

Schleiermacher on the Out-Pourings of the Inner Fire:  
Experiential Expressivism and Religious Pluralism

Contemporary scholars such as Huston Smith, who have delved into the beliefs and practices of many of the major world religions claim that there is a central spiritual reality to which all the major religious traditions point. Salvation, insofar as it is conceived in terms of being in relation with the Absolute Reality, is achievable from within the context of all the world's major faiths. John Hick has defended a similar claim, attempting to work out its philosophical ramifications in his book *An Interpretation of Religion*.<sup>1</sup> The proposal that all the world's major faiths are grounded in genuine experiences of the divine is not a new one, however. In his book *On Religion*, Schleiermacher makes a similar kind of claim. There Schleiermacher tells us that

I invite you to study every faith professed by man, every religion that has a name and a character. Though it may long ago have degenerated into a long series of empty customs, into a system of abstract ideas and theories, will you not, when you examine the original elements at the source, find that this dead dross was once the molten out-pourings of the inner fire? Is there not in all religions more or less of the true nature of religion, as I have presented it to you? Must not, therefore, each religion be one of the special forms which mankind, in some region of the earth and at some stage of development, has to accept?<sup>2</sup>

Yet there are significant issues raised by this kind of proposal. How can differing traditions, making competing truth claims about the human situation and how it relates to the transcendent, all point to a central spiritual reality? If they characterize it differently, how can we know it is the same ultimate reality to which they point, or which is being experienced? Moreover, it seems that insofar as these

traditions are making competing truth claims, they cannot all be right, and their not getting the facts right about the nature of the Absolute may translate into a failure in helping human beings achieve salvation. Can the claim that all the major world religions point to the same Absolute be defended?

Both in the *Speeches* and in the *Christian Faith* Schleiermacher offers a comprehensive theory of the nature of religion grounding it in experience. In the *Speeches* Schleiermacher grounds religion in an original unity of consciousness that precedes the subject-object dichotomy.<sup>3</sup> The *Christian Faith* presents a similar analysis of religion: the feeling of absolute dependence is grounded in the immediate self-consciousness. In both accounts a fundamental experience grounds religion.<sup>4</sup> In the *Christian Faith* Schleiermacher explains that doctrines are expressions of this fundamental experience; Christian doctrines are, for instance, "accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech."<sup>5</sup> This view aptly has been labeled "experiential expressivism." In this paper I will argue that Schleiermacher's theory offers a generally coherent account of how it is possible that differing religious traditions are all based on the same experience of the absolute. My account will attempt to show how Schleiermacher's program can respond successfully to some of the contemporary objections to religious pluralism noted above. My defense of Schleiermacher's view will revolve upon three different but related points.

First there is the question of the *nature* of religious doctrines. If doctrines are truth claims that seek to adequately describe reality as it really is, then their diverging claims as to the nature of the Absolute and its relation to human beings can pose a threat to the coherence of idea that all the major faith traditions have validity. On the other hand, if the meaning and purpose of doctrines is to convey an experience, in particular when that experience is of something that transcends the categories of the mundane, then it seems that it is possible that two different systems of symbolic representation can be equally adequate vehicles conveying an

experience of the Absolute. The first part of the paper will lay out the essential elements of Schleiermacher's experiential expressivism and explore the possibilities it offers for giving a coherent account of religious pluralism.

Second, related to this first issue is the issue of interpretation. What role does it play in the shaping of the religious experience itself? How does Schleiermacher envision this role? How might Schleiermacher respond to the critic arguing that cultural and linguistic categories are so central to the possibility of experiencing the transcendent that it is impossible to find a common experience across cultural boundaries? The key to Schleiermacher's response, I will suggest, lies in his understanding of the *immediate* character of religious experience and its *a priori* character.

Thirdly, because two or more systems of symbolic representations may be more or less adequate expressions of the experience of the Absolute, it does not follow that all are. In fact, in *The Christian Faith* Schleiermacher clearly holds the position that Christianity is the most perfect expression of the feeling of absolute dependence. While we may disagree with this particular verdict, it is nevertheless important to have criteria to distinguish those symbol systems that are more adequate vehicles for conveying the experience of the absolute from those that are inadequate. The last part of the paper will discuss how Schleiermacher envisions these criteria.

### On the Nature of Doctrine

It is well known that there are three basic models regarding what it is that religious doctrines are. On the first model, doctrines are a set of propositions that purport to make truth claims about human beings, the world in which they find themselves, and their relation to that which transcends the world. Doctrines are thereby informative of the nature of reality, and it is through the information they

convey that they are able to guide human beings on their spiritual path towards salvation. If this is the nature and function of doctrine, then assertions that differ as to the nature of the world, ultimate reality, and their interrelations cannot all be correct. Either only one is correct, perhaps all are wrong, but two conflicting assertions cannot both be right. If the Muslim insists on the absolute Oneness of God, and the Christian insists that God is triune, both assertions cannot be true. Moreover, on this model the truth-functional status of a doctrine is usually thought to have a direct effect on how much of a help or a hindrance it can be in guiding persons in their quest for the ultimate.

On the second basic model, religious doctrines do not so much seek to describe the nature of ultimate reality as to either express or evoke an experience of that reality, or to reflect upon and systematize those expressions. At the core of this understanding of doctrine is religious experience. This religious experience is then expressed in aesthetic symbolic elements that point past themselves to the transcendent. As such, the expression of this experience is subject to the influence of cultural thought forms and patterns available to the individual expressing the experience. On this model two or more different symbolic systems can be equally expressive and evocative of genuine religious experience. This occurs analogously to the way that two different paintings can both be beautiful. Moreover, here we move first from the inner experience to the outer diverse forms, and from the outer forms back to the inner experience to which they point. Experiences expressed by two differing forms can yet be experiences of the same Absolute. This model has been aptly called “experiential expressivism” by George Lindbeck.<sup>6</sup> While there has been some controversy concerning the exact details of Schleiermacher’s model of religious doctrines, there is no doubt that at its core his model contains the basic elements described here.

