleiermacher had absorbed both the Kantian critique of speculative metaphysics and the Romantic rehabilitation of feeling and aesthetic intuition.

His project was to take these two inheritances with complete seriousness and to show that religion, properly understood, could survive both the Kantian critique and the Romantic sensibility.

TEXTS IN GERMAN PHILOSOPHY

On Religion

Speeches to its
cultured despisers

Friedrich Schleiermacher

ON RELIGION: SPEECHES TO ITS CULTURED DESPISERS (1799)

On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers (1799) is deliberately addressed to the educated intelligentsia of late eighteenth-century Germany, of whom Schleiermacher was one, who had concluded that religion was an outmoded superstition or just moralising.

Schleiermacher writes directly that their contempt for religion is based on a fundamental misidentification: what they despise is not religion itself, but its distortions.

Genuine religion, according to Schleiermacher, is something they have never seriously considered.

ON RELIGION: SPEECHES TO ITS CULTURED DESPISERS (1799)

The 'Speeches' are an exercise in reorientation, as Schleiermacher wants his readers to look again at religion, and to discover that what they see is not what they assumed.

Contrary to the sense at the time, and very radically, Schleiermacher insists that religion must be carefully distinguished from both metaphysics and morality.

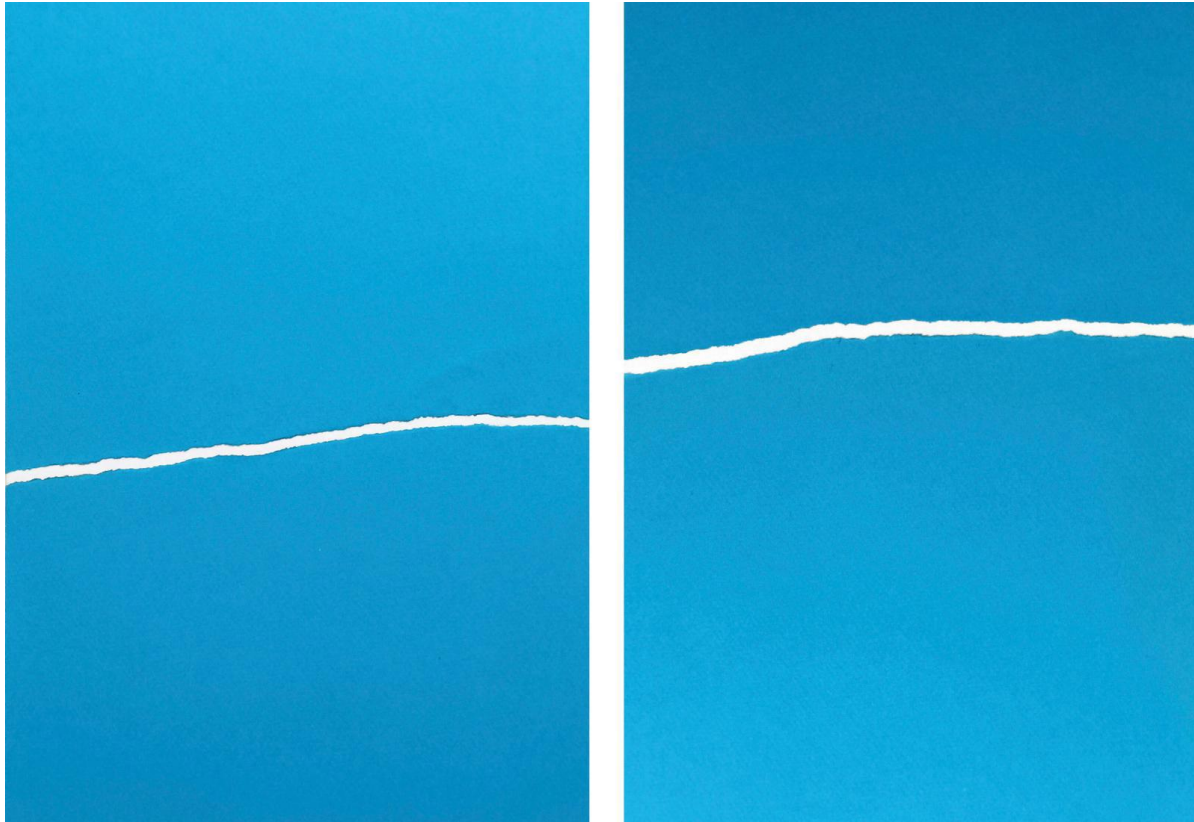
The standard defences of religion in the eighteenth century had either grounded it in rational arguments for the existence of God (the metaphysical route) or in the practical necessity of religious belief for moral life (the Kantian moral route).

