

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)

The development of Schleiermacher. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was a German philosopher, theologian, Biblical scholar, and perhaps above all textual hermeneute, who was also a major player among German literary philosophical luminaries, like the Schlegels and Novalis, who gathered around the University of Jena at the turn of the century, and who did so with a particular focus on the journal *Athenaeum* (1798-1800), which was its movement's beacon publication. That is, Schleiermacher was deeply involved with this group of literary and artistic people who were trying to track a new path for German thought on the far side of Weimar classicism—the rich inheritance of Goethe and Schiller, who were living near Jena, in Weimar. Schleiermacher, in other words, not only wrote on culture and philosophy for *Athenaeum*, but belonged deeply to the movement of change and reconstruction that was taking over German culture as it entered its 'Romantic' phase. Who was this complex theologian and cultural critic with such a binding to the art world, and with a destiny to build toward a new religious sensibility to meet the demands of a Protestant culture still debating the issues that concerned Luther.

Life of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Friedrich Schleiermacher was born in Breslau, in Southern Silesia. He was the son of a chaplain in the Prussian Army. He was initially sent to a religious strict Moravian school, but he soon realized that his belief in Christianity was not of that sort, was under question. (Letters to his father, from these years, show the son tiptoeing around the belief issue, which was most important to his father, then blurting out in a letter that he no longer believed in the Trinity.) After this flap was resolved, it was agreed that Schleiermacher should go to the University of Halle, which was 'rationalist' and on the whole congenial to Schleiermacher, who profited from this time to study Greek and fall in love with Plato and Aristotle.

Schleiermacher's Writing. After University, Schleiermacher, who was actively writing all this time, took the usual posts as a tutor, and involved himself in what was to be a seven year relationship with the wife of a Berlin clergyman. He also deepened his relationship with Friedrich Schlegel, and brought to fruition the two works that represented the thinking of his first thirty years: his *Reden ueber die Religion* (*Speeches on Religion*) and his *Monologen* (*Monologues*). To these works he added, in 1803, his *Outlines of a History of Morality*, all of which led to his being offered a Chair of Theology at Berlin in 1810.

Schleiermacher's thought. Like that of Fichte, another bigger than life figure in the transition of Germany from Enlightenment and classicism, into the complex early 19th century cultural mode we call Romanticism, Schleiermacher's thought was that of a significant and complex philosopher, as well as a Theologian concerned with bringing harmony between traditional Christianity—his reference point was Lutheranism and Pietism—and the various new naturalisms of the 19th century; not to mention the dramatic developments in textual criticism, hermeneutics, which Schleiermacher was considerably responsible for promoting. In those realms he evoked wide attention for the care with which he read Biblical texts in terms of a well planned method for scrutinizing the intentions of the writer. Schleiermacher's skeptical credence became an important ingredient of the Higher Criticism of the Bible, which was to prove one of the epoch making trends of the 19th century.

Theology. Like Fichte, Schleiermacher wished to base his modernist theology, with its room for evergrowing perspectives, on a compelling account of the human psyche. He elaborated a detailed psychology of self and other, in which God was introduced as the factor of supreme otherness; an otherness which nonetheless we can access in the depths of our self-awareness, where we live as the knowledge of our dependence.

Reading

Primary source reading

Lamm, Julia, *The Living God. Schleiermacher's theological Appropriation of Spinoza*, 1996.

Secondary source reading

Gerrish, Brian, *Prince of the Church: Schleiermacher and the Beginnings of Modern Theology*, 1984.

Further Reading

Barth, Karl, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, 1982.

Original language reading

Nowak, Kurt, *Schleiermacher: Leben, Werk, und Wirkung*, 2001.

Suggested paper topics

Schleiermacher was a renowned Biblical scholar and text critic, who evolved many techniques for the analysis of Biblical texts. In one sense he was a major thrust of the so called higher criticism of the Bible, which led to fresh and unsuperstitious readings of scripture; while in another sense he reawoke interest in the Bible as sacred literature.

Examine some of the detailed features of Schleiermacher's method of Biblical criticism.

Examine Schleiermacher's contributions to the *Athenaeum* journal. How did Schleiermacher address the intellectual problems of the day, that Sattelzeit (saddle-time) between the end of Weimar classicism and the full blown unfolding of the Romantic movement?

Excerpt <http://www.egs.edu/library/friedrich-schleiermacher/quotes/>

To be a religious man and to pray are really one and the same thing. To join in the thought of God with every thought of any importance that occurs to us; in all our admiration of external nature, to regard it as the work of His wisdom ; to take counsel with God about all our plans, that we may be able to carry them out in His name ; and even in our most mirthful hours to remember His all-seeing eye ; this is the prayer without ceasing to which we are called, and which is really the essence of true religion.

Therefore let us learn to die in seeing Christ die ! It is no small thing that I expect from you in calling on you to do this ; for it is with the death of the Saviour as it was with His life ; let him who seeks only happiness and joy shun likeness to Him ; let him alone seek it who covets what is great and perfect at any price.

If, then, His Spirit is actually among us, if Christ becomes increasingly glorious to us through our study of His words, our inward parts more and more enlightened by the eternal, divine light, which He brought from heaven, our hearts more and more purified ; we shall then, when the next time of commemorating our Lord comes round, return with new joy and gratitude to the beautiful circle of our Christian festivals, and anew, with yet purer spirit and in a way more worthy of Him, participate in adoring remembrance of His birth, His sufferings and His glorification.

However much admiration and honour was given to our Saviour by many of His contemporaries during His life on earth ; however powerfully a yet greater number were struck, at least for the moment, by His exalted character ; still just His greatest words and His noblest deeds often remained dark even to the noblest and best around Him, and seemed to the rest a piece of insolent pretension.

We will begin this series of meditations with the relationship which is the foundation of all others, namely, the holy bond of marriage, which we must regard as the first appointment of God after His almighty Word had called man into existence. Out of this sacred union are developed all other human relations ; on it

rests the Christian family, and of such Christian families Christian communities consist. Moreover, on this union depends the propagation of the human race, and the transmitting of the power of the divine Word from one generation to another. Therefore let us today consider this foundation of the whole Christian Church in the light of God's Word.

But our grateful joy before God must also be free from slothfulness. It seems really superfluous to say this ; for slothfulness and joy can never harmonize. Joy arouses the spirit, so that it is nothing but strength and life and activity; and this is pre-eminently true of joy before God, for it is ever exciting, ever bringing into action whatever may be specially in our hearts at the same time.