A compelling exposition of a third model, dubbed by George Lindbeck as the “cultural linguistic alternative” is provided in his book *The Nature of Doctrine*. One of the ideas driving this model is that there is no such thing as an uninterpreted datum of experience.<sup>7</sup> The experiencing self is always already equipped with cultural thought forms and linguistic categories through which it interprets its experiences. There is no innocent eye; the idea that there are “given” experiences that form a common core of religion is simply a myth, for it is these categories that *shape* the experience, and without them experience is simply not possible at all.<sup>8</sup> Hence, “religions are producers of experience.”<sup>9</sup> Here, in contrast to the second model, we move from the outer forms to the inner experiences.

While the second model (experiential expressivism) captures some of the most essential features of Schleiermacher’s understanding of religion, Schleiermacher’s views on doctrines and the religious experiences upon which they depend are extremely nuanced, and are well equipped to deflect criticisms often made against this model by proponents of other views. In what follows I will take a closer look at Schleiermacher’s understanding of the nature of religious doctrines. How does his development of the nature of doctrine help us to make sense of the diversity of religious expressions, and what resources does it offer for dialogue amongst differing faith traditions? How well does his model fare when compared with the other two?

Doctrines, for Schleiermacher, are always derivative. In the *Christian Faith* he notes that revelation does not operate upon us as cognitive beings, “for that would make the revelation to be originally and essentially *doctrine*” (CF, 50; §10.3). What is revealed is not a proposition whose function is to mirror the structure of what is known, but an experience. This does not imply that religious doctrines, being dependent upon that experience, are merely subjective and reflective of states of the self.<sup>10</sup> As Rudolph Otto, Schleiermacher’s famous disciple and commentator notes,

religious experience has a peculiarly noetic quality, since what is experienced is “felt as objective and outside the self.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, what it is that is experienced cannot be adequately conveyed by propositions whose structure corresponds to the known. This is for two reasons, both the results of Kant’s philosophy, of which Schleiermacher is very much aware. First, we cannot have knowledge of things as they are in themselves. Second, our *knowledge* extends only to the phenomenal realm, and the phenomena that Kant had in mind are those given through the five senses. What is intuited in religious experience, however, is not given through the senses. It transcends the categories through which ordinary sense experience is apprehended and organized and hence cannot be grasped in the same way. Schleiermacher tells us that

. . . . any possibility of God being in any way given is entirely excluded because anything that is outwardly given must be given as an object exposed to our counter-influence, however slight this may be. . . . The transference of the idea of God to any perceptible object, unless one is all the time conscious that it is a piece of purely arbitrary symbolism, is always a corruption, whether it be a temporary transference, i.e., a theophany, or a constitutive transference, in which God is represented as permanently a particular perceptible existence (*CF*, 18; § 4.4).

What is given through the five senses is material that is worked on by our own consciousness. This is what Schleiermacher means when he tells us that what is *given* as an object is “exposed to our counter-influence.” On the other hand, what is experienced through the feeling of absolute dependence is not an object *alongside* of other objects. Schleiermacher tells us that it must be understood as “the *Whence* of our receptive and active existence. . . .” and notes that, “this ‘Whence’ is not the world, in the sense of the totality of temporal existence, and still less is it any single

part of the world” (CF, 16; §4.4). It is not finite or limited by space and time and it is not an object *set over against us*. As such it cannot be grasped or encompassed by the mind and eludes apprehension through concepts; it is best apprehended through the symbol. In paragraphs 15 and 16 of *The Christian Faith* Schleiermacher notes that the original expressions of piety are the poetic or rhetorical. These contain aesthetic and symbolic elements pointing past themselves to a transcendent reality. Doctrines are the result of reflection upon these primary forms; they are “derivative and secondary” (CF, 79; §16.1), that is, second order propositions that are a result of reflection and systematization of first order expressions.<sup>12</sup> Hence, unlike the feeling of absolute dependence itself, they have been mediated and worked through by consciousness. “Dogmatic propositions,” Schleiermacher notes, arise out of “logically ordered reflection upon the immediate utterances of the religious self-consciousness” (CF, 81; § 16.3). They are the result of a process of dialectical reflection through which inconsistencies are weeded out and central tenets of the faith are given a controlling influence over subsidiary ones (CF, 80; § 16.3).

If Schleiermacher is right in his characterization of religious experience as transcending ordinary experience, then there are good reasons why we cannot think of doctrines as propositions whose structure ontologically corresponds to the structure of the real. At the heart of ultimate reality is *mystery* transcending all our cognitive capacities. Hence we can only express or point to both what is intuited and its relation to the self that intuits through symbols which gesture past themselves. The symbol, like the aesthetic object, has an overplus of meaning to which no concept is ever adequate. As such only it is suited to point to the Absolute, which cannot be captured in concepts but can only be alluded to through symbolic elements of the imagination. The purpose of doctrine is not to mirror the real but to give logical coherence to a system of symbols. If this is the case, then it is possible that two differing religious systems of symbolic representation and the

second order doctrines that systematize them can both be valid expressions of the experience of ultimate mystery.

On the other hand, if the purpose of religious doctrines is to present an isomorphism between the “structure of knowing and the structure of the known,”<sup>13</sup> then insofar as two religious doctrines are *not* in agreement, they cannot both be right. As Keith Ward puts it, “ To think that it[a proposition] is true is to affirm that reality is as it is described by that proposition. . . . Thus an affirmation by its nature excludes some possible states of affairs; namely one which would render the proposition false.”<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that differing religions may be right on differing points, so that no single religion has a monopoly on truth. Nonetheless, if doctrines are propositions, then the ultimate purpose of inter-religious dialogue would have to be either to convert others to the true religion, or to discover the elements of truth in each tradition. The symbolic system of rites and religious practices of each tradition would have worth only insofar as they reflected propositions deemed to be true. On this model, for instance, it would be difficult for a Christian to ascribe validity to the Muslim practice of the recitation of the Koran since the Muslim faith is at odds with Christianity on many doctrinal points.

