

THE INFLUENCE OF THE RISE OF CLASSICAL SCIENCE ON THE THEOLOGY OF FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER

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INTRODUCTION

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)¹ is commonly said to have inaugurated the modern period in religious thought. Meanwhile scientific reasoning, based on the principles of Isaac Newton (1642-1727), had proved to be adequate for explaining all motions and mechanical effects known to science for two centuries after his time.² In this article, after briefly examining this rise of classical science, we look at the stages in Schleiermacher's religious development and thereby focus on the significant influence classical science made on his theology.

THE RISE OF CLASSICAL SCIENCE

For fourteen centuries, between Augustine (354-430) and Newton, Christian philosophic synthesis had reigned supreme; undisputedly at first, a little uneasily at last.³ But during the succeeding centuries, 1700-1900, the results of investigation of Nature appeared to fit less and less neatly with the accepted philosophic scheme. 'Philosophic inquiries' came gradually to be known as 'scientific researches'. Science, the knowledge of nature, was separated from philosophy, the search for the key to the universe.

The success of classical science, the science of Newton and his peers, had its influence not only on philosophy, but also on theology. According to Honner,⁴ the content of classical physics rendered the Christian account of nature and creation suspect, if not empty; and the method of classical physics shunted theology off onto a narrow gauged sidetrack.

The Enlightenment, the eighteenth century European intellectual movement, was also affiliated with the influence of classical science.⁵ It promoted the values of intellectual and material progress, toleration and critical reason, as opposed to authority and tradition in matters of politics and religion.

Reason, to the enlightened person, was a kind of common sense sharpened and made subtler by training in logic and science.⁶

Meanwhile, Galileo (1564-1642)⁷, the Italian astronomer and physicist established experiment as the basis of science. His achievements in physics and astronomy were vast and of fundamental importance. While in Shakespeare's time

(1564-1616), comets were still portents, after the publication of Newton's *Principia* in 1687,⁸ it was known that he and Halley had calculated the orbits of certain comets and that they were as obedient as the planets to the law of gravitation.

Classical empirical science, therefore, enabled the world to be seen as an association of observable objects (particles, fluids, fields etc.) moving about according to definite laws of force.⁹ A person could form a mental picture in space and time of the whole scheme.¹⁰ For Laplace¹¹ this would include in one and the same formula, the movement of the largest bodies and those of the lightest atoms.

Although most of these men of science are models of piety, the outlook suggested by their work was disturbing to orthodoxy, and the theologians were quite justified in feeling uneasy. Deism too, had become a vital part of the context within which Christian theology had to operate after 1700.¹² The Deists wished to reduce all religions, Christianity included, to a common core - a bare minimum of essential beliefs.¹³ The deist god, himself a highly rationalistic construct, only had to exist to start this 'Newtonian world machine' running. The planets, according to Newton, were originally hurled by the hand of God.¹⁴ But when he had done this and decreed the law of gravitation, the solar system was seen to be kept going by its own momentum and its own laws. There was no further need of divine intervention. According to Russell, it became impossible to remain humble when men were achieving such triumphs:

Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night.
God said 'Let Newton be', and all was light.¹⁵

Within the century of Newton's work then, classical science had become so powerful in its prediction and control of every aspect of reality that God was hardly needed at all.¹⁶

SCHLEIERMACHER'S THEOLOGY

Barth¹⁷ sees Schleiermacher in all circumstances, as wanting to be modern man as well as a Christian theologian. He says of Schleiermacher:

With him, his participation in the cultural awareness of the time, and indeed his participation in its deepest possible context, in its strictest possible form and liveliest expression, was a deeply serious concern which was not suspended for an instant.

Schleiermacher took part in the philosophy, science, politics, social life and art of his time as if they were his own concern, as the man who was responsible in all these fields, the man who was called to achieve and to lead in the general achievement.

However, before Schleiermacher's conception of religion can be understood in its entirety, we must, according to Johnson¹⁸, describe and analyse the very precise and distinct periods in Schleiermacher's philosophical and religious development. Firstly, there is the 'period of his youth' (to 1796), during which time Schleiermacher was developing the basic philosophical presuppositions for his later thought. Secondly, there is the 'intuitive period' (1796-1802), thirdly, the 'critical period' (1802-1806) and finally the 'systematic period' (1806-1834), in which Schleiermacher matured as a scientific theologian and dogmatician. While each period is separate, there is a general development and continuity between these

periods in Schleiermacher's life. Being a synthetic thinker, Schleiermacher is able to use contrasting philosophical and theological ideas, without, at the same time, losing the unity of his system. We now take each of these stages in turn and observe the influence made on Schleiermacher's theology by classical science.

