

Schleiermacher and Barth:
The Knowledge of God

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Introduction

All of Christian theology has to start with, or at least deal with, how we know God. This is usually a turning point in a theologian's thought. The way we come to know God and the content of that knowledge is one of the most important topics in theology. It is also one of the hardest to deal with. This question, how we know God, raises many questions about the nature of the question itself. It raises the issue of who and what God is, and of what knowledge consists. We have to deal with all of these issues before we can try to answer of how we know God. We even have to *explore* the possibility that the question has no meaning at all.

How we know God is a complex issue. One has to understand that the "knowledge of God" means what we can discern of God on this earth and how we discern it. Almost all theologians deal with how we come to know God and not simply the content of the knowledge of God. In other words, we have to deal with the path we follow to know God, and we have to look at the content of that knowledge. I will show different interpretations of the knowledge of God through the eyes of two theologians.

There is the possibility that the question, "How do we know God?", has little or no meaning. There is *much* philosophical and religious debate about the term "God". Whether or not this term has any meaning outside of our own traditions is a complex question. I will not deal

with this question in my paper. I point this out because there are some basic presuppositions of this paper. One can reasonably object to some of the terminology employed in this paper. I will examine the viewpoints of two important theologians, but I will not criticize the basic religious language they use.

I will examine the theological work of two writers, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Barth. Friedrich Schleiermacher has been called the "father of liberal Protestant theology" because his thought started theology on a path that saw religion as a historically conditioned symbolic enterprise. He was the first theologian to break with reformation traditions and interpret faith in a new and controversial way. Most Protestant theologians are indebted to his theology. Schleiermacher thinks that revelation is in a deep consciousness within us. Karl Barth, on the other hand, is a twentieth century theologian who sees himself rescuing the Protestant tradition from Schleiermacher and his followers. He wants theology to return to supernatural revelation. We will examine these two writers in detail.

Why did I choose these two theologians? I think that each is the antithesis of the other in their writing. Barth considered Schleiermacher's thought the downfall of Christianity, and Schleiermacher believed thought such as Barth's represented uncritical supernaturalism. This is obviously an oversimplification of their relationship.

I intend to demonstrate, however, that these two writers represent totally opposite schools of Protestant thought. I intend to examine Barth and Schleiermacher's work and arrive at some conclusions about their theology and about the knowledge of God. I have chosen Schleiermacher and Barth because I believe them to be good examples of two differing approaches to the question of the knowledge of God. They are so different in their approach that at times they seem to talk past one another with no common ground on which to resolve questions.

I will explain Schleiermacher's and Barth's theologies and I will explain how each one thinks we come to know God. I intend to identify the advantages and disadvantages of each one's position. I will also point out which theologian's work I find the most desirable. Finally, I will add some conclusions and show the value of this investigation.

Part One: Schleiermacher

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher is possibly the most influential Protestant theologian since Calvin. His work has had an impact on the whole of Protestant theology. He wrote during the earlier part of the nineteenth century and he reinterpreted the role of theology in his day. His work has influenced Protestant theology greatly, either positively or negatively. Richard Neibuhr says of Schleiermacher:

He broke the stalemate of rationalism and orthodoxy, and set the mind of the protestant church free once more. As such, he holds an undeniable position as a reformer inside Protestantism, the most influential thinker since Calvin.¹

Karl Barth says:

The first place in a history of the theology of the most recent times belongs and will always belong to Schleiermacher, and he has no rival. It has often been pointed out that Schleiermacher did not found any school He did not found a school, but an era.²

Schleiermacher wanted to give an alternative to the critical thought of Kant and Hegel. His world was that of Enlightenment rationalism. What concerned Schleiermacher was ~~the~~ rationalism in Germany during his time. Enlightenment thinking claimed that religion was a vestige of pre-critical and pre-rational thought and that it would lose importance as reason advanced. Most of the enlightenment thinkers were deists. Deism was a religious view that held that God could be deduced from reason and nature. God created all and then withdrew from the world. Deists denied any supernaturalism. They had given up traditional religiousity. Schleiermacher wrote in reaction to this rationalism. He observed that religion had an integrity and identity of its own that was beyond reason and that the true nature of religion would not be reduced to rationalism.