### The Interpretation of Religious Experience

Before more can be said about the resources Schleiermacher’s model of religion offers for inter-religious dialogue and a sympathetic understanding of other religions, his exposition of the interplay between religious experience and culture needs to be discussed in more depth. An exploration of this point will also allow us to compare Schleiermacher’s model of the nature of doctrine with so called cultural-linguistic approaches. The first and most important point that must be made in this regard is the fact that the feeling of absolute dependence is *immediate*, that is, it is not mediated by the work of consciousness. As noted above, it is not given in sensuous

experience in such a way that we could exert our counter-influence (through the interpretive work of consciousness) upon it. If we were to exert such a counter-influence, then the feeling would not be of *absolute* dependence. This means, then, that the foundational religious experience remains pure, that is, it is unaffected by cultural and linguistic categories. These come into play only when the experience is being *expressed*. This is the fundamental point of difference between Schleiermacher's model of religion and the cultural-linguistic model. On the latter view, *all* experience is subject to the work of consciousness and as such is interpreted. There can be no such thing as an *immediate* self-consciousness or an unmediated feeling of absolute dependence. Hence strictly speaking we cannot posit a fundamentally similar experience at the ground of different religious symbols since *all* experience has been shaped and molded by historically determined and contingent cultural categories.

Note that in insisting on the *unmediated* character of the feeling of absolute dependence, Schleiermacher avoids one of the principle difficulties faced by John Hick in his attempt to link diverse religious traditions to the experience of a single ultimate. According to Hick, all religious experience is interpreted and the Real in itself is unknown and unknowable in our present state.<sup>15</sup> As pointed out by many of Hick's critics, however, on this view there is a problem in linking the phenomenal manifestations of religion to the Real in itself.<sup>16</sup> If all experience is interpreted, how are we to know that diverse religious traditions all point to the same Ultimate? Strictly speaking we cannot, since we have no access to that Ultimate as it is in itself. Schleiermacher, on the other hand, insists that the feeling of absolute dependence is immediate. As such, it is an experience not subject to the interpretive work of consciousness. But if it is immediate, what thematic access do we have to it?<sup>17</sup> And insofar as we are able to re-present it thematically, then do not all the facts concerning the conditioned nature of the interpretation of experience again apply?

Although the foundational religious experience is immediate, Schleiermacher has a good deal to say about the relation of the feeling of absolute dependence to the *activity* of consciousness, and hence to the categories through which consciousness interprets and appropriates experience. Very much like transcendental Thomists such as Rahner,<sup>18</sup> Schleiermacher insists that while the feeling of absolute dependence is itself unmediated, it can only really make an appearance when what he calls the sensible self-consciousness has been fully developed. Shortly after introducing the feeling of absolute dependence in *The Christian Faith*, he discusses three grades of consciousness: 1) the confused, animal grade of consciousness; 2) the consciousness of an antithesis between the self and the world and 3) the higher consciousness, that is, the consciousness of absolute dependence. In the confused, animal grade of consciousness there is no clear distinction between “the objective and introversive, or feeling and perception” (CF 18; § 5.1), precisely because there is no *self*-consciousness. In other words, in order to be able to distinguish between self and world, consciousness must be able to make itself its own object. Only then can it distinguish itself from what is other than itself. This is precisely what is lacking in this confused animal grade of consciousness. In the second grade of consciousness there is self-consciousness, and hence a grasp of the antithesis between the self and the world. The third grade of consciousness is the higher consciousness, which we have already noted is *immediate*. Now interestingly enough Schleiermacher claims that it is only in relation to the sensible self-consciousness that the higher consciousness can make an appearance:

It is impossible to claim a constancy for the highest self-consciousness, except on the supposition that the sensible self-consciousness is always conjoined with it. . . . It means rather a co-existence of the two in the same moment, which, of course, unless the Ego is to be split up, involves a reciprocal relation of the two. It is impossible for anyone to

be in some moments exclusively conscious of his relations within the realm of the antithesis, and in other moments of his absolute dependence in itself and in a general way; for it is as a person determined for this moment in a particular manner within the realm of the antithesis that he is conscious of his absolute dependence. This relatedness of the sensibly determined to the higher self-consciousness in the unity of the moment is the consummating point of the self-consciousness (*CF* 22; §5.3).

This passage is important in several regards. First it allows us to understand what Schleiermacher means by the *immediate* self-consciousness, a term which unaccompanied by further explanation, seems to make little sense. What can this possibly mean, since *self*-consciousness must always be mediated? Unless Schleiermacher is simply confused, he must be referring to the higher consciousness, which is itself always immediate, but which can only develop when consciousness recognizes the realm of the antithesis between self and world and is therefore *self*-conscious. This higher consciousness is transcendental, and as such can never become an object *for* consciousness. Insofar as it is the *whence* of both our active and receptive existence, it is always in the background. Nonetheless, the individual must be conscious of the antithesis between self and world in order thereby to intuit the unity of the ground of both activity and receptivity.

Second, this passage provides the basis for Schleiermacher's claim that religion must always be positive. The claim is made both in the *Christian Faith* and in the fifth Speech of *On Religion*. In the latter Schleiermacher notes that “. . . the positive religions are just the definite forms in which religion must exhibit itself. . . . in the positive religions alone a true individual cultivation of the religious capacity is possible. . .” (*OR* 217). The reason why this is so is explained in the passage given above from the *Christian Faith*. The higher consciousness can only exist insofar as it is

related to the antithesis of the sensible self-consciousness between self and world. Hence there can be no development of the higher consciousness that is not *situated*, that does not develop in relation to the sensible self-consciousness. Schleiermacher tells us that this relation between the higher consciousness and the sensible self-consciousness is “the consummating point of self-consciousness.” It is in the realm of the sensible self-consciousness, however, that there is a distinction between subject and object. Objects are given to consciousness through perception, but consciousness must take them up and make sense of them through interpretive categories. Many of these categories are contingent and develop historically; religious symbols are one of the products of the work of consciousness on the material given to it. As Schleiermacher notes in the *Speeches*, even the consciousness of the individual in whom the activity of the higher consciousness is most developed has a historical development influencing the expression of religion:

. . . is not then a characteristic personality born with the religious life? There is a definite connection with a past, a present and a future. The whole subsequent religious life is linked in this way to that moment and that state in which this feeling surprised the soul. It thus maintains its connection with the earlier, poorer life, and has a natural, uniform development (*OR* 227).