ON RELIGION: SPEECHES TO ITS CULTURED DESPISERS (1799)

Schleiermacher refuses both.

Religion, he insists, has its own province in the mind: it is not theoretical knowledge of God and the world, nor practical guidance for conduct, but a third thing altogether.

It is a distinct mode of human awareness and response. If theology tries to justify itself by borrowing the currency of metaphysics or morality, it is already in straying from its proper home.



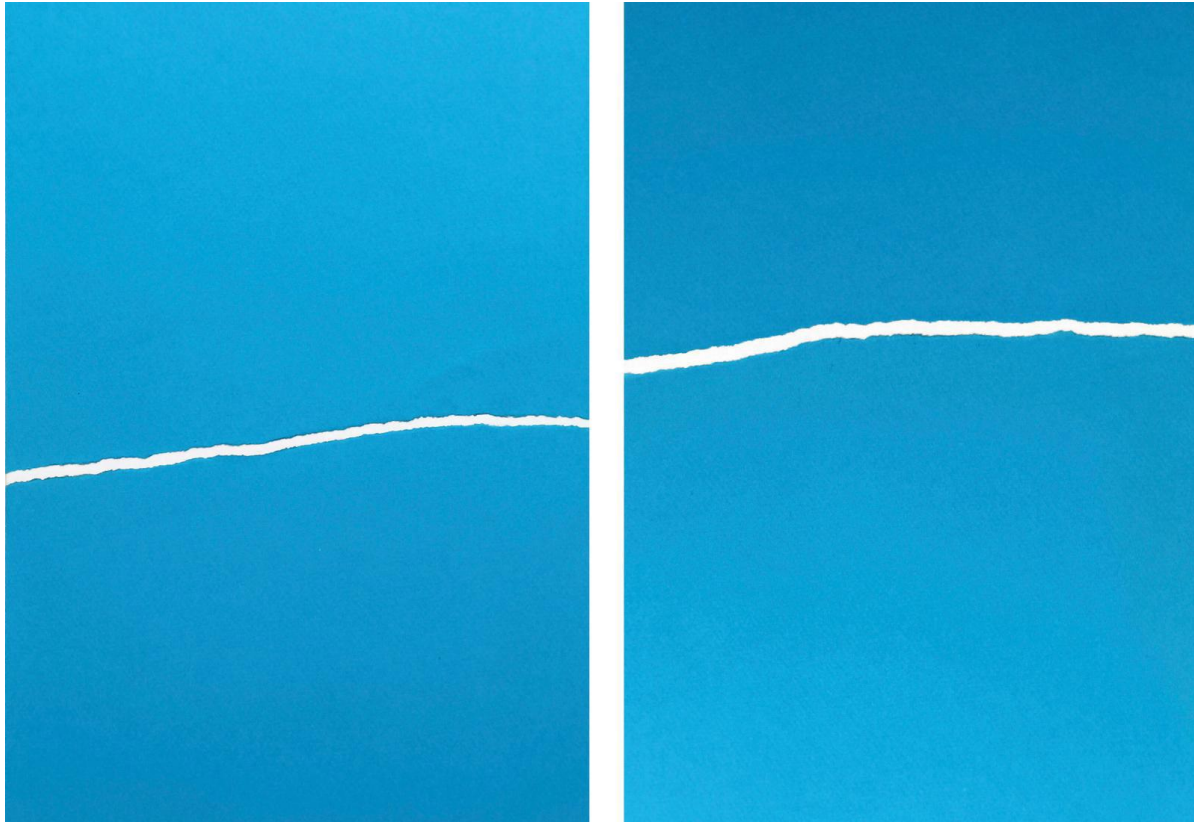
ANSCHAUUNG UND GEFÜHL

Schleiermacher characterises the essence of religion as *Anschauung des Universums*, intuition of the universe, together with *Gefühl*, feeling.

Anschauung, in Kant's usage, refers to the direct apprehension of something before the understanding has organised it into concepts and judgements.

For Schleiermacher, the religious Anschauung is the immediate apprehension of the universe as a living, dynamic whole.

Gefühl, feeling, is the corresponding resonance in the human subject, the movement of receptivity, of being affected and moved, that accompanies this intuition.



ANSCHAUUNG UND GEFÜHL

What is crucial for Schleiermacher is the immediacy of both of these concepts, in that they occur before reflection, before the application of categories, before the mediation of doctrine.

Religion, at its source, is this immediate, pre-theoretical encounter with 'something', not a conclusion reached at the end of an argument.

GEFÜHL SCHLECHTHINNIGER ABHÄNGIGKEIT

In 1822, when publishing 'The Christian Faith', Schleiermacher refined his account of the foundation of religion as the feeling of absolute dependence – ***Gefühl schlechthinniger Abhängigkeit***.

He thought the earlier language of Anschauung carried too much cognition in that it suggested a kind of immediate perception or intuition that could too easily be confused with a form of knowledge.

The mature Schleiermacher is more careful: the religious foundation is not a cognitive act but a feeling. In the feeling of absolute dependence, the self is aware of itself as wholly conditioned — as receiving its existence from a source that is not itself and upon which it is entirely dependent.

ABSOLUTE DEPENDENCE