THE PERIOD OF SCHLEIERMACHER'S YOUTH

Schleiermacher grew up in the deeply pious Moravian community.¹⁹ There, religion became for him the expression of that which is most authentic about human existence.²⁰ While at the seminary, the doctrinal world of Schleiermacher's youth collapsed. He could no longer bring himself to confess the Jesus of Nazareth was the true, eternal God or that by dying Jesus bore the punishments owed by others and not by himself.²¹

Meanwhile for the Enlightenment critics, the problem with the church's christological and trinitarian dogmas was not that they were religiously unfruitful but that they made no sense. And it must be admitted, with qualifications, declares Gerrish²², that Schleiermacher thought these critics were right: doctrinal revision, he believed, made urgent by the needs of the congregations, was required to extricate Christian theology from a logical muddle. What Schleiermacher lost in the Moravian seminary, therefore, was not his religion, but a system of doctrines.

In addition, Schleiermacher questioned why the Moravians were isolating themselves from the world, fearful of culture, prohibiting a natural and free expression of one's faculties when, at the same time, religion was supposed to be a positive expression of existence.²³ Hence, Schleiermacher acknowledged that a credibility gap had opened between the dogmas of the church and the outlook of the classical scientific world.²⁴ Classical science had had a deep influence on theology in terms of its content.²⁵ Taking his bearings strictly from the standpoint of the Church's faith, Schleiermacher set about rectifying this situation. His dogmatic task was not merely to set dogmas aside but to understand and improve them.

SCHLEIERMACHER'S 'INTUITIVE PERIOD'

During this period in the development of Schleiermacher's thought, his concern for Religion was magnified by a concern for the doctrines of the Christian church. For Schleiermacher, theology became an example of a historical science.²⁶ Schleiermacher's concept of reason had begun to change. He saw reason as having not only a formal structure, as Kant would have it, but also a positive and creative function. Schleiermacher's concept of person during this period presupposed the unity of a person's spirit and nature, reason and sensuous experience, active and passive natures.²⁷

Consequently Schleiermacher concerned himself with facts and phenomena, with real live religion, not simply with God as a philosophical construct. He understood Christian theology to be "empirical" not "speculative".²⁸ In his 1799 *Address on Religion (Reden Uber die Religion)*²⁹, Schleiermacher argues that doctrines are not the essence of religion but simply the result of reflection about religious feeling. He seeks an admission from the educated people to whom he is speaking, that religion is the highest value in life and something which is real and necessary beside science.³⁰ Schleiermacher³¹ insists:

"You must transport yourself into the interior of a pious soul and seek to understand its inspiration ... otherwise you learn nothing of religion".

These speeches constituted the revolutionary manifesto from which the birth of the new era in theology is commonly dated.³² Theology shifted its focus to the historical critical method. Honner³³ argues that this paradigm was inspired more by Schleiermacher than by anybody else and that Schleiermacher's decisions were influenced, albeit in a negative manner, by the use of classical science and the success of experimental method. Rather than leave theology in a ghetto of faith, Schleiermacher sought to give it an empirical base.

Gerrish³⁴ believes the cardinal point which begins to emerge here from Schleiermacher's second speech is the contrast he makes between feeling and intellect, not as antagonistic but as correlative, like female and male. For Schleiermacher³⁵ feeling is defined as a sense and taste for the infinite. This 'feeling', Schleiermacher's basic mode of religious experience, is not mere emotion but immediate consciousness - the most fundamental form of human consciousness at a level prior to that at which it is diversified into intellect, emotion and will.³⁶ Such was the unusual degree to which Schleiermacher combined depth of feeling with acuteness of intellect.³⁷ Schleiermacher was now more interested in what the experience revealed (its intuition) than its subjective aspect.³⁸ Religion was about to be seen as the inspiration of science.³⁹

SCHLEIERMACHER'S 'CRITICAL PERIOD'

The closest Schleiermacher ever came to writing the novel one of his friends proposed to him is his apparently less momentous piece *The Celebration of Christmas: A Conversation* (1805). Gerrish describes it as 'perhaps the most pleasant and painless introduction to the fundamental theological shift that he (Schleiermacher) brought about.'⁴⁰ It gives clear evidence of a fresh approach to traditional Christian beliefs, taking its point of departure not from dogma, nor from the biblical story but from the fact of the existence of the Christian community and its experience of redemption.⁴¹

This change in Schleiermacher's overall position is reflected by comparing his definition of Religion given in his *Address on Religion* (1799) with that in his 1806 edition. In the earlier edition Schleiermacher defines religion as the action of the Infinite making itself known on the finite.⁴² However, according to the *Address on Religion* (1806) there were three factors which belonged to Religion: the Self, God and the World. God was the original force which created the World and Religion was 'the immediate and original being of God in us through feeling'⁴³. Thus religion was an immediate experience of God. The unity of the infinite, the eternal, the unchanging and the finite and the changing was experienced in feeling.