The diversity of religious expression is thereby inevitable.<sup>19</sup>

Schleiermacher’s account is subtle and nuanced; as such it can accommodate many of the insights of the cultural-linguistic approach to understanding religion and doctrine. Religions have a historical development and as such are subject to the influence of linguistic, cultural, sociological and psychological factors. There is an important sense in which they provide interpretive categories through which religious feelings (at the level of the antithesis) are understood. Moreover, many of

the criticisms leveled against experiential expressivism do not apply to it. Lindbeck, for instance, hints that on this model one can be “religious in general”<sup>20</sup> and sees this as a drawback. It should be clear by now that this is not Schleiermacher’s position. For Schleiermacher the experience of religion always takes place in a given context. Only thus can it be a genuinely *human* experience. While there is no doubt that for Schleiermacher there is a religious *a priori*, this *a priori* does not become operative in a vacuum. Given that we are concrete socio-historical individuals, there is no “view from nowhere” in religion. Each experience is a *situated* experience of the transcendent; that situatedness cannot be abstracted from the experience. In the fifth Speech Schleiermacher notes that “as long as we occupy a place there must be in these relations of man to the whole a nearer and a farther, which will necessarily determine each feeling differently in each life” (OR 217). However, the fact that religious experience is always situated does not imply that believers from two differing traditions are not experiencing the same thing. My perception of any given object will be situated from a given perspective, and that perspective will be different from yours; it does not follow, however, that *what* is experienced is different. The situation is analogous with respect to religious experience.

#### Schleiermacher’s Criteria of Genuine Religious Experience

Two things must be noted about Schleiermacher’s use of the terms “a nearer and a farther” in relation to the transcendent. First, his use of this language makes it clear that the religious experience is *of* something and hence religious language, while needs be symbolic because of the nature of its object, is about *something* and hence has a noetic quality. It is not merely about the feeling states of the subject. Second, given that the religious experience is first and foremost a transcendental one, Schleiermacher’s language of a “nearer and a farther” must be understood metaphorically; there is no thematized *object* relating to a subject. Nevertheless, it is

clear that what Schleiermacher means to say is that some religious experiences are better manifestations of the feeling of absolute dependence than others.

We have already pointed out the transcendental character of the highest self-consciousness, which Schleiermacher identifies with the feeling of absolute dependence. The transcendental nature of this experience further implies that it is given *a priori*. Schleiermacher tells us in *The Christian Faith* that “The highest self-consciousness is in no wise dependent on outwardly given objects which may affect us at one moment and not at another. As a consciousness of absolute dependence it is quite simple, and remains self-identical while all other states are changing” (CF 21; §5.3). Moreover, the consciousness of absolute dependence “accompanies our whole existence” and “is never zero” (CF 16; §4.3). All religious phenomena are in one way or another grounded in this religious *a priori*. Even the religions “of the lower levels” are expressions, howsoever flawed and limited they may be, of piety. Hence Schleiermacher insists that “we must never deny the homogeneity of all these products of the human spirit, but must acknowledge the same root even for the lower powers” (CF 38; §8.4).

Since the feeling of absolute dependence is always self-identical, it cannot, of itself, account for the diversity of religious expressions. The difference between them lies in how this feeling of absolute dependence actualizes itself in a given moment through its relation to a moment of the sensible self-consciousness. Given that the moments of the sensible self-consciousness are infinitely various, there is infinite variety in the expression of piety (CF 22; §5.4; see also §9.1). Nonetheless, each moment of the sensible self-consciousness is in principle related to the higher consciousness. The question is the degree to which that relation to the higher consciousness dominates the moment. Hence sin is understood as “God-forgetfulness,” and is defined as the blocking of the influence of the higher (transcendental) consciousness upon moments of the sensible self-consciousness.<sup>21</sup>

Yet even in the case of God-forgetfulness, the feeling of absolute dependence is never at zero, for if it were “the lack of a thing which lay outside one’s nature could not be felt to be an evil condition” (CF 55; §II.2). Characteristic of the religious a priori is thus a kind of *élan* pushing it towards its fullest self-realization in its relation to the sensible self-consciousness. Schleiermacher would no doubt agree with Augustine’s pithy statement that “our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee,” that is, the arrest of the God-consciousness is felt as an *evil condition*, and as such spurs consciousness on to its remedy, namely the freeing up of the God-consciousness.

Given what has been said so far, it is clear that for Schleiermacher the difference between religions lies principally in the *degree* to which they are able to manifest the feeling of absolute dependence. In a telling passage he notes that “since Christianity affirms that only perfect love casts out all fear, it must admit that imperfect love is never entirely free from fear.” Likewise even those polytheistic religions in which idols serve as protectors are manifestations of imperfect love; they are adaptations, “corresponding to imperfect love, of the feeling of absolute dependence” (CF 38; §8.4). Noteworthy here are two things important to Schleiermacher’s criteria for the adequacy of religions. First, the feeling of absolute dependence is related to the Christian understanding of love, and as such these criteria are going to be associated in important ways with the moral fruits that each religion yields. Second, the criteria for the adequacy of religions must therefore be able to gauge differences in the *degree* to which they convey the feeling of absolute dependence.