In On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers, Schleiermacher addressed those who thought that religion

was an irrational enterprise. Schleiermacher wanted to show the special nature of religion:

Suavity and sociability, art and science have so fully taken possession of your minds, that no room remains for the eternal and holy Being that lies beyond the world. I know how well you have succeeded in making your earthly life so rich and varied, that you no longer stand in need of an eternity. Having made a universal for yourselves, you are above the need of thinking of the universe that made you.³

Schleiermacher was speaking here against the "cultured despisers" of religion. These "cultured despisers" were those who believed that reason would supplant religion. They held that if one was a cultured man, one would see the fallacious nature of religion. He was accusing them of not realizing the eternal nature of religious activity. Unlike Kant, who reduced religion to ethics, Schleiermacher wanted to claim that religion cannot be reduced to ethics, art or knowledge. Schleiermacher argued that religion has an identifiable quality all of its own.

Schleiermacher says:

But, in order that you may understand what I mean by this unity and difference of religion, science and art, we shall endeavor to descend into the innermost sanctuary of life. There, perhaps, we may find ourselves agreed. There alone you discover the original relation of intuition and feeling from which alone this identity and difference is to be understood....I must direct you to your own selves.⁴

Religion comes out of one's own existence. It cannot be replaced by rationality. Religion is a distinctive

activity and it has to be understood on it's own merits. Schleiermacher thinks that religion is a part of human existence that is unique and has its own authority.

One of the first subjects we must deal with is the nature of Schleiermacher's work over the course of his life. Scholars who study Schleiermacher's work recognize the difference between what is commonly called the "two Schleiermachers." This distinction refers to the division of Schleiermacher's thought. Schleiermacher's thought was influenced greatly by German Romanticism. His early thought was laden with romantic ideas. He had extensive contact with Schlegel and Novalis, German Romantics. Jack Forstman, writing on the Romantic influence on Schleiermacher, says:

In this situation Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis and Schleiermacher wrestled, like Jacob with the angel (or demon), to see if religious affirmations could be wrested from the new conditions and if so, of what sort.⁵

I will employ the writings of Schleiermacher that are from the early period of his thought, such as the Speeches, but I will try to concentrate on what is generally regarded to be his most mature work--his later thought--such as evidenced in The Christian Faith. I think that this is important because Schleiermacher's later thought is developed more than his earlier work. I emphasize Schleiermacher's The Christian Faith more than the Speeches because of this. The Christian Faith is his magnum opus,

and it represents the pinnacle of his thought. The Speeches are an attack on the intellectual elite of Schleiermacher's day and it is a more emotional work. It consists of much preaching along with its theology.

However, all of Schleiermacher's thought--the whole of it--is not theology in a sense. Schleiermacher is not about arguing for God, or explaining God. Schleiermacher's concern is description. He tries to describe what the religious nature of man is, and he describes how we come to know God. Schleiermacher is not trying to do what has traditionally been called "theology." He does not want to arrive at certain doctrines for belief. What he wants to do is show how religion is a universal human activity. For Schleiermacher, all men are religious. There are no people on this earth who lack a religious consciousness. Of course, Schleiermacher does deal with the attributes of God, our state in sin, and other traditional dogmatic subjects in The Christian Faith. However, his main purpose is to describe the nature of man as a religious being. He sees Man as a religious creature.

Schleiermacher argued that the individual is in a constant state of trying to know himself. He wants to understand every facet of his existence. Schleiermacher thought that we can only come to self-knowledge in a community of "others" and through communication with these "others." The ability to know one's self can only occur

in a community. That is, Schleiermacher believes that for us to understand ourselves, we have to interact with other human beings. In a way this is obvious. Unless we possessed language, we would not be able to examine ourselves. However, we do not acquire language in a vacuum. We acquire language through interaction with our parents and our society. It cannot be given to us any other way. It is the same with many of the tools we use to make judgments about ourselves. We could not ever come to any sort of self-knowledge without a community to give us a way to examine ourselves. We come to this self-knowledge not only through our close personal contacts but also through our interaction with culture and society as a whole.

Schleiermacher believed one would inherently want to come to know oneself. This is a romantic self-evident idea of a sort. Romantics were obsessed with man's improvement of his self. Schleiermacher, because of the influence romanticism had on him, believed this too.