The feeling of absolute dependence, Schleiermacher argues, is the anthropological correlate of what theology calls God.

God is not first known through arguments or the Bible and then correlated with what we know – the movement is the reverse.

The feeling of absolute dependence is the primary data and *God is the name given to that upon which we are absolutely dependent.*

ABSOLUTE DEPENDENCE

Crucially, this means that theological statements about God are not descriptions of a divine reality known independently of human experience but are instead articulations of what is co-given in the feeling of absolute dependence.

When we say that God is omnipotent, we are expressing the sense of our total limitedness; when we say that God is eternal, we are expressing our sense of our own temporal existence.

The doctrines of Christian theology then become expressions of specific modifications of our religious feeling.

ABSOLUTE DEPENDENCE

A central question in the interpretation of Schleiermacher is whether the feeling of absolute dependence is in any sense cognitive, whether it constitutes a form of genuine knowledge of God, or whether it is merely a subjective psychological state.

Does our shared experience of dependence really tell us something about the nature of our reality, or is it just meaningless feeling with no grounding?

SUBJECTIVITY AND RELIGION

Schleiermacher's grounding of religion in the feeling of absolute dependence represents one of the most consequential intellectual moves in the history of Christian thought.

By locating religion in the structure of human feeling itself, Schleiermacher makes theology answerable neither to metaphysical argument nor to the embarrassments of historical criticism.

But the risks are equally real. If religion is grounded in subjective experience, it becomes difficult to adjudicate between different religious experiences, to identify criteria of religious authenticity, or to maintain the priority of Christian beliefs over other religious traditions.

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

From leaving the bombshell in the last few slides, Schleiermacher does attempt to demonstrate that the entire content of Christian doctrine can be systematically derived from this feeling of absolute dependence.