Before Schleiermacher divides religions into two major kinds, the aesthetic and the teleological, he provides a general account of the causes for differences in how religious objects are conceived. He notes that there are two major factors influencing how the religious object is thought: first, the *extensiveness* of the self-consciousness, and second, the clarity with which the difference between the lower

and the higher self-consciousness is held in view. If an individual identifies him or herself with only part of the world, he or she will think of only *part* of the world as dependent upon a correspondingly limited deity, and hence “his God will remain a fetish” (CF 36; §8.2). On the other hand, if the higher self-consciousness is not clearly distinguished from the lower, that to which the feeling of absolute dependence corresponds will mistakenly be taken to be the world or an object in it instead of that which fully transcends it.<sup>22</sup>

This analysis has implications for Schleiermacher’s major division of religions into the teleological and the aesthetic. Key to his distinction between the two kinds of religion are the concepts of passivity and spontaneity. To be passive is to be affected from without; in being conscious of my passivity I think of my character and habits as the result of intra-worldly causes. I am what I am because something outside me has made me that way. Schleiermacher links an emphasis on such passivity to the aesthetic type of religion. This kind of religion develops when the higher self-consciousness is not distinguished from the lower; hence the individual sees him or herself as dependent upon intra-worldly objects or causes. Schleiermacher notes that “It [an aesthetic form of faith] will reduce both these arrestments and continued developments of the God-consciousness, as indeed every other change in man’s experience, to passive states, and represent them consequently as the effects of external influences in such a manner that they will appear simply to be appointed events . . . .” (CF 262; § 63.1). In teleological religion, on the other hand, all passive states are simply occasions for *spontaneous* activity. Such activity is *not* the result of intra-worldly causes and thus is linked with genuine human freedom. Schleiermacher associates this spontaneous activity with that which transcends the subject object dichotomy (and thus anything that appears *in* the world) and which can only be given in the immediate self-consciousness, that is, with the Whence of our active and passive existence. He explicitly notes that “no one can doubt that the

results of free activity take place in virtue of absolute dependence” (CF 190; §49.1). It is only insofar as we are absolutely dependent on the ground of all that is that we are able to recognize ourselves as free, that is as not determined by intra-worldly causes. Moreover, we can only achieve the feeling of absolute dependence insofar as we are freely acting agents. Schleiermacher notes that “the God-consciousness surely . . . has a content which relates exclusively to human freedom and presupposes it” (CF 260; § 62. 2). Freedom, in the sense of independence from intra-worldly causes, is a condition of the possibility the God-consciousness. Freedom and absolute dependence mutually condition and imply one another.

In Christianity, considered by Schleiermacher the teleological religion par excellence, “the consciousness of God is always related to the totality of active states in the idea of a Kingdom of God” (CF 43; §9.2). Moreover, this freedom is closely associated with morality; in teleological religion “a predominating reference to the moral task constitutes the fundamental type of the religious affections” (CF 41; §9.1). In aesthetic religion, on the other hand, an individual’s actions are taken as resulting from “a determination of the individual by the whole of finite existence, and thus as referred to the passive side. . .” (CF 42; §9.1). It is interesting that Schleiermacher considers Greek polytheism the religion most clearly antithetical to Christianity, since in it even the beauty of the soul is “the result of all the influences of Nature and world” (CF 43; §9.2).

Schleiermacher’s distinction between spontaneity and passivity was no doubt influenced by Kant’s ethics, which sharply differentiated between heteronomy and autonomous moral action.<sup>23</sup> In heteronomous action the individual allows his actions to be determined by what Kant calls the lower faculty of desire, itself constituted by our receptivity and hence by how we can be *affected* from without. Autonomous moral action, on the other hand, is possible only in so far as we are free, that is insofar as our motives for action are not determined by intra-worldly causes.

Not only is freedom the *ratio essendi* of the moral law,<sup>24</sup> but the free will of necessity stands under the obligation of the moral law. Moreover, insofar as an individual's actions are not merely *reactions* to how s/he has been affected by outside causes, s/he acts morally, for there is only one categorical imperative that the will as practical reason can *give itself*.<sup>25</sup> In the *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* Kant notes that the "very incomprehensibility of this predisposition [i.e., to be moved to action by the moral law] announces a divine origin."<sup>26</sup> (R 45). In *The Conflict of the Faculties* he tells us that is, "grace is none other than the nature of man in so far as he is determined to actions by a principle which is intrinsic to his own being, but supersensible (the thought of his duty)."<sup>27</sup>

Now while the later Schleiermacher emphasizes the autonomous character of religion, distinguishing it from metaphysics and morals, his thought still has important points of contact with that of Kant:<sup>28</sup> teleological religion is characterized through its emphasis on *spontaneity* and this spontaneity implies a reference to the moral task. While many of Schleiermacher's early ethical writings espoused a deterministic empirical psychology in which previous states of consciousness determine later ones, by the time he writes *The Christian Faith* he no longer holds this view.<sup>29</sup> There he quite clearly notes that, ". . . every original ideal which arises in the soul, whether for an action or for a work of art, and which can neither be understood as an imitation nor be satisfactorily explained by means of external stimuli and *preceding mental states*, may be regarded as a revelation" (CF 51; §10.2, italics mine). Hence a revelation, which can include both moral and aesthetic elements, is something original in that it cannot merely be explained as a result of intra-worldly causes or previous states of consciousness; in revelation that which transcends the world breaks into consciousness through the immediate consciousness of the Absolute.

For Schleiermacher spontaneity is the condition of one's becoming conscious of one's absolute dependence. Love is a function of the feeling of absolute dependence: the more conscious one is of absolute dependence, the more perfect is one's love. Hence the best measure for gauging a religion's effectiveness in freeing the God-consciousness lies within the realm of ethics. When the feeling of absolute dependence on that which transcends the world is blocked, one is in a state of captivity or constraint. Associated with this captivity or constraint is an understanding of oneself as merely receptive, that is, as simply reacting to intra-worldly causes. As a result of the confusion between the higher and lower consciousness, the individual understands herself as passive, as under the control of *outside* influences that have led her to be what she is. On the other hand, when the distinction between the higher and lower consciousness is properly maintained, the individual comes to understand herself as absolutely dependent on that power which *transcends* the world while yet being immanent to it. This leads the individual to understand herself as *free* vis a vis the world and empowers her to accomplish the moral task set to her as a member of the Kingdom of God. In fact, even the idea of such a Kingdom is defined by Schleiermacher in terms of the *activity* of its subjects (CF 43; §9.2).

