

# Schleiermacher's Conception of Theology and Account of Religion as a Constitutive Element of Human Culture

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## 1. Academic Theology in the Modern University

The founding of the University of Berlin in 1810, which became for many the archetypal modern university, was a formative event in the shaping of the modern academic tradition of Christian theology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When Hans Frei made this assertion in *Types of Christian Theology*, he was referring to the considerable debate circa 1800 about whether theology ought to be included in the university.<sup>1</sup> Some, first and foremost the philosopher J.G. Fichte, argued that it had no place in a university committed to modern standards of rationality.<sup>2</sup> The position that won out, however, was that of the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher affirmed the role of rationality in the university, yet allowed it neither to dictate to theology its content nor to be in competition with it. He saw theology as a "positive" science or discipline (*Wissenschaft*), by which he meant that it was not included within any single theoretical discipline but was rather related to several of them and directed towards the practical task of educating those who would lead the Christian Church.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 34-38.

2 Johann Gottlieb Fichte, "Deduzierter Plan einer in Berlin zu errichtenden höheren Lehranstalt," in *Die Idee der deutschen Universität* (Darmstadt: Hermann Gentner, 1956), 125-218.

3 "Theology is a positive science, the parts of which 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." Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, trans. Terrence N. Tice (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), §1. Henceforth BO. One should note that the German word "Wissenschaft" is much broader than the English "science." *Wissenschaft* includes any academic theoretical research based on rational argument and presented in the context of the other *Wissenschaften*. The opposition is not that of science vs. humanities, but of *Wissenschaft* vs. *Praxis*.

According to this conception of theology as "positive Wissenschaft," theology is a field held together not on the basis of theoretical reasons but by the professional tasks that were being undertaken by theology departments at German universities in the nineteenth century. The usual pattern of theology departments at German universities became that of the state overseeing and paying for a faculty that owed allegiance to general standards of rationality (*Wissenschaft*) and academic freedom, on the one hand, and was committed to training clergy for the state Protestant church, on the other. Schleiermacher's conception helps to demonstrate that theology and religious studies need not oppose, but rather can complement each other. Three consequences follow that make Schleiermacher's understanding of theology a good lens through which the discipline in its modern context can be studied. Firstly, theology was carried on in an environment where it was continually engaged with and informed by other academic disciplines in their most advanced forms. Secondly, the attempt to hold together the requirements of the academy and the church necessitates that theology bridge the gap between reason and faith. Thirdly, theology therefore considers itself obligated to give reasons for the meaning and truth of faith, i.e., it needs a reasonable justification of its object. While the Christian religion cannot be deduced from philosophical premises, it can be shown that being religious is a meaningful element of human culture.

This German pattern of theology, first established by Schleiermacher in the context of the founding of the university in Berlin, might be described as confessional theology, implying that the practical goal of theology refers it strictly to the practice of a religious community or "confession" of faith. This does not entail, however, that theology is inevitably a narrowly ideological endeavor. The close relationship of confessional theology to other academic disciplines, together with its high critical and hermeneutical standards, ensures that in all of its sub-disciplines theology fulfils the highest standards of an academic discipline. Such a university theology is, moreover, also oriented toward other religions and based on an anthropology in which religion is theorized as a constitutive element of human culture.

The practical aims of theology do require that the Christian religion remain the primary object of its theoretical endeavors. Yet this need not prevent theology from understanding the Christian religion as one religion among others. On the contrary, theology must integrate fundamental questions about the essence and meaning of religion within society with specific inquiries into the distinctions between different religions. In fact, following Schleiermacher's paradigm of theology,

most theology departments at German universities also teach the history of religions or religious studies (*Religionswissenschaft*). These disciplines are either integrated into theology departments or they cooperate with them. Being well coordinated with theology departments, they take other religions as their subject matter and likewise reflect upon the essence, meaning, and truth of different religious systems of belief. And despite their confessional status, all theological disciplines perform their work—in teaching as well as research—just like any other discipline within the humanities: through the employment of historical and critical, hermeneutical methods.

