The Whence from Which: 
Religion and Feeling, Christianity and Redemption

Christianity suffered devastating critiques following the Enlightenment, a time characterized by a search for certainty, material proof, and universal realities. During this time more and more intellectuals became deists, believing in a God who mostly acts to set the universe in motion. Others dropped God altogether. The classical theism and rituals of Christianity seemed unnecessary, untrue, irrelevant, distracting; deism was a much purer option, free from the trappings of tradition and fable. Friedrich Schleiermacher, hailed as the first modern theologian, criticizes his contemporaries’ intellectual abandonment of positive religion: “Having made a universe for yourselves, you are above the need of thinking of the universe that made you” (67). For Schleiermacher, true religion is founded in the feeling of absolute dependence that the individual discovers in ordinary life as a relational being; Christian religion relates that feeling to the experience of Christ as redeemer, authenticated by the experience itself and not on the circular proof of miracles, theology, or scriptural authority.

Schleiermacher grounds the origin of religion in feeling and subjective experience using an effect-to-cause argument. Schleiermacher claims that everyone has an intuition of the universe, a feeling of the whole, an impression that all things finite find their home in the infinite (83). This “sense and taste for the infinite” comes from an awareness of one’s dependence on others and the order of all things; life is impossibly and inexplicably held in balance, and not by any virtue of the self alone (85). This, Schleiermacher says, is the feeling of absolute dependence. Piety is therefore “the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or, which is the same thing, of being in relation with God,” God-consciousness (99). By God, Schleiermacher means the whence from which this feeling comes. Thus, religion is “an affection, a revelation of the infinite in the finite, God being seen in it and it in God” (83). Thus goes the effect-to-cause argument, moving from the feeling of absolute dependence to the conclusion that there is a whence from which that feeling must come.

To see why Schleiermacher’s move identifying religion with feeling is important and new for his time, we can look at the way in which one of his contemporaries viewed religion. The Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant associated human awareness of God with morality; humans discover the higher moral being through their own moral sense. But in his view, religion plays only a moral role, and Christ in the Christian faith becomes, fundamentally, an exemplar of the moral code (74). Schleiermacher, unsatisfied with this view, identified three rudimentary actions of man: knowing, willing, and feeling. Knowing leads to cognition, willing to morality, and feeling to piety. Knowing is principally concerned with the object, while willing is a movement of the subject. In the feeling of absolute dependence, the subject and object are together; an individual is both subject and object in relation to the subject/object that he or she is dependent on; a oneness or unity exists, not simply a consciousness of oneself but of the self in relation to the other (88). In this moment, the subject and object are inseparable and interdependent as well as dependent on the infinite. The feeling of absolute
dependence comes before knowing and doing, and so is more fundamental than both. In this way, Schleiermacher introduces a new location and significance of talk about God in turning to the subject, feeling, and experience to discover religious piety.

Schleiermacher, having reclaimed religion from its relegation to a purely moral role, then uses the same kind of effect-to-cause argument to reclaim Christianity as distinct and particular in its religious understanding. He broadly defines Christianity as Christocentric, centered on redemption through Jesus Christ. Redemption is a passage from God-forgetfulness to God-consciousness that is made possible by Jesus Christ. Other religions recognize the state of God-forgetfulness that mankind is in, but they do not place the emphasis on this state, whereas Christianity does according to Schleiermacher. Not only that, but the founder of Christian religion is distinct from the founders of Islam and Judaism in that Jesus is actually the redeemer himself because of his unparalleled God-consciousness (113). Christ is distinguished from other founders because no other man could have been him; he is “redeemer alone and for all, and is in no wise regarded as having been at any time in need of redemption himself; and is therefore separated from the beginning from all other men, and endowed with redeeming power from his birth” (114). It is the Christian’s experience of Christ as redeemer, as restorer of God-consciousness, that is central to Christianity. Christian faith is entirely inward—it cannot exist in the individual until Christ founds in him the beginning of the process which will end his state of being in need of redemption (116). God is the whence from which the feeling of absolute dependence comes; likewise, Jesus is the whence from which the Christian experience of redemption comes. We are unable to invent such an experience, so the logical conclusion is that a redeemer must be the cause.

Schleiermacher holds an intensely relational view of humanity—emotion and feeling are significant not simply because they are felt but because they are “inward witnesses to realities other than the self” (37). Both religion and Christianity are discovered by the individual in his or her subjective experience of piety and of the Christ, respectively, yet are intimately connected to community and ordinary life. One does not discover religion through supernatural events or extraordinary happenings, but through ordinary, relational life. The solitary man will not encounter the feeling of absolute dependence, for he has no community in which to experience the self grounded in the other. Likewise, the discovery of Christianity is not predicated on supernatural miracles, prophecies, or scriptural authority. All of these appeals are circular and require faith to have faith. The experience of redemption through Christ is self-authenticating, needing neither miracles nor prophecy to be believed. Testimony may arouse others to want the experience, and any person may enter into the church by free resolve. Though faith itself is individual and predicated on experience, participation in the Christian church ends the need for redemption. Ritual and practice are important ways of expressing and living out one’s faith in community; faith is both the inward experience and the outward communion.

Modern evangelical theology is quite taken with the Christocentric view and emphasizes on the individual Christian experience of God through Christ the redeemer, both of which are legacies of Schleiermacher. However, this legacy is often left unaccompanied by Schleiermacher’s insistence on the importance of community and the church. Modern Christians have lost the communal, relational side of absolute dependence and redemption in favor of individualism. In addition, while evangelical and fundamentalist Christians consider themselves heavily Christocentric, they have at
the same time lost the sense of Christ informing all things as well as Schleiermacher’s
decisive stand that miracle, scripture, and prophecy cannot convince someone to believe.
Such things cannot induce an experience of redemption; only Christ can do that.
Doctrine, scripture, and miracle are only for those who already believe.

Though Schleiermacher’s balance of individual and community could do much
to enlighten and improve both the Christian experience of redemption and the non-
Christian experience of Christians, his understanding of theology is yet lacking because
he abandons the medieval metaphysics that collapsed in the Enlightenment. This
discipline is important to Christian orthodoxy as path for knowledge about God. To
Schleiermacher, the individual’s experience of Christ as redeemer takes the place of
metaphysics. Theology is only talk about the Christian experience of the redeemer, rather
than the actual redeemer, let alone the actual God. This definition saves theology in the
new, modern intellectual climate, but it must be kept in mind that this modern view is
not necessarily more right or better than older ones. While as humans we cannot attain
to perfect knowledge about God, the task of metaphysics is an important one to theology
and does not discount or relegate experience of God. Christianity is perhaps more
accurately said to be discovered through the trinity of knowing, willing, and feeling
rather than just feeling, as Schleiermacher claims.