The connections between the constraint of the God-consciousness, the view of oneself as *merely receptive* and therefore dependent upon the world, and the blocking of love in a systematic fashion are explored by Schleiermacher in his discussion of sin. In what ways does the understanding of oneself as merely passive lead to fear, the opposite of love? What are the connections between self-transcendence, spontaneity, and love towards one's fellow human beings? In his discussion of sin Schleiermacher makes use of the Pauline distinction between flesh and spirit. The flesh is our bodily nature subject to corruption and determination by intra-worldly causes. The spirit, on the other hand, is associated with the God-consciousness. Sin is "an arrestment of the determinative power of spirit, due to the

independence of the sensuous functions." This view of sin is "certainly reconcilable with those explanations which describe sin as turning away from the creator" (*CF* 273; § 66. 2). In giving free reign to the sensuous desires one invests the limited and bodily with worth, ignoring what transcends the world and is of true worth. Hence sin is associated with an identification of oneself with the sensuous functions, that is, with the body. As such, anything that threatens the body and everything associated with it will be perceived as a real threat and will engender fear. Schleiermacher notes that if

the predominant factor is not the God-consciousness but the flesh, every impression made by the world upon us and invoking an obstruction of our bodily and temporal life must be reckoned as an evil, and the more so, the more definitely the moment of experience terminates solely in the flesh apart from the higher consciousness (*CF* 316; § 75. 1).

On the other hand, were every moment of our existence determined by the God-consciousness, the relative opposition between the external world and the temporal life of man "could never have been construed by the corporate consciousness as an obstruction to life, since it could not in any sense act as an inhibition of the God-consciousness, but at most would give a different form to its effects" (*CF* 316; § 75.1). Identification of the self with the higher consciousness has three effects, all interrelated with one another. First, not to identify oneself with the body results in freedom from the bondage of the fear of death (*CF* 316; § 75.1), since one has identified oneself with spirit, which is incorruptible and cannot be threatened. Second, to see oneself as absolutely dependent on the ground of being, which transcends the world, allows one to understand oneself as subject to a higher destiny and therefore as *free* in relation to the world. Third and most importantly, to grasp one's absolute dependence on the Whence of our existence allows us to transcend

ourselves. We are no longer bound to identify ourselves with the body, which has a particular causal history and particular sensuous desires associated with that causal history.<sup>30</sup> Insofar as we must also recognize others as capable of becoming conscious of their absolute dependence, we must value them as we value ourselves. In this way identification with the spirit engenders a completely different attitude to the world and others in it than identification with the body.

Thus far I have discussed how Schleiermacher envisions the nature of doctrines, issues linked to the problem of the interpretation of the religious experience, and Schleiermacher's criteria for the adequacy of religions. Given what has been said so far, we need to take a closer look at how this model accommodates religious pluralism and dialogue among different religious traditions. I have shown that for Schleiermacher at the core of all religions is an *unmediated* experience of the ground of all that is (the whence of our active and receptive existence). Differences in religions amount to the extent to which they can adequately convey the experience of absolute dependence upon this ground; they are differences in degree, not in kind. It is because there *is* a single, fundamental experience to which all the world's religions are related that there can be meaningful and significant dialogue among them. The alternative is to think of the relations between world religions as "family resemblances." On this view categories of religious thought may be so different across religions that they may not even be equipped to pick out the same things. If, on the other hand, there is a fundamental human experience grounding religion, then the question is how well the different religious traditions express it and facilitate that experience's influence on all aspects of life.

It might be asked: if the foundational religious experience is immediate, then how are we to gauge the adequacy of a religious tradition? We have no *thematic* access to this experience, and hence it is impossible to reflect upon that experience in its immediacy. How then are we to understand how well a religious tradition

expresses this experience and how are we to compare religions? Do we not need to be able to reflect on *both* the initial experience and its expression in order to measure the adequacy of a religious tradition's expression of the experience? If so, then it would seem that it would be impossible to make these kinds of judgments. Problems similar to those plaguing John Hick's understanding of the absolute as a thing in itself would then seem to crop up again in a different guise. In what sense can we *know* this experience and that to which it points? Is not all knowledge thematic?

Schleiermacher's resources for answering these questions lie in his systematic discussion of why religions must always be positive. As noted above his analysis hangs on a transcendental theory of consciousness: such a consciousness exists only in relation to the sensible self-consciousness. In fact, only *as such* can it be transcendental. States of the sensible self-consciousness to which we do have thematic access therefore reflect relations to the higher (transcendental) consciousness. Hence Schleiermacher tells us that ". . . the world will be a different thing to a man according as he apprehends it from the standpoint of a God-consciousness completely paralyzed or of one absolutely paramount" (*CF* 267; § 64.2). While the experience of absolute dependence is immediate and transcendental, how one understands the world is dependent upon the relation of the God-consciousness to the sensible self-consciousness. And as Schleiermacher noted in *On Freedom*, how one represents the world and the things in it to oneself are key in determining desire, and therefore action. Schleiermacher concludes "it will accordingly be possible to distinguish in the Christian life itself between what in our conception of the world is to be placed to the account of sin, and what to the account of grace. The like holds good also of the results of man's action upon the world as far as these are realities to himself and come within his consciousness" (*CF* 276; § 64.2). Because how one represents oneself and the world determines one's desires and therefore action, how one acts in the world and treats others will be

dependent upon the strength of the God-consciousness. Hence Schleiermacher importantly notes that the works of the second table of the law, which have to do with the treatment of the neighbor, "are in no sense external or carnal; they are truly spiritual works, and are possible only in virtue of an efficacious and purified God-consciousness" (*CF*, 285; § 70. 3). Without the God-consciousness action in accordance with the second table of the law might indeed invoke "the most consummate self-renunciation of the individual." This, however, would only be "the self-love of the nation or the country as a composite person," which may very well be combined with "animosity and injustice of all kinds towards those who are outside the group" (*CF* 284-285, § 70.3).