Nevertheless, theologians in Germany frequently confront the suspicion that their work is ideologically driven. This is an unjustified bias based upon the false assumption that the teaching and learning of theology requires one to be a believer or that being a Christian means that one is ipso facto incapable of attaining critical distance on one's personal religious standpoint. Anyone familiar with the research and teaching that goes on today in theology departments can attest that both assumptions are false. The Schleiermacherian model of theology requires that all branches of the theological disciplines, including practical theology, follow scientific methods such as historical criticism, hermeneutics, and empirical research. Most theologians, moreover, adopt a highly critical distance to their own confession. Furthermore, in this paradigm historical and practical theology are based on a form of philosophical theology or philosophy of religion that secures the rational basis of the entire discipline.

Schleiermacher maintained a distinction between the discourse surrounding the term "religion" and the specific propositions or doctrines articulating the peculiar content of the Christian faith. He emphasized that "philosophical theology," which is responsible for developing the general understanding of religion, must take a higher standpoint than the various confessions and religions. A Schleiermacherian theology promotes the integration of the philosophy of religion or—why not?—today's religious studies into theology departments. The key assumption enabling this integration is that religion be understood as a constitutive element of human culture in general.

In this broader perspective, theology is a speculative, critical, and empirical theory of religion, specifically concerned with Christian traditions, churches, and communities. What makes this ensemble of disciplines theological is not their distinctive method. There is no theological hermeneutics or special kind of theological thinking. Theology uses the same methods as all of the other humanities. Speculative, critical, or empirical disciplines can and must become theological disciplines be-

cause they are needed both for understanding the Christian religion and for fulfilling the practical tasks of leadership within the Church.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of contemporary debates about the relationship between religious studies and theology, Schleiermacher represents a position that allows for a differentiation between *Religionswissenschaft* (i.e., the philosophy of religion or religious studies) and theology—but without entirely separating them. Theology is a combination of heterogeneous disciplines. The same is true of the *Religionswissenschaften* or religious studies. Today, both ensembles of disciplines integrate sociology, psychology, history, ethnology, and anthropology. The only difference is that religious studies departments are not obligated to function within or otherwise foster church leadership. As a consequence, they do not focus primarily, if at all, on the Christian religion. But this difference does not of itself impugn theology's standards of rationality or academic credentials. Theology and *Religionswissenschaft*/religious studies are both ensembles of diverse scientific disciplines that employ empirical, critical, and speculative methodological procedures.

Indeed, they have more in common than their scientific methods. In Schleiermacher's paradigm, the object of theology is religion as a dimension of human life. The object of theology is not "God in his revelation in Jesus Christ." Rather, theology is a positive discipline in the double sense that its object is empirically given and that it has to solve practical tasks. I want to go a bit further into this conception of theology before explaining how, on the basis of a philosophical anthropology, Schleiermacher makes his case that religion is a constitutive element of human culture.

## 2. Theology as a Praxis-Oriented Theory of a Profession

In Schleiermacher's view, theology lives on its subject matter. Its content is represented in the praxis of human life. This content is the Christian religion, which includes the entire history of Christianity and its continuation into present-day Christian communities, the church, and, last but not least, church leadership. With this as its content, theology as a whole is also committed to the practical challenges facing "leadership in the Christian church."

This understanding of theology—that theology in its essence is a positive and a praxis-oriented science—does not presuppose a special definition of scientific studies that would apply to theology and not to other disciplines. In his 1808 proposal concerning the plans for the

founding of a new university in Berlin, *Occasional Thoughts Concerning the Universities as They are Understood in Germany*), Schleiermacher wrote about the three so-called "higher" departments of the traditional university—theology, law, and medicine—as the "positive faculties" because a connection to practical tasks is constitutive for all of them.<sup>4</sup> In theology such practical tasks call for the development of a special "methodology of church leadership." Schleiermacher employed the concept of leadership in a rather broad sense. It can mean leadership one level above that of the parish, i.e., on the organizational level of the regional church (*Landeskirche*). For this, Schleiermacher mostly used the term "government of the Church" (*Kirchenregiment*).<sup>5</sup> But the term "church leadership" (*Kirchenleitung*) also includes all of the forms of leadership that operate in local congregations. Schleiermacher generally described these local tasks with the term "service of the church" (*Kirchendienst*)—meaning liturgy, preaching, education, and pastoral care. All of these endeavors belong to the life of the congregation and receive treatment in the first part of his practical theology.<sup>6</sup> According to Schleiermacher, church leadership includes two institutionally structured forms: the "binding" (*gebundene*) element and what he calls the "discretionary" (*ungebundene*) element. The latter comprises the "free influence upon the whole, which may be undertaken by any individual member of the church, who believes him or herself call to it"; this is "the free spiritual power."<sup>7</sup> Evidently, Schleiermacher wanted to strengthen the participation of laity in the church so that they too were involved in theological learning.

