

## Schleiermacher.

**F**RIEDRICH ERNST DANIEL SCHLEIERMACHER was born in Breslau in 1768 and died in Berlin on February 12th, 1834. He is one of the most influential of modern thinkers. In his own day he was one of the most effective of preachers and university administrators. And he has well deserved the title of "the father of modern theology." He is the apostle, that is, of that type of theology which endeavours to establish dogmatic not on the creeds of the Church or on the doctrines of the Bible, and not even on the principles which can be described by logical analysis, but rather upon the fact of human experience, the experience of the Christian of the power and presence of God. He is the forerunner of that type of thinking that would bring theology out of the cold storage of rationalism into the warmth and fresh air of experience.

Schleiermacher was fortunate in his parents, and especially in his mother. To her he owed more than he did to his father. His mother was a woman of keen intellect and real religious experience, and she did much in the training of her son's mind and spirit. His father was an army chaplain of the old type, rigid, unbending and narrow. The discipline of it was good for the son perhaps, but there was little in the father's mind that would be of help to a boy who was learning to think for himself. He early decided to enter the ministry, and with that purpose in view, he went to the schools of the Moravians at Nersky and Barby. The pious atmosphere of these places was much to his mind, but the discipline and the lack of originality in thought made him break away from it all. In 1787, he went to Halle to study theology. But he never quite lost the influence of the Moravian training, and what he learned with them had more to do with his later work than appears on the surface. It was there that he learned to stress the importance of personal experience of God as the foundation of religion.

When he went to Halle, he immediately got away from the atmosphere of pious devotion into that of dull philosophical rationalism. The university at the time was under the influence of Semler and Wolf, who were both rationalists of the most unbending type. But Schleiermacher was too much of the religious man to be really influenced by them. He gave over most of his time to the study of Kant, Fichte, Spinoza and Plato. Plato was to remain one of his great loves, and he was to spend many happy years in the translation and interpretation of his works. He also spent a good deal of time in the study of the

New Testament, especially of the newer sort of criticism that was becoming the vogue in Germany at that time. It was a pity, however, that he did not spend more time in the study of the Old Testament and in the study of the thought of the New Testament as opposed to the merely critical aspect of it. It would have saved him making obvious mistakes in his theological construction in later years. His reading was pretty wide, and because of it, he did not seem to be able to find any firm standing ground so far as theology is concerned, while he was at the University. But one thing was certain for him there. No theological system could be sound which left out the personal experience of those who were believers in religion. Religion was a personal possession of the soul, and not merely a system of dogmas. He had got that far at any rate, but no further, by the time that his University studies were finished. But that was the beginning of the whole matter for him.

For a time he acted as tutor in a private family, then he was ordained and acted as assistant for his uncle, after which he went to Berlin as a hospital chaplain. This appointment gave him plenty of time for the pursuit of his studies. Also he made many friends, among them the Schlegels, who were to become the leading representatives of the Romantic movement at the time. He shared their feelings to a large extent, especially in their attack upon the barrenness of the rationalism and dogmatism of the intellectuals, but his profound reading in philosophy and theology and his respect for the intellect prevented him going to the excesses that were so common in German Romanticists. He also had his early pietistic training and his personal experience of religion to save him from foolishness. But it was under this influence, and in this atmosphere, that he made his first excursion into theological literature, with his *Reden über die Religion*. In this work he vindicated the place of religion in the life of the complete man as against the representatives of the rationalist school who despised it. He also made his first attack upon the dogmatism of the older ethical teachers and upon the categorical imperative of Kant, which was to be the start of his constructive thinking on ethical questions. In the very next year he published *Monologen*, in which he elaborated in greater detail his ethical standpoint, and vindicated the place of the individual in society. Soon after that he left Berlin and went into the country as the pastor of a little church which gave him even more time for study. It was while he was there that he began to publish the results of his studies in Plato. But while he was a devoted student, he by no means spared himself in his criticism. And in these essays as well, his own standpoint as an ethical teacher, his effort to build up the conception of life as a realm of ends

and purposes, comes out. In 1804 he went back to Berlin as pastor of Trinity Church, and later, as one of the founders of and Professor in theology at the new University of Berlin. All the time while he was lecturing he was also preaching, and was drawing large audiences. His sermons bore vitally upon the needs of the day, they were undogmatic in their tone (theologically at any rate), they were full of common sense, and were delivered with fire and passion. His whole effort was to build up the power of religion in the personal life. He found that in preaching he was able to do a good deal in bringing home the powers of religion to the life and thought of men. He was one of the rare examples in modern Germany of a theologian who could or would preach. In Germany it is so common for the theologian and the preacher to be out of sympathy with each other, even if they are not opposed to each other. Schleiermacher was not only a teacher: he was also a preacher of conviction and power. A theology to him that could not be preached was no theology.