Schleiermacher's transcendental analysis of consciousness allows him to provide criteria of adequacy for religious traditions: it is insofar as they adequately reflect human transcendence and freedom that they can also thereby adequately point to the ground of all that is. While the experience of absolute dependence is immediate and no thematic access can be had to it, whether or not one is open to the higher consciousness has concrete manifestations on the level of the sensuous self-consciousness. These have to do with how one views oneself and one's relation to the world around one. Religious symbol systems reflect these views. Principle among the questions reflected therein are whether one should identify oneself with the body and the effects of the material world on it, or whether one should identify oneself with that which transcends the world. To understand the self as only a body will engender fear because the body can be destroyed. Such an understanding moreover, implies a denial of the possibility of self-transcendence. On the other hand, identification of the self with that which transcends the body, the finite and the particular is a condition of the possibility of genuine love. In viewing others as one views oneself, as loci of self-transcendence, one values them precisely because they have the possibility of recognizing their absolute dependence on the Whence of

all that is. As such it is through the higher consciousness that genuine love of the neighbor is possible. In an important passage Schleiermacher notes that if the God-consciousness is perfectly dominant

Just as little again could the action of one person prove a hindrance to another's life, since, in virtue of the God-consciousness that was supreme in all, each could not but acquiesce in the other's every action. But if that supremacy is done away, there emerges opposition between the individual beings, and what is a furtherance to one will often for that very reason become a hindrance to the other" (CF 316; 75. 1).

If the idea of self-transcendence and freedom from determination by intra-worldly causes yields a concrete ethic, namely one of love, then Schleiermacher's theology provides the basis for a theoretical justification of how an individual's relation to the Absolute affects his/her relation to others and vice versa. As such his theology provides a concrete proposal for comparing and gauging the adequacy of different traditions. Religious traditions are adequate vehicles expressing the God-consciousness insofar as they affirm 1) the self-transcendence of the individual 2) the individual's freedom from complete determination by the world 3) love of the neighbor as one loves oneself. These should not be understood as mere theoretical propositions. Their true efficacy lies in the practical realm, in how they determine our understanding of ourselves, of others, and of the world. This understanding in turn determines how and what we will value, and therefore how we will act.

Schleiermacher's theology allows us to understand how different historically situated religious traditions can provide access to the absolute. Moreover, because God cannot be an *object* of our experience, the idea that we can simply have propositional knowledge of God and God's relation to the world is beset with difficulties. Schleiermacher's philosophical theology provides a coherent account of

how it is that the Absolute can be experienced and talked about if this is the case. Hence while it may be the case that it is impossible to achieve a universal theology, we may yet come to a consensus regarding a *universal practice* and the experience that attends it. Working from there we may be enabled to measure the adequacy of religious traditions in reflecting upon this experience.

#### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, translated by John Oman, (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1958), 216. All future references to *On Religion* will be to Oman's translation of the third edition (1821) of the *Speeches*. They will be contained in the body of the paper, indicated by *OR* followed by the page number.

<sup>3</sup> The following passage from the *Speeches* illustrates this view: "Sense and object mingle and unite, then each returns to its place, and the object rent from sense is a perception, and you rent from the object are for yourselves, a feeling. It is this earlier moment, which you always experience yet never experience. The phenomenon of your life is just the result of its constant departure and return. It is scarcely in time at all, so swiftly it passess; it can scarcely be described, so little does it properly exist" (*OR*, 43).

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<sup>4</sup> The differences between Schleiermacher's analysis of religious experience in the third edition of the *Speeches* and the *Christian Faith* have to do principally with the question of Schleiermacher's Spinozism. By the time that Schleiermacher writes the *Christian Faith* he is careful to present a pantheistic position with respect to the relation of God and world. While God is immanent in the world, God as the Whence or ground of the world is more than the world. Schleiermacher revised the *Speeches* in order to stave off charges of Spinozism. However traces of that position still remained even in the third edition (1831) of the book. For instance he there speaks of the ". . . One in All, and All in One, an *object that knows no other bounds but the world*" (OR 7, italics mine). However, differences between the two works concerning the issue of the possible validity of differing religions have more to do with presentation than with substance. Both works ground the possibility of religious experience in an analysis of a unitary moment of consciousness preceding the subject object split. Both recognize that all religions are grounded in that experience, although some religions will be more successful in expressing and therefore mediating it. And finally, both works consider Jesus as the mediator par excellence embodying the perfection of human nature. Hence in the *Speeches* Schleiermacher calls Jesus "the true Founder of redemption and reconciliation" that must be acknowledged by every religious individual once "His whole efficacy is shown him" (OR 248).

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, edited by H. R. MacKintosh and J. S. Stewart, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 76; §15. All future references to *The Christian Faith* will be contained in the body of the paper, indicated by *CF* followed by the page number.

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<sup>6</sup> See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia: 1984), 31.

<sup>7</sup> This is a neo-Wittgensteinian understanding of religion. On this understanding the “categories” or lens through which religious experience is understood is inherently tied to religious *practices*. Hence there is a significant sense in which one cannot even understand the categories, and therefore the claims (made in terms of these categories), of a particular religion unless one is on the inside, i.e., a participant in that religion’s practices. One of its earliest philosophical proponents was Peter Winch. See, for instance, Winch’s “Meaning and Religious Language,” in *Reason and Religion*, ed. Stuart Brown (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 193-221.

<sup>8</sup> Lindbeck puts the matter quite clearly when he notes that “When one pictures inner experiences as prior to expression and communication, it is natural to think of them in their most basic and elemental form as also prior to conceptualization or symbolization. If, in contrast, expressive and communicative symbol systems, whether linguistic or non-linguistic, are primary—then, while there are of course nonreflective experiences, there are no uninterpreted or unschematized ones. On this view, the means of communication and expression are a precondition, a kind of quasi-transcendental (i.e., culturally formed) a priori for the possibility of experience. We cannot identify, describe, or recognize experience qua experience without the use of signs and symbols. These are necessary even for what the depth psychologist speaks of as “unconscious” or “subconscious” experiences, or for what the phenomenologist describes as prereflective ones” Ibid, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 30.

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<sup>10</sup> The point has been made by George Behren's in his article "Schleiermacher *contra* Lindbeck on the Status of Doctrinal Sentences," *Religious Studies*, **30**, (1994): 399-417. There he notes that "All doctrinal sentences are about God and the world *as we experience them*. Sentences of the first form are not so much about feelings as they are about felt relations: they express the experienced relation between God and the world. . . ." 406).

