

The Spiritualist's Theologian: Friedrich Schleiermacher

Charles St-Onge, December 20, 2002

Baptist preacher Tony Campolo once wrote that there are two basic approaches to epistemological questions: the Apollonian and the Dionysian. To follow the former is to *think* your way to the truth. To follow the latter is to *feel* your way to the truth.¹ Perhaps Campolo took his inspiration for the Dionysian approach that he advocates from Friedrich Schleiermacher's seminal work, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. In these speeches Schleiermacher lays out a general approach to religion that emphasizes personal feeling and self-sublimation to what he calls, variously, "The Infinite", "The Eternal", "The Universe", "The Whole", and "The World-Spirit".¹ True religion is "to have life and to know life in immediate feeling."ⁱⁱ

In order to understand what Schleiermacher was attempting to achieve in *On Religion*, his cultural milieu must be understood. He was writing at the end of the 18th century, in an intellectual environment shaped by the Enlightenment. Schleiermacher set his sights on three groups that he wished to critique. The first was the Deists, who approached God through natural reason. The second was the traditional dogmatists of the church and their systematic theology. The third group was the followers of rationalism, especially Immanuel Kant. All three groups, Schleiermacher felt, had excluded genuine spirituality by reducing religion to either science, in the case of the Deists; cold facts, in the case of the dogmatists; or morality, in the case of Kant and his neo-rationalist school. Schleiermacher's Moravian upbringing shaped his own spirituality over and against so-called "dead orthodoxy", human rationalism and ethical moralism.

For Schleiermacher, religion is neither science nor morality. Religion is in point of truth a *tertium quid* that he felt was being excluded from intellectual discourse. Through his speeches to the cultured German intellectuals of his time, he hoped to recreate a space for "true religion" as a vital part of human existence. Schleiermacher did not want to see religion subsumed into either science or action. Religion could not be reduced to a set of proofs for the existence of God, or to a moral code. He wrote, "to wish to transport religion into another sphere that it may serve and labour is to manifest towards it also a great contempt...(Religion) must render a special service; it must have an aim; it must show itself useful! What degradation!"ⁱⁱⁱ Religion has intrinsic worth. Just as knowledge and action are distinct, and yet each informs the other, so religion stands alone apart from both knowledge and action, and yet influences both.

Neither is religion concerned with the sorts of issues with which one would presume it to be concerned. Schleiermacher wrote that religion, "when the God and the immortality of my childhood vanished from my doubting eyes, remained to me."^{iv} Religion could not be reduced to thoughts about divinity and eternal life. Although these are the two chief topics of religions such as Christianity, these are not properly part of religion for Schleiermacher. "Only what...is feeling and immediate consciousness can belong to religion. God and immortality...are ideas. How many among you – possibly most of you – are firmly convinced of one or the other...without being on that account pious or having religion?"^v But if religion is not mere knowledge, not dogmas, not morality, and not even talk about God or immortality, what is it?

True religion, for Schleiermacher, is found in personal *Gefühl* – a German word normally translated as "feeling." Theologian Perry Lefevre wrote, "Feeling is not emotion, though it may include emotion. Rather, it is direct, immediate awareness."^{vi} Religion is the immediate awareness that the individual is not alone, but part of a greater Whole which underlies all things, on whom he is absolutely dependent.

¹ All these terms are used throughout the work. The term "God" is used sparingly, and certainly less than some of the other terms named here.

Schleiermacher wrote that, “Your feeling is piety, in so far as it expresses...the being and life common to you and to the All. Your feeling is piety, in so far as it is the result of the operation of God in you by means of the operation of the world upon you.”^{vii} Through the means of everyday encounters, with people, at work, through objects, the individual recognizes that he is not the prime mover of all things. He looks within himself, and feels – becomes aware – that Something or Someone is behind all these encounters and is grounding them. This awareness is true religion. Nothing more, nothing less.

This awareness, or religion, will by necessity vary from person to person. “It matters not what conceptions a man adheres to, he can still be pious. His piety, the divine in his feeling, may be better than his conception.”^{viii} Yet religion is not individualistic for Schleiermacher. “If there is religion at all, it must be social, for that is the nature of man, and it is quite peculiarly the nature of religion.”^{ix} Those who “get religion”, so to speak, are driven together by necessity, because of their realization that they are all part of the Whole. The “Church” becomes a gathering of people to hear each other’s religious experiences – an audience, rather than a flock, with a priest who speaks of his own encounter with the All, rather than a shepherd who proclaims any set truths. “Mystics and physicists in religion; those to whom the Deity is personal and those to whom he is not...”^x – all gather together to hear and be heard, to share the experience of their particular awareness.

Where does this leave Christianity? Schleiermacher sees true Christianity as fitting very neatly with his concept (pun intended) of religion. The essence of Christianity, in his view, is the mediation of Christ between the divine and the human, the Infinite and the finite. “What mediates must not again require mediation, and cannot be purely finite. It must belong to both sides, participating in the Divine Essence in the same way and in the same sense in which it participates in human nature.”^{xi} Thus Schleiermacher defends not only the Chalcedonian dogma of Christ’s two natures but also to a certain extent the Eastern Orthodox understanding of salvation as deification, a reunion of the finite with the Infinite, although without external means.

In fact the “God” of Schleiermacher is almost indistinguishable from the Force of George Lucas’ Star Wars movies. Schleiermacher’s God is “Highest Being, not as personally thinking or willing, but exalted above all personality, as the universal, productive, connecting necessity of all thought and existence.”^{xii} “Whoever insists... that the highest piety consists in confessing that the Highest Being thinks as a person and wills outside the world, cannot be far traveled in the region of piety.”^{xiii} Certainly Schleiermacher’s view of God is not much of an improvement on Kant’s.

Schleiermacher’s desire to promote religion to the Romantic intellectuals of Germany, over and against the rationalism and formalism of the Enlightenment period is laudable. Christianity should never be allowed to decay into mere formality and dead ritual. Certainly the god of the Deists and of Kant whom Schleiermacher was attacking is barely recognizable as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit of the Christian faith. Yet Schleiermacher goes well beyond the bounds acceptable to any confessional Christianity. Schleiermacher reduced Christianity to an expression of a universal religious feeling, a feeling that could manifest itself in many other ways without Christ and, indeed, without any personal God. By attempting to recover a viable spirituality for a post-Enlightenment, Romantic period, Schleiermacher opened the path to a period in which confession of the God of Christianity would be replaced by the personal awareness of a unifying All which is unique to each individual religious practitioner. Not until the advent of Karl Barth would a serious challenge be mounted to this view of religion and of Christianity.

Bibliography

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ⁱ Tony Campolo, *Following Jesus Without Embarrassing God*. (Nashville: Word, 1997)

ⁱⁱ Friedrich Schleiermacher. *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. John Oman, trans. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958 c.1799), 36.

ⁱⁱⁱ Schleiermacher, 20.

^{iv} Schleiermacher, 9.

^v Schleiermacher, 93.

^{vi} Perry LeFevre. *Understandings of Prayer*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 13.

^{vii} Schleiermacher, 45.

^{viii} Schleiermacher, 95.

^{ix} Schleiermacher, 148.

^x Schleiermacher, 154.

^{xi} Schleiermacher, 247.

^{xii} Schleiermacher, 95.

^{xiii} Schleiermacher, 99.