It was in 1821 that he published the book that is, of all his books, the best representative of his thought and the one that most clearly is an interpretation of his mature mind, *Der Christliche Glaube*. In this he made an attempt to re-fashion Protestant theology along the lines that he had already accepted as fundamental. That is, his foundation was not in the creeds nor in Scripture, but in personal experience, the experience of God mediated through Jesus Christ. His method was so new that he was naturally called upon to face a good deal of opposition. On the one hand, the evangelicals accused him of betraying the faith, and of opening the door to all sorts of theological dangers and innovations. On the other hand, the rationalists condemned him for parting with reason as the one guide to truth. But in spite of opposition, he went on. He proved capable of defending himself, and he did it with charm, ability and eloquence. It cannot be said that he made many or even any disciples, in the sense that he established a school of theology. But no man can read him without having an impression left upon him. And it is no exaggeration to say that he has influenced modern theology more than any other one thinker. No man who has tried to do any thinking for himself has been able to escape from his influence, even if he has wanted to do so.

The position of Schleiermacher in the field of theology is very much like that of Kant in the field of philosophy. That is, they set the problems for men to solve in the next generation, and they show them the lines on which they will have to be tackled. There is a great deal of difference between the final reconstructions of Kant and Schleiermacher, but they had many

likenesses. Kant's purpose was to submit reason to a critical analysis in order to discover from it what it was really, to find what was fundamentally necessary to constitute thought and what was derived merely from sensation which supplied the raw materials of thought. Far more by his methods than by the actual results that he secured has Kant proved himself to be the father of modern philosophy. In the same way Schleiermacher broke up the old ways of looking at religion and demanded that the first thing you needed to do when building up a theology was to examine what religion in its essence was, how it had manifested itself in past history and how it expressed itself in the personal life. It was that method which was important in Schleiermacher much more than his definite achievements. It was the critical method of Kant applied to religion, the scrapping of old methods of thinking and all old dogmas, and the critical examination of the nature of religion in itself. It was a startling thing for men to learn from him that religion itself was more important than what men said about it, even what the Bible said about it, even what the Church said about it, even what God was supposed to have said about it. You must study it at its fountain head, and the fountain head is the personal life of the man who has faith in it. That was his fundamental position, and from it he never swerved all his life. He found, of course, as everybody knows, that religion does not consist in dogmas but in feeling, in the realisation of the power and majesty of God in the soul of man. Dogma is not religion; it is only what man has said about religion. The establishment of experience as the foundation of theology was a new thing. It is commonplace now-a-days, of course, but in those days it was new. But even more important than the fact that Schleiermacher fixed upon feeling as the essence of religion was the fact that he went to religion itself to ask what it was, and conducted a critical examination of it to find out what its basic elements were. Religion was to shine and to be interpreted by its own light, otherwise it could not shine at all. That was his epoch-making contribution, and it is that that has justified his title of the father of modern theology.

Schleiermacher did not profess to be a critical and constructive philosopher. His business was religion far more than it was philosophy. He was a theologian first, because he was a preacher and because he wished to get clear for himself and for others the principles on which he preached. But at the same time, no man can preach for long, and no man can think about the problems of theology for long, without having to establish in some way his relations to philosophy. And in all his works Schleiermacher shows us what his position is. He did not try

to build up a system of philosophy, and you have to get at his ideas by gathering together scattered references. But on the whole his position is clear. The unifying principle of the world is God. It is in God that all things inhere and consist. God is neither separated from the world nor bound up in it. That is, Schleiermacher is neither deist nor pantheist. He claims that we can know only phenomena. In much the same way as Kant does, he draws a distinction between things in themselves and things as we see them, *noumena* and *phenomena*. We cannot know *noumena*; we can only know *phenomena*. And he is open to the same criticism as Kant. You can say bluntly that we do know *noumena* and that *phenomena* is what we know of them. But all our knowledge is derived from the phenomenal world. There can be no knowledge of reality other than what we experience of reality through our senses. In the same way we cannot have a complete knowledge of God; we can only know God as He manifests Himself to us and as we find Him. Not that that matters to Schleiermacher. For to him religion does not consist in the fulness or accuracy of our ideas of God, but rather in the immediate consciousness of God's power, in the experience of His presence in the world and in ourselves. Thus our ideas are not of absolute importance; it is only the experience of God that is that.