<sup>11</sup> Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1950, 11. Later on in the book, commenting on Schleiermacher's understanding of intuition, Otto notes that "Wherever a mind is exposed in a spirit of absorbed submission to impressions of 'the universe,' it becomes capable—so he lays down—of experiencing 'intuitions' and 'feelings (*Anschauungen* and *Gefühle*) of something that is, as it were, a sheer overplus, in addition to empirical reality. This overplus, while it cannot be apprehended by mere theoretic cognition of the world and the cosmic system and the form it assumes for science, can nevertheless be really and truly grasped and experienced in *intuition*, and is given form in single intuitions. And these, in turn, assume shape in definite statements and propositions, capable of a certain groping formulation, which are not without analogy with theoretic propositions, but are to be clearly distinguished from them by their free and merely felt, not reasoned, character. In themselves they are groping intimations of meanings figuratively apprehended" 146.

<sup>12</sup> This is one of the central points of Behren's article. He notes: "Doctrinal sentences are not themselves 'accounts' of pious self-consciousness, but the products of dialectical inquiry proceeding from such accounts to claims about God, the world, and the relation between the two" Behrens, *op. cit.*, 413.

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<sup>13</sup> This is the way that Bernard Lonergan puts it in *Insight*, (Harper & Row, 1978) 399; quoted by Lindbeck in *The Nature of Doctrine*, 47.

<sup>14</sup> Keith Ward, "Truth and the Diversity of Religions," in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, edited by Philip Quinn and Kevin Meeker, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 110.

<sup>15</sup> This is the position that Hick seems to advocate in his *An Interpretation of Religion*, *op. cit.* There he writes: "It follows from this distinction between the Real as it is in itself and as it is thought and experienced through our religious concepts that we cannot apply to the Real *an sich* the characteristics encountered in its *personae* and *impersonae*. . . . None of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperienceable ground of that realm" (246).

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, George A. Netland, "Professor Hick on Religious Pluralism," *Religious Studies*, **22** (1986): 249-61. The problem is also discussed at length by Sumner B. Twiss in "The Philosophy of Religious Pluralism: A Critical Appraisal of Hick and His Critics," *The Journal of Religion* **70** (1990): 553-68. Phil Quinn discusses a similar problem in his "Toward Thinner Theologies: Hick and Alston on Religious Diversity," in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, *op. cit.*, 226-242. The Netland and Twiss articles can also be found in the anthology cited above on religious diversity edited by Quinn and Meeker.

<sup>17</sup> This is, of course, the main challenge put forward by Hegel to Schleiermacher's system. On this point see Richard Crouter, "Hegel and Schleiermacher at Berlin: A Many Sided Debate," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* **46** (1980) 35-40.

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<sup>18</sup> See Karl Rahner, *The Foundations of the Christian Faith*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1978).

<sup>19</sup> Schleiermacher notes that “. . . you must abandon your vain and foolish wish that there should only be one religion” and “lay aside all repugnance of its multiplicity. . .” *OR* 214.

<sup>20</sup> Lindbeck, *op. cit.*, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Schleiermacher notes that “the evil condition can only consist in an obstruction or arrest of the vitality of the higher self-consciousness, so that there comes to be little or no union of it with the various determinations of the sensible self-consciousness, and thus little or no religious life.” *CF* 54; §II.2.

<sup>22</sup> So Schleiermacher: “Idol-worship proper is based upon a confused state of the self-consciousness which marks the lowest condition of man, since in it the higher and the lower are so little distinguished that even the feeling of absolute dependence is reflected as arising from a particular object to be apprehended by the senses” *CF* 35; § 8.2.

<sup>23</sup> The distinction is developed by Kant both in the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and in the second *Critique*. In the latter book Kant notes that “autonomy of the will is the sole principle of all moral laws and of the duties conforming to them; *heteronomy* of choice, on the other hand, not only does not establish any obligation but is opposed to the principle of obligation and to the morality of the will” *Critique of Practical Reason* (translated by Louis White Beck, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1993) 33.

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<sup>24</sup> In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant famously notes that “though freedom is certainly the *ratio essendi* of the moral law, the latter is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom” Ibid, 4.

<sup>25</sup> This is Kant’s reciprocity thesis, developed in his second *Critique*. There Kant notes that “freedom and unconditioned practical law reciprocally imply one another” Ibid, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson, (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 45.

<sup>27</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, translated by Mary Gregor, (University of Nebraska Press, 1979).

<sup>28</sup> For Schleiermacher the immediate consciousness (the whence of our receptive and active existence) that grounds religion is also the ground of unity between knowing and doing, theory and practice. On this point, see Richard Crouter’s discussion in the introduction to his translation of the first edition of the *Speeches*, in which he discusses the evolution of Schleiermacher’s thought throughout the three editions. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, introduction, translation and notes by Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 60-61. The differences from Kant are subtle, since for Kant freedom and the moral law are also grounded in the transcendental consciousness; the main difference is that Kant does not think of the transcendental consciousness as that through which we come into contact with the Absolute.

<sup>29</sup> Schleiermacher’s early ethical writings [i.e., *On Freedom* (1790-92), his notes on Kant’s second *Critique* (1789), the third of his *Dialogues on Freedom* (1789) and his critical review of Kant’s *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1799)] are

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attempts to think through and refine Kant's ethics. While marked by Kant's influence, the first three writings nevertheless reflect a deterministic empirical psychology antithetical to Kant's thought. For a discussion of this issue see my "Schleiermacher on the Philosopher's Stone: The Shaping of Schleiermacher's Early Ethics by the Kantian Legacy" *Journal of Religion*, 78 (1999) 193-215. By the time that Schleiermacher writes his critical review of Kant's *Anthropology*, however, he no longer seems to hold this determinism. On this point see my "A Critical-Interpretive Analysis of Some Early Writings by Schleiermacher on Kant's Views of Human Nature and Freedom," *Neues Athenaeum*, Volume 5, 11-31, in particular 14-16.

<sup>30</sup> As Schleiermacher notes, "the flesh has to do with the particular only and knows nothing of the general . . ." (CF 276; § 68.1).