Schleiermacher's *Celebration of Christmas*, was also an important dialogue for his Christology.⁴⁴ With 'flesh', 'Word', and the 'Incarnation' being defined here it was then possible to determine the meaning of Christ's birth. These were then related to the historical and empirical life of Christ. A person's need for salvation had its basis in the incongruity which existed between the ideal person and the empirical person. Salvation was effected only when individuals found themselves in their individuality, that is, when the individual considered himself in relationship to the Infinite'.⁴⁵ Schleiermacher's Christian beliefs were now coming from the Christian community using the science of experience, rather than from dogma.

THE SYSTEMATIC PERIOD FOR SCHLEIERMACHER

The concept of Religion had become, by the time, the most fundamental element in Schleiermacher's entire theological system.⁴⁶ In the years 1809-1834, apart from being in Berlin once again, he was at the height of his career. According to Barth⁴⁷, he was as much at home in the Academy of Sciences as in his pulpit in the Church of the Holy Trinity. By now the scientific status of theology was secure.⁴⁸

The great work of Schleiermacher's maturity *The Christian Faith* (full title: *The Christian Faith, presented systematically according to the basic propositions of the Evangelical Church*) was first published in 1821/1822 and then in revised form in 1830/1831.⁴⁹ Here, Galloway⁵⁰ believes, Schleiermacher gave some precision to what, in the *Speeches*, he had expressed with rhetorical abandon. Schleiermacher proposed that theology become a positive science based on historical criticism.⁵¹ He defined this positive science as:⁵²

An assemblage of scientific elements which belong together not because they form a constituent part of the organisation of the sciences, as though by some necessity arising out of the notion of science itself, but only insofar as they are requisite for carrying out a practical task.

For Schleiermacher, then, theology, as a positive science was a specific realisation of the 'Religion of Infinity' or Christianity. He saw science as an 'objective science', a practical science in the service of the Church.⁵³ Consequently Schleiermacher saved the scientific quality of theology by reference to the romantic concept of history. He attempted to demonstrate the necessary relationship which existed between theology as a science and every other science. Nevertheless, he maintained that every indication of the historical realisation of the Religion of infinity was imperfect and therefore limited.⁵⁴

Schleiermacher included historical theology within the historical sciences. Historical theology became the knowledge of the beginnings of Christianity and dealt with 'the idea of doctrine'.⁵⁵ Thus dogmatics became a fact of historical theology. Dogmatic theology was not the means by which orthodoxy was preserved or an ancient doctrine maintained. Dogmatic theology had to be heterodox in the sense that it was open to every new form and representation of the 'essence of Christianity'. Doctrine had to express that which was permanent and fixed within the Christian faith. For Schleiermacher then:⁵⁶

Theology is a positive science, where parts join into a cohesive whole only through their common relation to a particular mode of faith, that is a particular way of being conscious of God.

Niebuhr⁵⁷ believes that Schleiermacher in his classic text *The Christian Faith* aimed to be empirical to such a degree that his data be accessible not only to his professional colleagues and to scholars but also to every person upon whom the communication of the gospel has worked. The material of theology, for Schleiermacher, is simply that which is at hand for everyone who has believing experience.

In this 'Glaubenslehre', therefore, Schleiermacher developed the doctrines of creation and redemption, in which he made the pioneering effort to produce a genuinely modern reconstruction of Christian belief.⁵⁸ Schleiermacher resisted any curtailment of the status of creation faith because of his fear that the prodigious

growth of natural science would destroy all faith in God as creator, unless the doctrine was so restated as to show that it involved no conflict with such science. Schleiermacher did not propose to build his theology of creation on the foundations of any materials taken from natural science although, according to Niebuhr, Schleiermacher 'could no more entirely free his mind of the unconscious influence of current natural science'⁵⁹ than could any person.

Here, then, Schleiermacher seeks to formulate principles that are prior to any and every specific procedure in the natural sciences and that can be considered as conflicting only with alien theologies but not with the immediate premises and results of research. Schleiermacher believed that unless such a task were undertaken, the alternative would be to retreat into biblical literalism that is inimical from contemporary culture. 'Shall the knots of history come asunder in this way' he asked, 'Christianity with barbarism and science with unbelief?'⁶⁰

Schleiermacher, in particular, rejected the Newtonian notion of miracle as an event running counter to the laws of nature. Any event for Schleiermacher was a miracle in so far as it heightens a person's consciousness of the relation of all creation to the Eternal, the Infinite, the Divine. To the truly pious, Schleiermacher saw the whole of nature as a miracle.

For him the miracle stories of the New Testament should be treated as symbols rather than as factual reporting.⁶¹ Such is the systematic way in which Schleiermacher helped translate religious affections to propositions, with classical science providing the constructions.

