

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) lived in an age in which Christian theology in particular, and religious life in general, was subject to intensive criticism from a number of different quarters: historical criticism of the New Testament, the philosophical criticism of miracles, the rise of modern physics in Isaac Newton, and the rejection of historical events as the proof of truth claims about God.

However, Christian theology was under threat from another direction as well, this time by figures who claimed to want to defend the truth of Christianity over against these attempts to falsify it. Immanuel Kant thought that religion differs in no way from morality, for both are concerned with duties as such. There is therefore only one universal religion, that of morally legislating practical reason, and all of Scripture and theology needs to be interpreted in light of this one religion if we are to benefit from it. G. W. F. Hegel, on the other hand, sought to ground all religion in the development of thinking consciousness or spirit, by converting the symbols of Scripture and theology into concepts whereby their truth can be demonstrated rationally.

The unique contribution of Schleiermacher lay in his ability to internalize the criticisms of Christian truth claims by history, philosophy, and science, and yet still develop a foundation for human religiousness in general, and Christian faith in particular, that did not lead to the collapse of religion and faith into philosophy. Schleiermacher thought he could thereby establish an “eternal covenant between living Christian faith and completely free, independent scientific inquiry, so that faith does not hinder science and science does not exclude faith,” so that even as a theologian he could “participate actively in the building up of both the church and science.”

Schleiermacher’s father attempted to shield his son from the toxic effects of the rational criticism of faith current in his day, and so had his son educated in the Herrnhuter school at Niesky and in the Herrnhuter theological school at Barby. When Schleiermacher was fourteen years old, he experienced a conversion to faith in the love of God revealed in the crucified Redeemer, and throughout his life he credited the Herrnhuter Brethren with awakening faith and piety in him by means of their stimulating testimony to their own faith.

However, Friedrich was much like his father, in that he also had a very thoughtful and critical side, and so was drawn to the very texts from which his father sought to shield him, which subjected Christian faith to radical criticism. The effect of this reading was to bring about Schleiermacher’s loss of faith in the two central doctrines of the Moravian movement: “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.”

Much to Schleiermacher’s surprise, even though he lost faith in Christ’s divinity and in his atoning death, he did not lose faith in God, or faith in the saving efficacy of the person of Christ. The Moravians had revealed to Schleiermacher that faith does not depend on doctrine, but rather on the feeling of the heart that the unknown redeemer has come to save me. For Schleiermacher, as for Zinzendorf, faith will be seen as a modification not of knowing or of doing, but of feeling. This feeling is stimulated by what we come to know, and is expressed by what we do, but is not to be identified with either knowing or doing. “And I may say, that after all that I have passed through, I have become a Herrnhuter [Moravian] again, only of a higher order.”

This means that piety can be described scientifically, and this description entails two tasks: “One’s task is rather [1] to endeavor both to understand the essence of Christianity in contradistinction to other churches and other kinds of faith, and [2] to understand the nature of piety and of religious communities in relation to all other activities of the human spirit.”

Schleiermacher roots the essence of all religious communities in the structure of human consciousness. He claims that everyone with a modicum of introspection can realize that we are both relatively dependent on others in the world, and relatively free with regard to our role in the world. He calls this the “sensible self-consciousness.” We also have an immediate self-consciousness that both we and the universe are absolutely dependent. Schleiermacher calls this self-consciousness “immediate” because it transcends the distinction between subject and object. The concept of “God” arises in conjunction with this immediate self-consciousness of absolute dependence, and it is only when the idea of “God” arises that this consciousness can fully emerge, meaning that the concept of God is both the original expression of this immediate self-consciousness and is also the most direct reflection upon this feeling.

“The feeling of absolute dependence becomes a clear self-consciousness only as this idea [of God] comes simultaneously into being, and if we speak of an original revelation of God to man or in man, the meaning will always be just this, that, along with the absolute dependence which characterizes not only man but all temporal existence, there is given to man also the immediate self-consciousness of it, which becomes a consciousness of God.”

The immediate self-consciousness of absolute dependence can only emerge in human self-consciousness when it combines with our knowing and doing, which Schleiermacher describes as “the sensible self-consciousness,” in which we are conscious of ourselves as subjects in a world of objects and agents distinct from us. Whenever the consciousness of God combines with the sensible self-consciousness, it gives rise to the religious emotion of joy, which would be the experience of blessedness if it happened continually. Whenever it fails to combine with our sensible self-consciousness, we experience this as the religious emotion of sorrow.

A distinct community of piety is formed when all members share and communicate the same kinds of religious emotions with one another, and also recognize the boundaries created by these religious emotions. Larger religious communities are usually formed by the decisive religious emotions of their founding figure, so that Jewish piety is decisively shaped by the communication and imitation of the religious affections of Moses, and Muslim piety is shaped by the communication and imitation of the religious affections of Muhammed.

What are the religious emotions that are essential to the community of piety called Christianity? “To participate in the Christian communion means to seek in Christ’s institution an approximation to the above-described state of absolute facility and constancy of religious emotions [i.e., blessedness]. No one can wish to belong to the Christian Church on any other ground. But since each can only enter through a free resolve of his own, this must be preceded by the certainty that the influence of Christ puts an end to the state of being in need of redemption, and produces that other state; and this certainty is just faith in Christ.” Christ must have had a perfectly sinless, absolutely potent God-consciousness, and this is communicated to us in the testimony of the Church, reinforced by the picture of Christ in the New Testament.