

The Ground Upon Which We Stand

A reflection on some of Schleiermacher's thoughts
on freedom, dependence and piety.

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First, let me say 'thank you' to the program committee for the selection and the order of readings. Schleiermacher is always someone whose thoughts I supposed I had a hazy understanding of but his contribution to liberal religion, and his fundamental influence on the Unitarian Transcendentalists, were not things I really began to understand until I did the reading. So, kudos to you. I am also curious to see what Brother Lavanhar will come up with for an aesthetic treatment of this content. And I can now spell Schleiermacher in my sleep, given the number of times I've written it.

In this paper¹, I will briefly review my sense (from the reading) of Schleiermacher's motivation for his work; his sensibility that religion is based on feeling primarily (all else being secondary); and which parts of this thinking cohere with contemporary Unitarian Universalism.

Schleiermacher's motivation

We begin with a tongue in cheek characterization of traditional religion:

Andover represented Trinitarian Congregationalism, the parent stock from which the Unitarians had split off. Andover required its professors to sign an agreement to offer opposition "not only to Atheists and Infidels, but to Jews, Papists, Mahometans, Arians, Pelagians, Antinomians, Socinians, Sabellians, Unitarians and Universalists."

The Unitarians tarred Andover as "orthodoxy" and enjoyed making fun of it as "an institution which would have disgraced the bigotry of the middle ages," as a place where "doctrine was hammered in, hammered down tight and the nail clinched on the other side," and where the student's free time was spent building coffins in the seminary workshop.²

I selected the quote above from Richardson since it so neatly captures this critique— one which

¹This paper isn't a true 'response' paper because, as of 48 hours prior to the start of Prairie Group, I had not received a paper to respond to. So, I hope this paper gives a brief glance at some of the issues on "Schleiermacher's sense of freedom, dependence, and the feeling of religion."

² *Schleiermacher and Transcendentalism*, by Robert Richardson. Page 132.

Schleiermacher wanted to resolve, once and for all.

In the early 1830s, American Transcendentalists were reading Schleiermacher's early works and found his response to Enlightenment critiques of traditional religion quite inspiring. And so, Schleiermacher did find some success with the Transcendentalists who had much the same Enlightenment critique with their parents religion.

Richardson notes that Emerson's *Divinity School Address* has strong parallels with Schleiermacher's work; that Theodore Parker's *Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion...is* based directly and explicitly on Schleiermacher; and, that Frederick Hedge's *Reason in Religion* which he calls the "definitive statement of mainstream Transcendentalism" includes a short paragraph at its beginning which is from Schleiermacher's *Soliloquies*:

No more precious gift can a person make to others, than what he says to himself in his innermost being.

He goes on to say that Schleiermacher locates religion in piety, and piety in human experience. This coheres swimmingly with much of Transcendentalist thought. Consider this almost Emersonian quote: "What is revelation? Every original and new communication of the universe to man is a revelation"³

Schleiermacher's motivation for constructing a body of thought to deal with the Enlightenment critique came from his early religious life, and from his fellowship with people in the "romantic circle" in which he socialized.

In our reading, Copleston notes that Schleiermacher

was a sincerely religious man who... retained the lasting imprint of the piety of his family and of his early teachers. He had therefore to think out the intellectual framework for the religious consciousness as he conceived it.⁴

So, Schleiermacher is a sincerely religious man, who also takes seriously the critique of traditional religion by his contemporaries. He seeks to define religion in general, and Christianity in particular in such a way that it is immune to such critiques, by shifting the focus from a divinity centered definition to a human one.

Having your friends make fun of, or pointedly skewer your deeply held religious beliefs is uncomfortable, particularly when you see the truth in the skewering. In our reading, Brandt notes that Schleiermacher's social circle reacted against orthodoxy by "stressing intuition, poetry, and

³ Richardson, 124.

⁴ "Schleiermacher" (Chapter 8) in *A History of Philosophy*, volume 7: Modern Philosophy by Frederick Copleston. Page 150.

sympathy over reason, science, and order.”⁵

Furthermore, Enlightenment rationalism threatened to reduce religion to mere morality. And so, Schleiermacher’s focus on piety provides “a clear alternative to a rationalistic reduction of religion.”⁶

Roger Olson notes that Schleiermacher wanted to rescue Christianity from caustic criticism in such a way that it would no longer conflict with modern thought. Schleiermacher did this by redefining Christianity, such that human experiences come first, and subsequent church doctrine is merely an attempt to codify those experiences.

Schleiermacher also made a much bigger move (in my opinion) by separating out the essence of religion (piety) from empirical facts: this neatly side stepped the bluntest of the Enlightenment critiques.

Olson goes on to note further develop of liberal theology (by Ritschl borrowing from Kant) to separate science from religion, as they comprise different realms.⁷

To oversimplify: science is about facts, religion is about values. This is a distinction I stress with some frequency in my own work. If this distinction is agreed to, then there is no conflict between science and religion.

Feeling, Freedom, and Dependence

Schleiermacher locates the center, the ground of religion in “piety.” In contemporary usage the word often refers to a practice designed to win favor from God (wikipedia).

Schleiermacher uses it in the sense of *feeling*. And this feeling is quite specific: it is an awareness of being absolutely dependent. What does this mean?

