

# Background to Modern Theology

## Friedrich Schleiermacher

23.10.2005

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher was born in Germany in 1768 and died in 1834. As a young man, he was converted when he befriended Moravian Christians (who also had a big influence on John Wesley). By 21, while in a Moravian College, becoming a minister, Schleiermacher realised that his faith had very little intellectual content. So he read all of Immanuel Kant's works and wanted to reply to them.

Kant said that in this phenomenal or material world, we can only know our perceptions of something, not the reality itself. and we can never know God because God is in the spiritual or noumenal world. Kant said all we can ever know is people's perceptions of God. And in an area I did not talk on last week, Kant also said that people have moral obligations. The desire to do what is right pushes and motivates us, and that is the basis for religion.

Schleiermacher could have responded to Kant by reaffirming the uniqueness of God and the traditional faith as it stood. However, he did not. He accepted Kant's views, but pushed them to try to re-establish the traditional faith. The risk he took was that the end result was not acceptable to the traditional faith.

Schleiermacher wanted to expand Kant's view of life to include God. Kant had pushed God into the noumena, and therefore any claim to know God was unreliable.

Schleiermacher said that part of the categories in our brain that we were born with, which help us make sense of the massive amount of impressions our senses pick up not only includes moral obligation, but at a deeper level also has a feeling of absolute dependence on something outside of ourselves.

So how we can know God? According to Schleiermacher, he is known from within. Our deepest feeling of absolute dependence implies that there is a God, and tells us of a very present reality who is beyond the rational level of thoughts.

So where is evidence for God to be found? He said don't look for God's fingerprint in nature, or in historical facts such as the Bible, for the evidence for God is inside yourself.

His first book published in 1799, Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers, concluded that all religions are based on this deepest need of absolute dependence. He emphasised that no one is totally independent. We need people, but also when we are pushed to our lowest point in disasters or tragedy, we cry out for help. We recognise that there should be something more than simply what we see, hear, taste, smell or feel. Any scientist or philosopher who denies that is simply being too superficial, and not searching deep enough inside.

In 1821-2, he published The Christian Faith. It focused more specifically on Christianity.

He kept the major principle that we all need God as our deepest dependence, and interpreted many passages of the Bible to fit this theme. What was so special about Christianity to him, was that Christianity gave the clearest and most intelligent expression of what we experience.

However, some of us might be a bit edgy to hear his claim that Christianity is just the best form of religion. Surely there is something totally different about Christianity that is not present in other religions. Is religion a commodity like a car, but it just so happens that Christianity is the top of the range, with the best air bags, sound system, mag wheels, leather accessories etc? Is that true?

Surely that's not what Jesus said when he said in John 14:6 "*I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except by me.*" Surely that's not what Peter said when he said in Acts 4:12 "*Salvation is found in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven given to people, by which we must be saved.*"

So how did Schleiermacher look at Jesus?

He claimed Jesus was the saviour, but how he saves is not the traditional saving.

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He claimed Jesus is the most God-saturated consciousness that we know of. He is the finest point of refinement of utter dependence. Christ experienced perfectly, what we experience in part. Some of us experience it more fully than others. We are 'saved' as we copy his God-consciousness.

In other words, if I was swept out to sea, according to Schleiermacher, a life saver would come, and swim the best he could beside me. Because I could see him, I would then be encouraged to copy the same style or stroke, and thus be saved from drowning.

But I do not want a life saver to show me how incompetent I am. I want a saviour who saves, by grabbing me and pulling me in from the dangers. Don't you? That's the sort of saviour I want to be absolutely dependent on. Otherwise I am not being absolutely dependent on him, rather I am being encouraged to depend on myself under his coaching. The Bible says Jesus came to show us how to live, but even more importantly he came to die that we might live. His death saves us from God's wrath.

Another issue that Schleiermacher's work encouraged concerned all religions being similar. If that is true, then are not all people saved? What of Jesus teaching that there is a hell and judgment and people who reject him will go there? What of his particular claims that He is the light, and the door, and the good shepherd, and all other shepherds are false?

Schleiermacher stressed that God is love, and ever present, but his God was not a personal God. Prayer was no longer talking with God, but a time of reflection and meditation for improving yourself. The reflection and meditation focused on your need for absolute dependence, and becoming less self-reliant.

This is a far cry from the God and Father of Jesus Christ, and the teaching of the Bible.

However, because Kant's teachings were so popular and accepted, and Schleiermacher

focused people onto Jesus, and used the Bible for his teaching, many Christians followed. He had pushed Kant's views into something of a Christian shape, but it certainly was far different from traditional faith and understanding as provided in the plain reading of the Bible. His method of interpreting became more popular.

In fact, his views had a big impact on our diocese, as they were the major teaching of Moore College for about 20 yrs until 1936 when TC Hammond came from Ireland to be the principal.

Because of his work, Schleiermacher is called the Father of modern theology.

Schleiermacher's method encouraged more scholars to look for secret meanings in the text of the Bible, in a completely different way than the other secret meaning way, called allegory, which had been popular since the early church, and which Jesus used in some parables.

But the problem was that he reinterpreted Jesus' teaching, so that it fitted with his philosophical idea of absolute dependence being the major theme of all religions.

Step by step, Christianity was heading down a dangerous road that leads away from Jesus. The teachings of Hume, Kant and Schleiermacher all had truths, and emphasised more about how we can understand our world. But Hume taught that the Bible wasn't worth reading, Kant denied God's authorship, and Schleiermacher taught people to reinterpret the Bible by finding secret meanings within the text. He also taught that praying was simply reflection, and Jesus was no longer a saviour, but more a coach and example.

But more was still to come.