But while you get scattered thoughts of his philosophical position in his various works, it is not in them that Schleiermacher shows his real power. He does not profess to be a philosopher, except in so far as a preacher and theologian and Biblical scholar has to be that. We have seen that the central fact of his thought is that he conducted a critical analysis of religion itself and found that it consisted in a feeling of dependence upon God. His chief book opens with that. Religion consists in the specific feeling of dependence upon a power outside of ourselves. The fact of God is an unescapable fact of the human personality. We do not advance to it at the end of an argument, as though from the presence of something in us or in the world, we moved along a line of logic to the position that there must be a God to explain the facts. God was not at the end of an argument, but rather at the beginning of it. He was an unescapable element of the mind. He was bound up with the human spirit. We do not have to withdraw from the world or conduct any analysis of thought in order to find God. We have Him within ourselves, the one universally fundamental fact of personality.

Now when he says that religion consists in feeling, we must not assume that he means no more than sensation. Neither must we think that he means that one element in the personality, and

one alone, and that perhaps the lowest, is involved in the relationship of man with God. What he means by feeling, so far as religion is concerned, is a sense of awareness of the presence of God, which is mediated to us through the emotions. He would urge just as much that religion consists in obedience to the divine will and also in the attempt to understand the divine mind. But his reaction to the intellectualism of his time was such that he was willing to run the risk of being misunderstood in order to make clear that religion is not a matter of brains or dogma but a matter of experience. We do not know God because we understand Him; we understand Him because we know Him. Schleiermacher knew quite well that the exercise of the will and of the intellect are a necessity, if we are going to have a full life. He knew also the fact of the unity of the personality. But he was so keen on showing the centrality of the fact of religion in the sense of the presence of God itself and of the feeling of dependence upon Him, that he was prepared to run the risk of being misunderstood. Better be thought to be romantic than intellectualistic. At the basis of all religion, and not only of the Christian religion, there is the sense of the union of the soul with God. And that union, even though it be spread over the whole personality, manifests itself, and must manifest itself at its highest in the emotions. That is why he says that religion is found at its highest in the feelings.

This sense of God is immediate. That means that the old arguments for the existence of God are of no meaning to Schleiermacher. God is His own argument. He needs no evidence. He is present in the personal life and His power, as it manifests itself in the personal life, is unescapable. But again it must not be thought that Schleiermacher concentrates upon the personal life as though that, in and by itself, carried the conclusion with it. He knows as well as we do that the individual can go astray. He was sufficient of a psychologist to know that a man could misjudge his feelings. It is unsafe to base the argument for the fact of God upon His presence in the personal life, seeing that there are so many who have no sense of the presence of God. The individual is conditioned by the society in which he lives and of which he forms a part. And the way in which that society re-acts to religion is based to a large extent upon the training that it has received in religion. Thus, for the preservation of religion in the world, you need more than so many isolated men and women, all receiving an impression of God for and by themselves. You need a handing on of religion from one man to another. Every world religion consists in the communication of the creative experiences of great individuals, the communication of truths which could have come in no other

way than by the way of experience. Thus the distinctive truths of the Christian religion cannot be discovered by a process of reasoning. They are what they are because Christ knew them in His own soul and made them real to the souls of others. Thus Schleiermacher does not run the danger of subjectivism, at least not to any great extent, for the simple reason that he knows that the experience of the individual is created by and conditioned by the society of which he forms a part. Christianity is an historic religion, and it is only in the society of the Church that you can have a full Christian experience.

But at the same time, while he says all that, he is very indefinite as to what he means by God. He tells us distinctly that he is not teaching pantheism, and it is easy to see that he does not want to teach it. But many a man teaches what he does not know he is teaching. And Schleiermacher cannot go so far as to say that God is personal. 'God is a power not of ourselves of which we are immediately conscious. He will not draw from that the conclusion that God is personal. He knows that God is more concrete, if such a word can be used, than the pantheist will allow, but he cannot go so far as to say that He is personal. To understand that we need to remember that Schleiermacher was very much under the spell of Spinoza, and it is clear that when he tries to explain in what the fact of God consists, the Spinoza complex is too much for him and he draws back. But whether that is what he does or not, we shall never be able to repay our debt to him for bringing religion back out of the arid deserts of intellectualism and establishing it upon the solid ground of experience. Even though we cannot say exactly what God is, we know in our hearts that we must look upon Him as real. And with that, for the time being, we may have to be content. Scepticism was rife at the time through the attempt to build up religion on the basis of dogma. And Schleiermacher did good work in showing that it was not by way of the intellect but by a more fundamental way that men come into touch with the living God.