He does this in his very large 'The Christian Faith' (1830) in which Christian doctrines like creation, sin, the person and work of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church, eschatology etc. is reconstructed as an expression of a specific modification of religious feeling.

Doctrine of Sin

Expresses the sense of the God-consciousness being impeded or obstructed by the flesh

Doctrine of Redemption

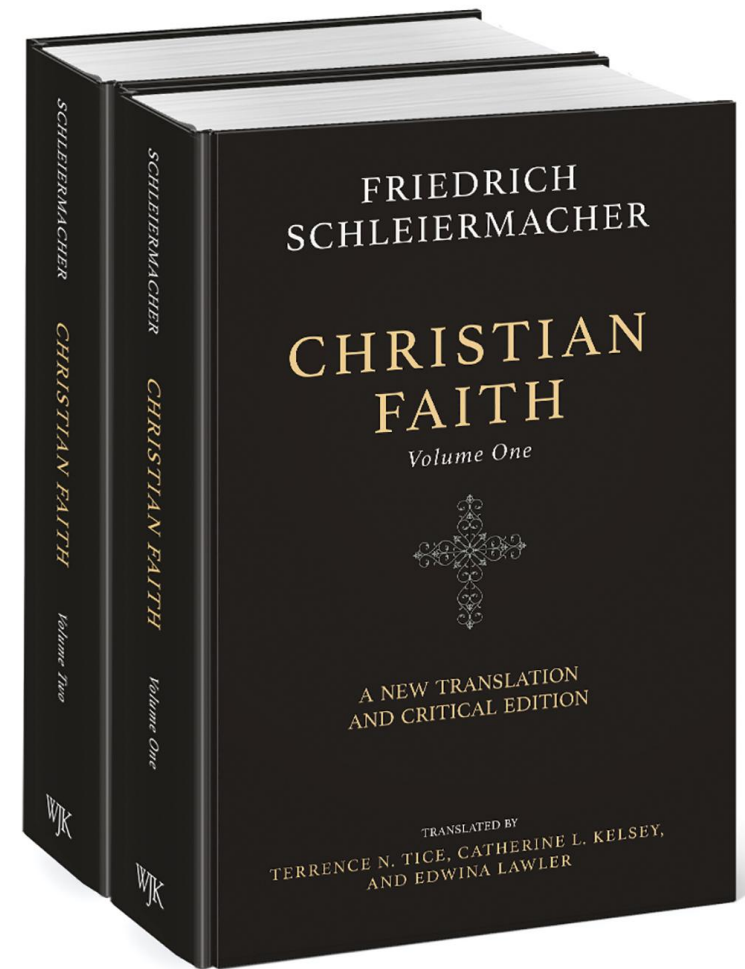
Expresses the sense of the God-consciousness being awakened through the influence of Christ's own perfect and powerful God-consciousness

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

This is a programme of extraordinary ambition on Schleiermacher's part which covers essentially every aspect of Christian doctrine in a systematic way.

The system is internally coherent and theologically serious, but it raises the question of whether doctrines reconceived in this anthropocentric mode still refer to realities beyond the human subject.

What does it mean to talk of the doctrine of sin, specifically and exactly, when it arises from our feeling of being constrained within our flesh, rather than a "true" account of reality?



CHRIST IN SCHLEIERMACHER

A good example of this is Schleiermacher's Christology – his theology about the person of Christ and his meaning.

Jesus Christ, for Schleiermacher, is not primarily defined by the metaphysical categories we think of (e.g. two natures in one person, divine and human) but by the perfection and power of his God-consciousness.

What makes Jesus Jesus is not a supernatural constitution but the fact that his God-consciousness, his immediate awareness of God and orientation toward God, was absolutely unimpeded, a constant and living presence that shaped his entire existence.

Through the ongoing life of the community he founded, this God-consciousness elevates and intensifies our own religious awareness, leading us by example to salvation.



CRITICISMS OF SCHLEIERMACHER

GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH HEGEL (1770-1831)

Schleiermacher's account of religion as feeling attracted an immediate and devastating riposte from his Berlin colleague, Hegel.

