

Humanities 4:  
Lecture 22  
Schleiermacher's *On Religion*

# Friedrich Schleiermacher



- 1768-1834
- Tutor, chaplain, Professor of Theology, translator
- Romantic circle in Berlin (esp. Schlegel brothers and Herz)

# Brief Bibliography

- *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1799)
- *Soliloquies* (1800)
- *Hermeneutics and Criticism* (1809-10)
- *The Christian Faith according to the Principles of the Protestant Church* (1821-2)

# Intellectual Background

- Kant's Philosophy of Religion
  - The "invisible church"
  - Reduction of much of natural religion to ethics
- Hamann's attack on the enlightenment
  - Attack on reason (esp. its universality)
  - Positive view based on religious experience
  - Different standards for different cultures
- Lessing, Jacobi, and Spinoza
  - pantheism

# Structure of *On Religion*

- Speech I: Apology
- Speech II: On the Essence of Religion
- Speech III: On Self-Formation for Religion
- Speech IV: On the Social Element in Religion;  
or, On Church and Priesthood
- Speech V: On the Religions

# On Religion: The Audience

- Note Subtitle: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers
  - Proponents of the Enlightenment
  - Early Advocates of Romanticism
  - Germans, not French or English
- Note special status of religion
  - Some think there is no need for religion, as secular is enough. (“No need for the eternal”)
  - Some think that clergy are not to be trusted, though otherwise experts are preferred.

# On Religion: The Speaker

- Schleiermacher represents himself
  - As a pastor, but not of the usual kind
  - As being one by a divine calling or inner necessity
  - As a mediator or ambassador of God, someone who has the special talents necessary to express what religion is.

# Schleiermacher's Stated Intent

“I wish to lead you to the innermost depths from which religion first addresses the mind. I wish to show you from what capacity of humanity religion proceeds, and how it belongs to what is for you the highest and dearest. I wish to lead you to the pinnacles of the temple that you might survey the whole sanctuary and discover its innermost secrets” (87).

- If religion has been dismissed and is now an object of contempt, the only procedure is to consider source of contempt in audience.



# Misconceptions about Religion

- If judgment concerning religion arises from center, then Schl.'s main point will have been granted and the main task is simply to avoid misinterpretations.
- If judgment arises from its extremities, question then is whether it is based on the proper concept.
  - Objection: center is not homogeneous with extremities
    - => no religion at core; instead, only metaphysics or ethics
    - => religion is “an empty and false delusion”
  - Schl.'s response
    - One must be open to finding a valid center/core to religion.
    - Look to more particulars.
- No “system” of religion is possible, even if something of religion lies latent in such a system.

# Proper Method for Forming a Conception of Religion

- Start with particularities
- E.g., the actions of particular individuals
- Then look to see whether anything divine can be found in it.
- “You must seek these heavenly sparks that arise when a holy soul is stirred by the universe, and you must overhear them in the incomprehensible moment when they are formed” (92).

# The Place of Religion vs. Philosophy

- Schl. argues for the distinctness of religion and practical & theoretical philosophy (morality & metaphysics).
  - Same object: universe and man's relation to it.
  - Different methods and/or goals.
    - Classifies and seeks reasons
    - Commands and forbids
    - Possibly a higher principle that would unify pr. and th. phil., but definitely an indispensable one.

# The Essence of Religion

“Religion’s essence is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling. It wishes to intuit the universe, wishes devoutly to overhear the universe’s own manifestations and actions, longs to be grasped and filled by the universe’s immediate influences in childlike passivity.... Religion wishes to see the infinite, its imprint and its manifestation, in humanity no less than in all other individual and finite forms” (102).

# Clarification

- Intuition
  - Immediate cognitive relation
  - Feeling
- Distinct from metaphysics
  - Concerns the infinite
    - “religion is the sensibility and taste for the infinite”
    - Everything finite is “cut out of the infinite”.
  - Keeps metaphysics from being empty formula.
- Distinct from Ethics
  - “We should do everything with religion, nothing because of religion” (110).

# Further Clarification

- Spinozism
  - Humanity is part of the universe.
  - Universe is divine.

# Schleiermacher's Critique of Orthodox Christianity

- Rejection of afterlife and transcendent God
- Rejection of traditional connections between religion and ethics.
  - Fear of God
  - Reduction of religion to ethics
- Critique of literalist interpretations of the Bible

# Summary

- Schl. articulates Romantic conception of religion
  - In contrast to Enlightenment conception
    - No reduction to rationality/metaphysics or ethics
    - No priority given to natural over positive religion
    - Spinozistic interpretation of nature and (thereby) rejection of orthodox Christianity
  - In contrast to Romantics' views at the time:
    - Emphasis on religion as
      - distinct from metaphysics and ethics
      - necessary
    - Denial of identity of religious and aesthetic experience
  - In agreement with both:
    - Religious toleration (but in different ways)