At the same time, Schleiermacher understood practical theology and theology as a whole to be distinct from the life of the church. Moreover, he defined practical theology as "the theory of practice."<sup>8</sup> The practical life of and within the church is not yet practical theology as an academic discipline. Only if this practical life is being reflected upon methodologically, if "technical rules" or "rules of the craft" (*Kunstlehren*) are being developed that can be applied to support and help church life to fulfill its purpose, can we speak of practical theolo-

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4 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Gelegentliche Gedanken über Universitäten in deutschem Sinn: Nebst einem Anhang über eine neu zu errichtende*, in KGA I/6, 15-100.

5 See BO §§309-34.

6 See BO §§277-308.

7 BO §312, §328.

8 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Die Praktische Theologie nach den Grundsätzen der Evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt*, ed. Jacob Frerichs, *Sämtliche Werke* I/13 (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1850), 12.

gy.<sup>9</sup> Only those who accept responsibility for shaping church life and contributing to it in these ways, those who are called and trained, will make use of practical theology. These persons, however, need not exclusively be ministers of the church in the sense of professional clergy. The decisive point is whether one merely participates in the life within the church—its worship services, pastoral care, and education—or takes on a role of responsibility for shaping the life of the church, thus serving Christian life. What people need in this latter instance is practical knowledge: a familiarity with and competence in the methods for organizing worship, preparing a religious discourse or sermon, teaching classes about religion, providing pastoral counseling, and governing and directing the church as a large organization in society. This is what church leaders—all of those people with special responsibilities for Christian life within Christian communities—have to do. Assumed in all of this, however, is Schleiermacher's distinction between theology as a whole (including practical theology) and the practical life of Christianity and its churches, i.e., the Christian religion as it is actually lived out. Practice is not theology; it is religion. Lived religion is, however, the object of all theological reflection, ranging from practical theology to the philosophy of religion.

### 3. Theology as a Historical and Empirical Theory of Christian Religion

For Schleiermacher, theology as a theory of Christian religion includes questions that belong to philosophical and historical theology—the latter of which includes dogmatics and ethics—as well as those concerned with Christian life as it is lived in practice and in the activities of church leadership. The former disciplines have to provide “the right conception of these tasks” so that practical theology can proceed to consider the “correct [i.e., appropriate] procedure” for accomplishing them.<sup>10</sup> The specific task of practical theology is thus to develop methods that promote forms of religious practice in the church.

Christianity is a historical phenomenon. In its institutionalized form as the church, it is a significant factor in culture and society. As an organized communal body, it requires support and strengthening. Therefore, it is necessary that theology in general, and practical theology in particular, be taught at universities as an academic subject.

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9 BO §265.

10 BO §260.

Theology is not the science of God, as the rational theology of the Enlightenment still claimed. It is, rather, the science of Christianity. And Christianity is a form of lived religion, "a particular mode of faith, that is, a particular way of being conscious of God."<sup>11</sup> Hence theology is the science of God in an indirect sense only: it communicates the specifically Christian way of being conscious of God. Put differently: it is reflection upon the religious faith of human beings as expressed in and through Christianity. For this reason theology presupposes the historical and empirical facts of the Christian religion. As the science in which reflection upon the Christian religion takes shape, it is, moreover, internally self-differentiating. While practical theology represents one way of doing theology, another way is represented by philosophical theology or the philosophy of religion, and yet a third by historical theology.

Because Christianity is a historical phenomenon, historical theology for Schleiermacher constitutes "the actual corpus of theological study."<sup>12</sup> It supplies the knowledge of the historical whole: from the historical beginnings of Christianity through the course of its history to the present day. *Glaubenslehre* (or dogmatics) and *Christian Sittenlehre* (or ethics) are part of historical theology because they are likewise concerned with Christianity in its historically given form and with the religious practice of Christianity as we actually find it in the Christian church. Dogmatics and ethics for Schleiermacher explicate what Christianity—Christian faith as it is being lived—has to say about human beings, God, and the world, and also what implications this has for the practical life of the church and for the life of the family, society, culture, and politics.