If the essence of religion is the feeling of absolute dependence, Hegel is reported to have remarked, then a dog has religion – for surely a dog feels its dependence on its master.

The wit of the observation masks a serious philosophical objection: feeling, as a subjective state, lacks the conceptual determinacy necessary for genuine cognitive content.

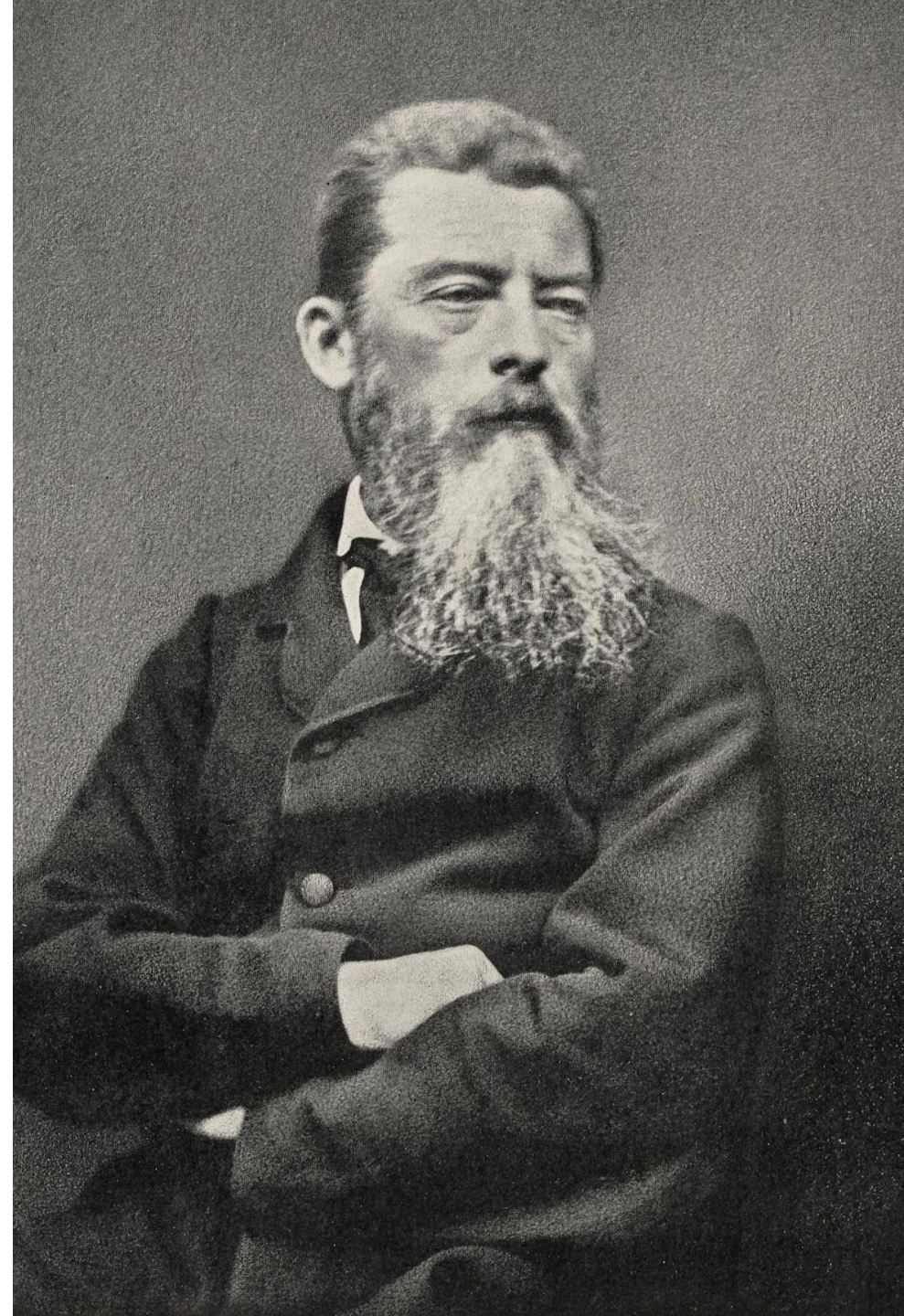


LUDWIG FEUERBACH (1804-1872)