CONCLUSION

Schleiermacher⁶² then, in the maturity of his life, saw the task of Protestant theology as the creation of an eternal covenant between living Christian faith and an independent and freely working science, a covenant in which science is not hindered and faith not excluded. Such was the impact of classical science on the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher. In seeing the human person as a living personal whole Schleiermacher also saw in this wholeness the living spirit.⁶³ Perhaps he too has explained for us the words of the Lord to Ezekiel: 'And I shall put my spirit in you, and you will live, and I shall resettle you on your own soil'(Ez. 37:13).

NOTES

1. B. Gerrish *A Prince of the Church: Schleiermacher and the Beginnings of Modern Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) p.18.
2. *Illustrated World of Science Encyclopedia* Vol.1. (Chicago: Creative World, 1971) p.121.
3. C. Singer *A Short History of Scientific Ideas to 1900* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959) p. 297.
4. J. Honner "Nature, Physics and Theology Naturalised" *Compass Theology Review*, Summer 1987, p. 13.
5. A Wood *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (M. Eliade ed.) Vol.5 (New York: Macmillan, 1987) p.109.
6. C. Brinton *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (P. Edwards ed.) Vol.1 (New York: Macmillan, 1967) p.520.
7. *Illustrated World of Science Encyclopedia* Vol.19 *op. cit.* p.96.
8. B. Russell *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971) p.522.
9. J. Honner *op. cit.* p.13.

10. R. Burchfield (ed.) *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary* Vol.1. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) p. 537.
11. C. Singer *op. cit.* p. A.
12. C. Brinton *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy op. cit.* p.522.
13. B. Gerrish *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (M. Eliade ed.) *op. cit.* p.110.
14. B. Russell *op. cit.* p.523.
15. *Ibid.* p.523
16. J. Honner *Spirituality and Science The Way* (1985: 195205) p.197.
17. K. Barth *From Rousseau to Ritschl* (London: SCM, 1959) p.314.
18. W. Johnson *On Religion: A Study of Theological Method in Schleiermacher and Nygren* (Leiden: Brill, 1964) p.3.
19. W. Placher *A History of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) p.273.
20. W. Johnson *op. cit.* p.19.
21. B. Gerrish *A Prince of the Church: Schleiermacher and the Beginnings of Modern Theology op. cit.* p.36.
22. *Ibid.* p.39.
23. W. Johnson *op. cit.* p.5.
24. B. Gerrish *op. cit.* p.43.
25. J. Honner "Nature, Physics and Theology Naturalised" *op. cit.* p.14.
26. W. Johnson *op. cit.* p.37.
27. *Ibid.* p.26.
28. B. Gerrish *op. cit.* p.21.
29. *Ibid.* p.27.
30. K. Barth *op. cit.* p.323.
31. W. Placher *op. cit.* p.273.
32. B. Gerrish *op. cit.* p.34.
33. J. Honner *op. cit.* p.13.
34. B. Gerrish *op. cit.* p.32.
35. *Ibid.* p.18.
36. A Galloway *The History of Christian Theology. Vol. 1: The Science of Theology* (P. Avis ed.) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) p.242.
37. B. Gerrish *op. cit.* p.32.
38. L. Dupre *A Dubious Heritage* (New York: Paulist, 1977) p. 23.
39. B. Gerrish *op. cit.* p.44.
40. *Ibid.* p.27.
41. B. Gerrish *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (M. Eliade ed.) *op. cit.* p. 109
42. W. Johnson *op. cit.* p.48.
43. *Ibid.* p. 52.
44. *Encyclopedia Britannica* Vol.19.(Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1971) p. 1161.
45. W. Johnson *op. cit.* p. 56.
46. *Ibid.* p. 56.
47. K. Barth *op. cit.* p. 315.
48. R. Niebuhr *Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion* (New York: Scribners, 1964) p. 169.
49. *Ibid.* p. 27.
50. A Galloway *op. cit.* p. 243.
51. J. Honner *op. cit.* p.13.
52. F. Schleiermacher *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology* (Atlanta: Knox, 1963) p. 19.
53. W. Johnson *op. cit.* p.71.
54. *Ibid.* p. 72.
55. *Ibid.* p. 73.
56. F. Schleiermacher *op. cit.* p. 19.
57. R. Niebuhr *op. cit.* p. 19.
58. B. Gerrish *op. cit.* p. 111.

59. R. Niebuhr *op. cit.* p. 241.
 60. Ibid. p. 242.
 61. A. Galloway *op. cit.* p.247.
 62. K. Barth *op. cit.* p. 321. and G. Spiegler *The Eternal Covenant* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) p. 22.
 63. A Galloway *op. cit.* p. 241.

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