Theology requires and is the product of a certain level of reflexivity—reflection upon a religion that has been handed down in history and is alive in contemporary practice. The critical and reflective work of theology provides self-clarification for a specific religion, and whether or not theology as a science is needed will depend upon the level of development in a given religious community.<sup>13</sup> A religion that is alive primarily in symbols and rituals, or that belongs to "a community of small scope," or that is not institutionally organized, has little need for theology as an academic discipline. Such a theology will be in demand, however, as soon as the meaning of symbols and rituals is questioned, as soon as people no longer agree about what these symbols have to do

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11 BO §1.

12 BO §28.

13 BO §2.

with their lives. Whenever a church develops into a religious organization, a theology will develop. Theology's task then is to provide conceptual explication of the basic beliefs articulated at the roots of religious life; it must show how these beliefs and life practices cohere with each other. Moreover, it will have to establish a connection with the tradition and give new expression to old beliefs so that they can be understood and communicated in the context of a new situation.

Schleiermacher developed this theory of theology in view of the challenges confronting Christianity at a time of great intellectual and cultural upheaval. With this new conception of theology as a theory of lived religion, he sought to guard against the decline of religion. For in the wake of the Enlightenment, many of his contemporaries were questioning the meaning and purpose of religion in general and Christianity in particular: What did religion stand for in the social and cultural context of their world? And what value did it have to offer a humanity come of age? Schleiermacher's conclusion was that theology could address these questions and become a "theology of religion" only if it combines a variety of theological disciplines—practical, historical, and above all, philosophical theology—with an anthropological theory of religion as a constitutive element of culture. Indeed, it was left to philosophical theology—with its foundation in a philosophy of culture—to work out the most basic understanding of religion within Schleiermacher's conception of theology.

#### 4. Philosophical Theology and the Task of Theology

The task of philosophical theology is to define the "essence" of Christianity as well as the essence of Protestantism.<sup>14</sup> In order to define the essence of Christianity, it is not enough simply to describe Christianity in its factual existence. It is not enough to go back to its Biblical beginnings and trace the course of its history, or to study what its more or less qualified proponents claim it to be. It is not enough merely to repeat its own claim to divine revelation and Holy Scripture, or even to support such claims by means of a supernaturalistic doctrine of revelation. While Schleiermacher was not willing to develop a theology based upon supernaturalistic revelation, neither could he approve of a rationalist or a speculative theology. To repeat: for him, Christianity is a historical phenomenon unfolding in history, an empirical religion, a par-

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14 BO §24.



ticular mode of faith, a specific shape and form of religious consciousness.

Christianity is one religion among other religions. The acknowledgement of this fact requires philosophical theology to be a critical philosophy of religion. Such a philosophy is critical in the sense that the "distinctive nature of Christianity" can only be "defined critically . . . by comparing what is historically given in Christianity with those contrasts by virtue of which various kinds of religious communities can be different from one another."<sup>15</sup> The fact that no historical phenomenon in its particular individuality can be deduced from general concepts is also true of the Christian religion. On the other hand, the specific particularity of Christianity—its history and its world of thoughts and ideas—cannot be defined without a general concept of religion and, in addition, a concept of how religions are to be categorized.

Schleiermacher was already aware in his time of the modern situation of Christianity with respect to religious pluralism and the relationship between religion and society. This is one reason why he saw theology as a whole, including practical theology, as being built upon a foundation of the philosophy of religion. Theology is not simply there; in fact, it did not even exist at the beginnings of the Christian faith.

By Schleiermacher's time, the demands upon the church had increased in complexity due to socio-cultural changes and a general awareness of those changes, which had developed with the Enlightenment and continued to grow in the second half of the eighteenth century. Here I am thinking of the religious wars and the experience of religious pluralism that followed in their wake. Christianity no longer held the position of the one and only true religion, proven by appeal to divine revelation. It no longer functioned as the prime integrating force in society; it was becoming a dividing force instead. And it no longer sanctified the whole of the social world, but was increasingly regarded as one social phenomenon among others. Closely related, the new historical consciousness had a strong influence. Christianity, which had once enjoyed the status of an absolute in many parts of the world by claiming divine authority as its foundation, now stood as one religion beside others. Possessing only relative validity and being tied to a particular culture, Christianity ceased to dominate the whole society and was reduced to one of its segments. As a consequence of these historical changes, theologians had an increasingly difficult time affirming the absolute priority of scripture.