A more radical challenge to Schleiermacher's project came from Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), who argued that theology is nothing other than anthropology. It is the projection of ideal human qualities onto an imaginary divine subject.

If God is the name given to that upon which the subject feels absolutely dependent, and if this feeling is a structural feature of human self-consciousness, then it is at least an open question whether theology has disclosed something real beyond the human subject or has simply described the mechanics of human self-projection.

Feuerbach drew the reductive conclusion: what theology calls God is only the human essence alienated from itself and hypostatized as a transcendent Other.

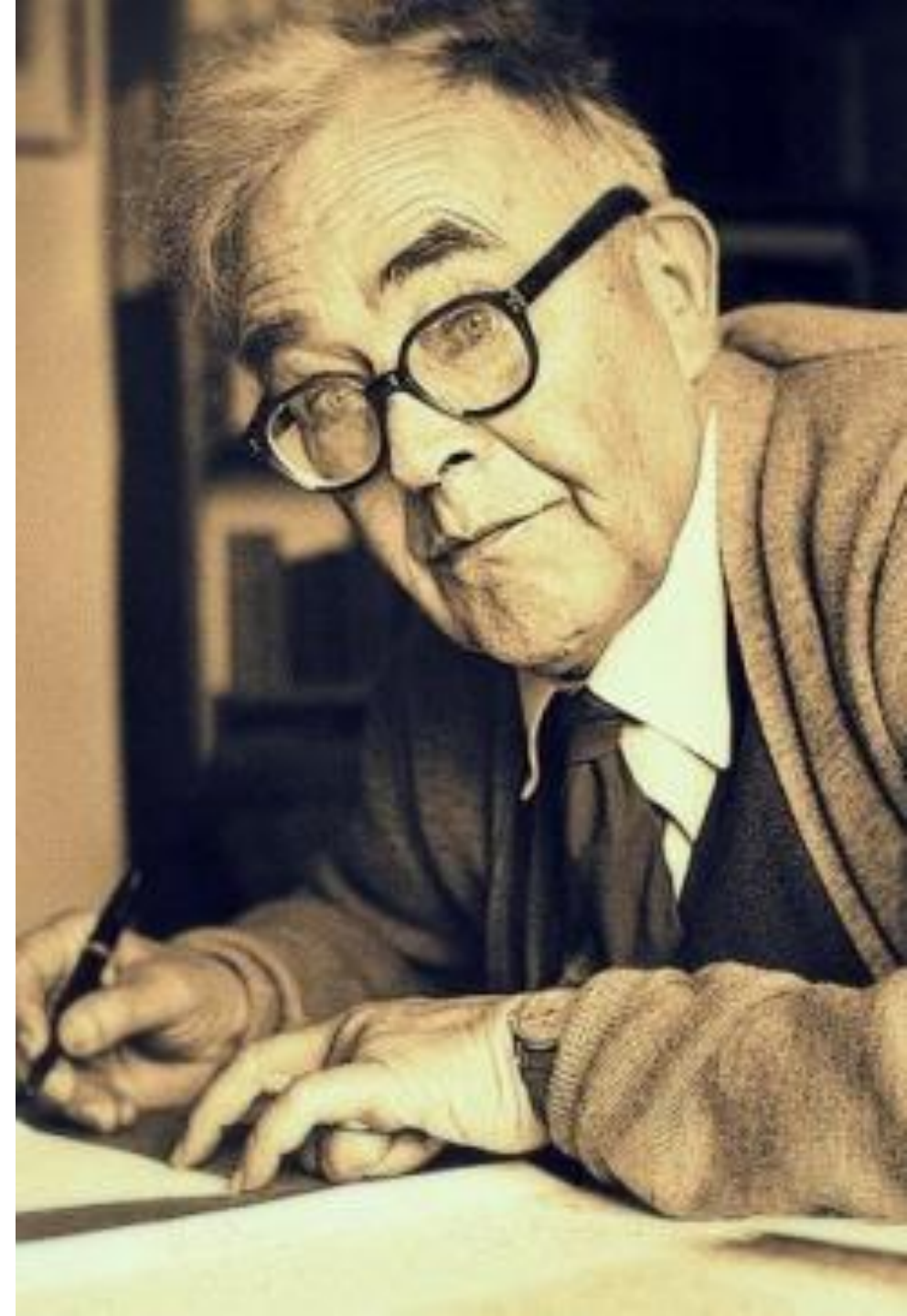


KARL BARTH (1886-1968)

Probably the most theologically grounded critique of Schleiermacher's project came from Karl Barth (1886-1968), who devoted a large part of his career to responding to and thinking through Schleiermacher's work.

Barth's objection is fundamental: by grounding theology in the feeling of absolute dependence, Schleiermacher has made theology answerable to the structure of human consciousness, rather than to the sovereign Word of God.

The God who emerges from this theology is a God correlated to human experience, a God whose character and attributes are determined by what the human religious subject finds within itself.



KARL BARTH (1886-1968)

This, for Barth, is an idolatrous move: it makes God in the image of the human, rather than receiving the human as made in the image of God.

The living God of the Bible, the God who acts, speaks, commands, and redeems with sovereign freedom, cannot be read off from the feelings of humans, however refined and elevated they might be.

For Barth, Schleiermacher's move to ground religion in human feeling, means that the human, rather than God, come first.



DEFENCES

The critiques of Hegel, Feuerbach, and Barth are serious, and we should take them seriously, but Schleiermacher has able defenders, and the defence is instructive in deepening our understanding of his argument.

Against Hegel, Schleiermacher does not intend the feeling of absolute dependence to exhaust the content of religion, nor to entirely encapsulate the totality of Christianity.