But for Schleiermacher there is something more than religion: there is the Christian religion. And it was his particular business to expound and defend this. Every historical religion rests upon a revelation. The Christian religion does just as much as any other. But the peculiarity of Christianity is not that we have an experience of God; you have that in all religion. The peculiarity of Christianity is that those who practise it have an experience of Christ. The central fact of the Christian faith is the experience of Christ as the Redeemer, and by that fact all other facts in our religion are tested. The Christian realises that he has got redemption and deliverance

through Christ, and that that redemption has been mediated to him through the Christian Church. Schleiermacher again does his best here to steer clear of subjectivism. There is no experience of Christ apart from the community of those who have that experience. In the fullest sense of the term, outside the Church there is no salvation. The Church is the community which maintains and keeps alive the divine life. Religion consists in personal contact between God and man, but apart from the community, there would be no contact between God and man. There are other functions of the Church, but that is the main one. The redeeming influence of it upon those inside of it is simply the same as the influence of Christ upon it.

But that does not go quite far enough. It is not enough to say that there is a Christian community or that the experience of God is mediated through it. You need to go further and ask how that community came into being, and how the experience has been handed on from age to age. We have men to-day with the experience of God and of Christ. How has that come? Schleiermacher would say emphatically that it has come through Christ Who is the Redeemer in the sense that He has mediated to men the knowledge of God. Christ does not differ fundamentally in kind from us, although He attains to a far higher spiritual nature than we do. The one thing that does distinguish Him from us is that He is sinless, and He was this because of the intimacy of His life with God. He had the consciousness of God completely unspoiled by any taint of any sort. This is, of course, a miracle, and cannot be explained as merely the product of preceding conditions. History may say that to some extent, the world was prepared for Christ at the time He came, and it can do something to show how His definite consciousness of religion had its precursors. Schleiermacher would grant that. But the real fact of the experience of Christ is unique. Nothing prepared the way for it. It cannot be explained. It was due to an act of grace on the part of God. God willed Christ, and so there was Christ. Christ is the Redeemer of men in the sense that He possessed in Himself the complete consciousness of God. For Him the lower elements of the personality had been mastered by the higher elements, and the God within Him had become complete. The way in which He redeems men is by establishing the supremacy of the consciousness of God within them, and to that extent, establishing the Kingdom of God within them. Not that that happens all at once. There is no high road or easy road to the consciousness of God. There was no such road for Christ. There is a clash for a time between the earth consciousness and the God consciousness, but the end is sure. And the victory is with God.



That, briefly, is Schleiermacher's position. It needs to be said again that it is in Christian experience that Christian dogmatics start. They cannot start anywhere else. They cannot go beyond what we experience. There have been in the history of religion all kinds of speculations on the nature of God, Christ, and the spiritual life. And often these speculations have had no sort of relationship to the life that men have had to live. What the Scriptures said, or the creeds, must be accepted, and the sole task of dogmatic was to examine what was given and to understand it and to show its bearings in wider and wider fields. For centuries before Schleiermacher there had been no attempt to find out whether there had been anything given, and if so, what it was. Christian life and Christian truth had little to do with each other. And that had had terrible results upon Christian ethics. Schleiermacher was the first to bring the Church back to purity and sanity. He set experience at the centre. Thought has the right to go anywhere where experience leads. It has the right, in theology, at any rate, to go nowhere where experience does not lead. In saying that, he set the tone of theology for future generations. And he probably saved religion from destruction, in that age, at any rate.

But in saying that dogmatic is to be tested by experience, he implies that many things enter into dogma that have no right to be there. And in that also he separates himself from the majority of thinkers. What cannot be tested by experience cannot be accepted by reason. That is simply another side of the assertion that what cannot be preached ought not to be taught. An unpreachable dogma is useless. And in the same way an untestable dogma is so much dead weight. There can be no experience of the virgin birth and of the second coming and of the last judgment and so on. So out of dogma they ought to go. They may possibly be derivatives of experience, but they are not part of it. We have here a plea not only for the spiritualising of theology but also for the simplification of it. And it would be well if more tried to copy it.