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15 BO §32.

On the other hand, the rational religion of much Enlightenment theology was not producing very convincing results. The same period, moreover, witnessed the uncovering of the human origins and historical contexts of the Christian scriptures by historical criticism. This issued in more probing questions about theology, including the question of whether theology was concerned directly with the nature of God or rather with the nature of Christianity and its distinctive understandings of God. Schleiermacher tried to meet this challenge with a conception of theology in general that is grounded in an anthropology in which religion forms a constitutive element of human culture.

## 5. The Account of Religion as a Constitutive Element of Human Culture

Religion as a "feeling of absolute dependence" (*schlechthiniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl*) is an essential element of human nature, which is to say, of human culture. This basic statement of proposition 6 of the "Glaubenslehre" refers to the anthropological foundation of theology as a theory of Christian religion.<sup>16</sup> The feeling of absolute dependence is the presence of the transcendent ground of the human capacities of knowing and willing. My conscious relationship to the world, to other human beings, and even to my own self is characterized by oppositions because in my consciousness of the world, of others, and no less in my self-consciousness, I am distinct from the object of my consciousness. In self-consciousness I am at once an object to my self and subject who is conscious of me. Nevertheless, I have confidence in my identity and in the correspondence of my thinking with the reality of the world. I am conscious of my identity throughout the course of my life, and I have the feeling that my knowledge and my will fit into the world. This feeling of personal identity as well as the confidence that I do know what is real and that I can be successful in my endeavors in the world are constitutive moments of my self-consciousness. Where does this self-consciousness come from? This fundamental question led Schleiermacher to the notion of an *immediate* self-consciousness (*unmittelbares Selbstbewußtsein*), which human beings find in themselves in a pre-reflective and pre-verbal form. In this self-consciousness we are think-

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16 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt*, ed. Martin Redeker (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1960), 41. On this anthropological argument for becoming religious, cf. also §4 of the *Glaubenslehre*, 23-30.

ing being and being thinking, Schleiermacher says in his "Dialektik."<sup>17</sup> Such self-consciousness emerges immediately and, precisely for this reason, is the constitutive factor of our awareness that our thinking is real and our willing meaningful. Yet we cannot know the ground of this unity because all forms of knowing and acting are determined by oppositions or polarities. Within our cognition and conduct, we can never overcome the oppositions between thinking and acting, idea and reality, universality and individuality. The consciousness of unity and, with it, the confidence of being free to act according to our will, based on our knowledge, only emerges within a pre-reflective experience of the self. The consciousness of unity is a passively constituted moment in our self-relationship. It emerges as a feeling of the self, but we cannot achieve access to it through our knowing and acting. This condition of our ability to know and act therefore remains transcendent to our knowing and acting. It is present in us and accessible in the self's pre-reflective moments of "feeling."<sup>18</sup>

As a consequence, Schleiermacher argues, this immediate self-consciousness of our identity is the actual presence of the transcendent ground of our activity of knowing and acting and, as such, the feeling of absolute dependence. We are not the agents in becoming free and self-determined in a world of oppositions and under the finite conditions of relative dependence and relative freedom. We do not make ourselves into free human beings, but we do have the ability to modify our acts in correspondence to our knowledge and our will. This is what we feel. We are conscious of being constituted as free beings from outside ourselves. This is what the feeling of absolute dependence is about. Due to its passivity, it can also be called a religious feeling. The feeling of absolute dependence or of immediate self-consciousness of identity is passively constituted through our bodily existence, a relationship to ourselves through our body. Thus the transcendent ground of our ability to know and act is given to us and becomes present for us. It is the transcendent ground of our freedom, and it gives us the confidence that we are able to know and act in a self-determining way, despite the oppositions of a world in which only a relative freedom is possible. We can self-confidently move through these worldly relativities because our feeling of absolute dependence makes us conscious of not being completely absorbed in these oppositions.

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17 See KGA II/10.1, 143-44 and KGA II/10.2, 572-73.

18 See Ulrich Barth, "Der Letztbegründungsgang der 'Dialektik': Schleiermachers Fassung des transzendentalen Gedankens," in *Aufgeklärter Protestantismus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 353-85, esp. 380-85.