Imagine that you are simply standing on the grounds of Pere Marquette lodge. You are free to walk around where you wish. But you are absolutely dependent upon the ground beneath your feet in order to have something to walk around on.

Clearly, we are finite beings who yearn for the infinite. This sense of utter dependence is key to

⁵ *All Things New: Reform of Church and Society in Schleiermacher's Christian Ethics* by James M. Brandt. Page 2.

⁶ Brandt, page 5.

⁷ Roger Olson on Patheos: "What is Theological Liberalism?" (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2011/07/what-is-theological-liberalism/>)

all of Schleiermacher's thought— both early and late, and despite his later attempts to link back to orthodox doctrine— this thought is independent of creed and confession, and indeed of liberal Protestantism itself.

Below a sense of “reflective self-awareness” we all carry around, there is a ‘fundamental immediacy of feeling.’ This lies below the level of conceptual thought. One could also think of this in the layers of the human brain: at the root is our ‘reptilian brain’ which is surrounded by our limbic system, which itself is surrounded by the cerebrum.⁸

We feel partially free, and partially dependent. There is the immediate self and then there is a self that watches that first self. That second self that is doing the watching is God. That first self is a lower consciousness. The higher consciousness is a God consciousness.⁹

Religion is based on primarily on feeling; secondary is thought, action, metaphysics, morality, and aesthetics.

Copleston again:

For the essence of religion is 'neither thought nor action but intuition and feeling. It seeks to intuit the Universe ... ,' And the Universe, as Schleiermacher uses the term, is the infinite divine reality. Hence religion is for him essentially or fundamentally the feeling of dependence on the infinite.¹⁰

Copleston asserts that this also allows Schleiermacher to place religious consciousness away from theoretical knowledge and close— but not so close as to merge them— to aesthetic consciousness.¹¹

This is in contrast to noted Unitarian minister Von Ogden Vogt, for whom worship was celebration, essentially aesthetic experience, but with strong social and ethical overtones.¹²

⁸ <https://home.comcast.net/~momtofive/SIDWEBPAGE2.htm>

⁹ “Sin and Redemption,” by Walter Wyman, in *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, Page 131.

¹⁰ Copleston, 153.

¹¹ Copleston, 152.

¹² <http://www.uua.org/worship/theory/leadingcongregations/120345.shtml>

Schleiermacher's work and contemporary Unitarian Universalism

In the introduction to *The Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher says his work only applies to Christianity. And he defines dogmatics as theology which interprets dogma. Dogma is an unquestioned belief in doctrine. Dogmatics applies only to the Christian church. And that Apologetics is a scientific (meaning empirically based) study.¹³

And yet, I believe his foundational work on religious consciousness is useful to Unitarian Universalists, and for much the same reasons as the Transcendentalists found him useful.

What doesn't fit so well:

Schleiermacher asserts that Christianity rests on redemption by Christ. Alienation from God is an action of ours. Fellowship with God comes from God. Schleiermacher affirms the doctrine of original sin in his later work. Also, that evil is the result of sin, and evil is the punishment of sin. Here, we find his attempts to link his original, earlier thinking with the old creeds and confessions less helpful. Wyman, page 130-138.

In the *Cambridge Companion*, Adams asserts that Schleiermacher is clear that his dogmatics is written "only for Christians." And of course, he assumes Christianity is true. He begins with the certainty of the Christian faith.

Schleiermacher says faith in God and faith in Christ is required, and that God's love cannot be known, apart from redemption. He is also, a triumphalist. "It is essential to our faith that every nation will sooner or later become Christian."¹⁴

A better fit for Unitarian Universalists:

- God has no personality.
- The universal is immanent in all individuals.
- The deification of one finite self is not a moral ideal
- Every individual is a manifestation of God.
- Thus, it is our duty to develop individual talents.
- Education should be directed to integrated personality.¹⁵

¹³ *The Christian Faith* by Friedrich Schleiermacher. Pages 3- 5.

¹⁴ *Faith and Religious Knowledge*, by Robert Adams in *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*. Pages 45-50.

¹⁵ "Schleiermacher" (Chapter 8) in *A History of Philosophy*, volume 7: *Modern Philosophy* by Frederick Copleston. Page 155.

Even more explicitly, in his essay, Beiser, writing in *Schleiermacher's Ethics*, says

Each person develops humanity in their own unique and distinctive way. Each person has a distinctive value as an appearance of the infinite. *In other words, we all have an inherent worth and dignity.*

People develop their "humanity and individuality only through interaction with others." *In other words encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.*

The purpose of social gatherings is a free exchange of feelings and ideas. *In other words, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.*¹⁶

I find I have come to a beginning appreciation of some of Schleiermacher's thought, especially as to how it affected the Transcendentalists, and through them— me. The idea of direct experience as being the ground of faith, is persuasive, especially as it relates to our first UU source.

The feeling of absolute dependence, and yet having a certain degree of freedom is also compelling. After all, we were born into a world we did not create. We come from mystery, and to mystery we shall one day return— ready or not. And in between the coming and going, we have a few moments to make significant choices— we have that freedom— even as we know the only thing we really have control over (sometimes) is our attitude.

¹⁶ *Schleiermacher's ethics*, by Frederick Beiser in *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*.
Page 61.