There are contributions of Schleiermacher to thought that are of vital importance. But we need to guard ourselves perhaps from misconception before we try to pass judgment. We need to be sure that we know what Schleiermacher means by "feeling." He does not intend to separate "feeling" off from any other part of the personality. Neither does he intend to separate the feeling of a person off from that of the community. But many have forgotten that and have charged him with too narrow an interpretation of religion. He speaks of the feeling of dependence so much that, if you read carelessly, you may think that he has nothing else to speak about. We need to bear several

facts in mind. First, he is making a protest against the intellectualism of his day. That cannot be mentioned too often. In his protest he went to extremes. It was the only thing to do to get his point home. He had to make theology turn a complete somersault, and if he had hedged and qualified his remarks, he would have made no impression upon anybody. Second, his whole ethical position is to be found in the conception of the realm of ends. That is, the Christian is not merely a passive recipient of the grace of God; he is a man fired to go out and do his best to prepare the Kingdom of God to come to the earth. For Schleiermacher everything goes off into morals. And it is the moral test that is final for him and for us. Religion consists in the sense of the reality of God, but once that sense is there, it spreads over the whole personality and takes will and mind along with it. Schleiermacher runs the risk neither of subjectivism nor of sentimentalism.

Schleiermacher gives us no real picture of a historical Christ. There was such a person. He acknowledges that. He knows that Christianity is a religion of history. He knows that that is the case with all great religions. He knows that the central fact of the Christian is an experience mediated through the Church to him, but coming to him ultimately from Christ. But the difficulty is that he makes no real union between the Christ Who is present in the experience and the Christ Who was a living historical figure in Galilee. The fact is that Christianity is a system of thought that revolves round two centres. The one is experience, and the other is the Jesus of history. And for the second, there must be a rigid and honest historical criticism as a pre-requisite of dogmatic. And that Schleiermacher does not give to us. You are left with the impression that with him Jesus is not a person of history at all, but a purely ideal figure. He opens himself out to very severe criticism not only from the Christian but even more from the non-Christian. He suffers the risk of being accused of building up his whole system upon an experience which may after all be a gigantic error and delusion. He needed to show by a strict examination of history that there was in Jesus the realisation of the fact of God and the power to mediate to others what He Himself possessed. He needed also to show that there is to-day an experience of the eternal Christ, a meeting Him in the secret places, and not only through the medium of the Church, and he needed to show how that eternal Christ is related to the Christ of history. All that he failed to do, and that is a weak point in his whole argument. There is no way of getting from the fact of the present experience of the Christian to the reality of the Gospel portrait of Jesus. You cannot deduce Jesus as a man of history from the conscious-

ness of the Christian of to-day. And in thinking that it can be done, Schleiermacher lays himself open to the criticism that there is no Jesus of history, but that all we have is an ideal figure. In fact, that is just the criticism that is passed upon the Christian religion by many to-day. To them it is a mere system of ideas which have no basis in a person. And if that were true, it would eventually mean the end of the Christian religion.

In the same way he does not really give us an intelligible view of God. On his own judgment of the methods of dogmatic theology, he could not. You have no right, according to him, to go beyond what you have in experience. You have experience of a power outside of yourself upon which you are dependent, but you cannot go further than that and say that that power is personal. This all springs from the fact that Schleiermacher is not, in theology any more than in philosophy, concerned with things in themselves. We cannot know anything except in so far as it acts upon us. It is open to object here that we do know God, and that we know of Him what we experience of Him. Our knowledge is real so far as it goes. We could not have experience of power and majesty and love unless they all sprang from a person outside of ourselves. That would be a perfectly legitimate thing to say. Were God not personal, we should have and could have no experience of Him. That is what we should say. But Schleiermacher would not say that. Much as he tries to keep clear of pantheism, he cannot do so entirely. But it needs to be noticed that he is not really interested in the question of what God is: he is only interested in the question what God does.

But in many ways, even though Schleiermacher did not answer questions, he set them. He set first the question as to what we really mean by Christian experience. He set second the question as to what is the secret of the Christian religion. He had no doubt himself of the uniqueness of it. It was unique in the sense that Christ had a consciousness of God that no other had, and that He had mediated to others redemptive power. And that set the question as to what that experience of Christ really was, and in what way it had been mediated to men. He finally made Christ the centre of the Christian religion. And he set there the question as to who that Christ was, and what was His relation to the Christ of Whom in this day we have experience. Those are the questions that theology ever since has had to answer. But in this world, the really potent thinker is not the man who answers questions, but the man who asks them. So long as they are fundamental enough. It is he who is the progressive thinker, and it is he who sets the lines for others to travel on.

H. J. FLOWERS.