Schleiermacher calls the feeling of absolute dependence a religious feeling because it connects us as human beings with the transcendent and absolute ground of our finite freedom. Both the theory about the conditions of the capacity of knowing (*Dialektik*) and the theory of the types of activities that constitute human culture (*Philosophische Ethik*) have to refer to this feeling. Thus, as a consequence of the philosophical anthropology sketched briefly above, Schleiermacher argues that being religious is a constitutive aspect of human existence. Religion, however, does not primarily fulfill this constitutive function through the use of its doctrines, symbols, and rituals, but by representing and interpreting the immediate experience of the self.<sup>19</sup>

One of the most important consequences of this argument is that in Schleiermacher's conception of theology all expressions and articulations of religious self-consciousness have a functional meaning. Religious doctrines, symbols, and rituals are external signs of bodily mediated modes of self-consciousness; they must be acknowledged as such signs in order to be valued as religious signs. Therefore we can indeed analyze religious doctrines, symbols, and rituals without being involved with our own personal existence. However, we have to recognize that to deal with religious doctrines, symbols, and rituals requires reflection upon the way in which human beings express their self-consciousness together with their needs, world-views, faith, and hopes. Again we see that Schleiermacher's anthropological theory of religion permits the academic to deal with religious phenomena with critical distance. In examining the objective expressions of the Christian faith, neither theologians nor researchers in religious studies are necessarily involved as believers in the religious objects—doctrines, symbols, and rituals—that they study. Yet they must acknowledge that these religious phenomena can be or are in fact expressions of a basic human self-understanding. The differences between religions, which are treated by the *Religionswissenschaften* or religious studies, express diverse human self-understandings and therefore different worldviews and cultural concepts. Understanding a religion is linked throughout with understanding human conceptions of the self. It therefore also requires the scholar to examine his or her own self-understanding. We cannot understand any religion without examining our own self-understanding and, consequently, our own religious standpoint—be it explicit or implicit.

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19 See Wilhelm Gräb, "Religion als Praxis der Lebensdeutung: Zu Schleiermachers Bestimmung des Verhältnisses von Philosophie, Religion und Theologie," in *Protestantismus zwischen Aufklärung und Moderne: Festschrift für Ulrich Barth*, ed. Roderich Barth et al. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005), 147-62.

This merely means that each human being and also each researcher in theology or religious studies finds in themselves the potential to develop a religious self-consciousness or to deny self-interpretation in religious terms. It does not mean that everyone must belong to a religious community or denomination or that researchers in religious studies have to be believers who affirm their own religious standpoint, specific doctrines, or symbolic and ritual systems. In Schleiermacher's thinking, an articulated religious position, religious doctrines, rituals, and the like are secondary elements within a given religion that is based on a cultural-anthropological, transcendental structure of subjectivity. Nevertheless, such secondary elements are historically and culturally mediated expressions and articulations of how human beings most fundamentally understand themselves. In the end, understanding not our own religion but a foreign one demands a complicated hermeneutics. It is impossible to describe the meaning of the doctrines, symbols, and rituals of other religions as if they were our own without going back to the basic elements of the self-understanding and worldviews of those who were educated in the doctrines of the religion concerned.

One last remark: it should be obvious that this conception of religion as the expression of the deepest human self-understanding is based on the Christian notion of the *conditio humana*. Schleiermacher understands religion as the feeling of absolute dependence, and for him the feeling of absolute dependence is the condition of the possibility of human self-consciousness, including the self-understanding of freedom. This understanding of religion as the conception of the self as free coheres with the Christian faith's concentration on Jesus as the redeemer. The individual who belongs to Jesus and his community of faith is not completely absorbed—such is the confession of a Christian—by the oppositions of his or her worldly existence. Jesus is the redeemer because he communicates the feeling of absolute dependence and therefore the presence of the ground of freedom and self-determination in the oppositions of finite human existence. To follow Jesus is to actualize personal freedom.

There is a circle in Schleiermacher's theory of religion, but this circle is necessary. Because religion in the form of the expression of the deepest human self-understanding is a constitutive element of human culture, we cannot develop a theory of religion while at the same time bypassing our own self-understanding and therefore our own religious standpoint. But this does not have to be an impediment to attempts to understand other religions. On the contrary, the better we understand our own religious standpoint and its religious doctrines, symbols, and

rituals as a more or less fitting expression of our self-understanding, the better we are able to understand other religions, their doctrines, rituals, and symbols as articulations of the worldviews and cultural constructs of believers of other faiths.