Instead, it is its foundation, not its totality, and the full content of Christian doctrine is developed through the community's historical experience of redemption and growth.

DEFENCES

Against Feuerbach, it can be argued that the feeling of absolute dependence is not just a projection but a recognition. That is a response to something that is genuinely given, that confronts the subject rather than being merely produced by it.

Against Barth, it can be argued that Schleiermacher never intends to derive the content of Christian revelation from experience alone. The Christian Faith is a specifically Christian dogmatics, rooted in the particular experience of the community formed by Jesus Christ, not a general religious phenomenology.

EXPERIENCE AS THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

This question of whether experience can serve as the foundation of religious truth remains one of the most contested questions in contemporary theology.

The three positions opposite largely define the field within which contemporary theological epistemology is conducted and the “traditions” we might talk of as shaping contemporary theology.

Schleiermacher’s achievement is not merely historical. He identified, with a clarity that has not been surpassed, the genuine difficulty of theological knowledge in modernity and that a new foundation was required.

Schleiermachian

- Theology must begin from the analysis of human experience if it is to describe the actual situation of the people to whom it is trying to speak.

Post-Liberal

- There is no pre-theoretical religious experience available as a neutral foundation for theology, as everything is culturally shaped.

Barthian

- The Word of God is the only reliable foundation for theological knowledge, and that any appeal to human experience as a theological starting-point risks making God dependent on the prior conditions of human subjectivity.

READINGS

Schleiermacher, F “Second Speech: On the Essence of Religion” in Schleiermacher, F (1996) *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. Cambridge University Press.

Dole, A “Religion in Outline” in Dole, A (2009) *Schleiermacher on Religion and the Natural Order*. Oxford University Press.