He was influenced by romanticism to the extent that he thought the most desirable thing one could do was to come to a sound knowledge and understanding of oneself. The belief that we have to cultivate ourselves, and that we have to strive to make ourselves all that we can be. Schleiermacher carried this idea to its fullest. He argued that if one truly knew oneself, and if one cultivated

oneself, then one would have to acknowledge the religious nature of oneself and of all humanity. Man must always come to know himself in historic circumstances. No one is born in a vacuum. Man always knows himself in relation to others, and oneself and others are in a culture and ethos that are unique.

Schleiermacher describes man as a religious being. He thought that there is a religious nature to man that could not be denied by reason. Reason can explain many areas of man, but his religious nature is an a priori, a precondition to reason and all other human faculties. Schleiermacher sees this religious a priori as a structure of human consciousness that shows men how they know God. This structure of human consciousness is prior to any emotion or cognitive structure of consciousness. Schleiermacher says that human life and reality are inherently religious. This is true for all people, not just persons of faith.

How does Schleiermacher come to this conclusion? He argues that man knows that he is dependent. There is a part of consciousness that pre-dates all other parts of consciousness. We realize that our reason, emotions and the like seem to be independent, but they are all dependent on ourselves as a reality. Our being and existence is dependent. We can take no control of our existence or stop the threats to it. Our existence is

insecure, and in the deepest most primordial level of our being we know that this is the case. Schleiermacher believes that we all have a "feeling" of absolute dependence. We cannot control these things that could destroy us. All humans have this feeling of absolute dependence. This feeling is in the most primordial level of being. We do not produce this feeling. It is spontaneous. Schleiermacher says:

Can it (our feeling of absolute dependence) be the result of a personal resolve, or does it not rather appear to be the business of the Whole, and therefore a given product of life?⁶

Furthermore, Schleiermacher *says* that this feeling of absolute dependence is the same thing as a consciousness of being in relation to God. This is how Schleiermacher describes the nature of religious experience. Of course, one has to realize that Schleiermacher is not arguing that this should be the case. Rather, he is *describing* that this is the case. This is a description of our experience. Schleiermacher believes that our feeling of utter dependence shows us that we rely on something other than ourselves for our existence. We cling to God. For this reason, he sees that our feeling of absolute dependence is equal to our relationship to God.

Schleiermacher believes that our feeling of absolute dependence is the same as a feeling of identity also. We have a feeling of identity because we realize that

there is more to ourselves than external things, such as our emotions. Our emotions are "externals" because they are levels of consciousness that assume our immediate self-consciousness. There is a particular nature and integrity to human experience. We feel identity because we realize that there is something about ourselves that cannot be taken away except by God. We are utterly dependent, which is the same thing as being in relation to God. Schleiermacher claims these are equivalent:

As regards the identification of absolute dependence with "relation to God" in our proposition: this is to be understood in the sense that the Whence of our receptive and active existence, as implied in this self-consciousness, is to be designated by the word "God," and that this is for us the really original signification of that word.⁷

This dependence gives us our identity in relation to God. We cannot achieve this for ourselves. We are utterly dependent on God for our existence, and we cannot secure our existence on our own.

The translation of the German word Gefühl into "feeling" in Schleiermacher's work is unfortunate. The German word has a richness that is untranslatable. Gefühl is a prereflective consciousness. It is not an emotion and it is not the unconscious. It is the primal level of the self, and it is the background for all other human experience. Schleiermacher explains:

The term "feeling" (Gefühl) has in the language of common life been long current in this religious connection; but for scientific usage it needs to be more precisely defined;... So that if anyone takes the word "feeling" in a sense so wide as to include unconscious states, he wil...be reminded that such is not the usage we are here maintaining.⁸

It is not reflective. The self does not become an object in the "feeling of absolute dependence". Schleiermacher saw the "feeling of absolute dependence" as equal to immediate self-consciousness. Immediate self-consciousness means that we see all of the world through the filter of ourselves. We can never step outside of ourselves to examine anything. We always have the background, the primal level, of our own selves. We become aware of ourselves in this respect and that, for Schleiermacher, is immediate self-consciousness.

Schleiermacher also says that the immediate self-consciousness we have is the same thing as God-consciousness. Because all persons are immediately aware of themselves then they are immediately aware of God. Once again, this is a description, not an argument. Moreover, one has to realize that Schleiermacher saw all of these points as very formal and abstract. He did not think that we came to God-consciousness in such an abstract way. Schleiermacher then approaches the problem of how our God-consciousness works itself out in history.

Schleiermacher believed that this abstract God-consciousness came to bear in history in the *piety* of

every believer. It is shaped by how it is expressed.

Schleiermacher says:

Now, since the feeling of absolute dependence is in itself perfectly simple, and the conception of it provides no basis for differentiation, such a basis can be derived only from the fact that feeling, in order to realize itself in an actual moment, must first unite with a sensible stimulation of self-consciousness, and that these sensible stimuli must be regarded as infinitely various.⁹

Individual piety is where God-consciousness is housed. Religion appears in different historical and social forms. Schleiermacher sees this as self-evident. One only has to look at the history of the Christian Church and one can see it in a state of constant change in relation to social and cultural situations. For example, one can see how Chinese traditions do not lend themselves to a western way of life. Schleiermacher realized that we are limited and inhibited by our historical circumstances. Religious belief arises in particular forms in particular historical situations. Therefore, religious traditions are conditioned by the historical circumstances of the time.

Schleiermacher believed that religious activity is a result of Gefühl, or feeling, or God-consciousness, being played out in history in the piety of individuals. This piety is expressed through the religious institutions, language, norms, customs and all the qualities of a particular human culture and society. Schleiermacher believes that religious activity comes from the Gefühl

of individuals. However, that is a very abstract notion. The Gefühl manifests itself in particular historical instances, such as Methodism in the 1770's or Catholicism in the 1400's, for example, Schleiermacher says that gefühl manifested in history is piety:

Your feeling is piety, in so far as it expresses, in the manner described, the being and life common to you and to the All. Your feeling is piety in so far as it is the result of the operation of God in you by means of the operation of the world upon you.¹⁰

In this respect, all historical religious traditions are conditioned. They cannot totally escape their own history. This is true of individual believers too. We are limited by the circumstances of our birth and our society. No one can step outside of this completely.

Since all religion consists of gefühl being played out in history, and since we are all limited by our own historical conditions, Schleiermacher believes that all religious traditions have some validity. He says:

Our proposition excludes only the idea, which indeed is often met with, that the Christian religion (piety) should adopt towards at least most other forms of piety the attitude of the true towards the false....even Polytheism...(has)...an obscure presentiment of the true God.¹¹

All men feel their utter dependence and that is acted out in history, so religions arise. This is not deterministic. We can act to help change history. We are pushed along by history, but we can push back. Schleiermacher believed

that not only were all Christian confessions valid, but also the religions of the world, to an extent. All religious traditions are the result of the individual's God-consciousness coming to actualization in history. Piety is the historical form of our God-consciousness.

Schleiermacher did not believe that we are totally bound by our historical condition. We are still free. Our piety is shaped by our history, but as our life changes, then our piety changes and that changes religious institutions and society. This is how history progresses and varies. Schleiermacher thought that religious institutions and society were slow to change, but our changes in piety can nudge the traditions. Some people can change history drastically by a change in piety--Luther, for example. Schleiermacher saw our piety in constant flux as our life changed. One cannot become a father, lose a close friend or relative, be fired from one's job, or experience any other event of one's life and remain unchanged. Our piety is always being shaped by the conditions of our life and society, but the same piety shapes society too.

Schleiermacher's account of Christianity is a description too. He claims that Jesus was the only person who was not conditioned by his historicity to the extent of the rest of man. Jesus' God-consciousness is pure. A

Christian's God-consciousness always makes reference to the God-consciousness of Jesus. Everything else of Christianity is tradition and the working of piety in history. The resurrection, for instance, is a tradition of the early church. We gain insight into the early Catholic church when we look at the creeds, but we do not have pure God-consciousness there. Schleiermacher thought that sin was a failure to recognize one's God-consciousness. Sin is tenacious because history is hard to change so that everyone will recognize their God-consciousness. Schleiermacher also argues that Christianity is the "highest religion" by an interesting argument. He thinks that since God-consciousness is channeled through one place in Christianity, through Jesus, then that is more desirable. I will discuss this more later. Schleiermacher states this as fact, but his argument is very weak.

Part Two: Barth

Karl Barth is perhaps the most influential theologian of the Twentieth Century. Almost all of his work is done in reaction against the work of Schleiermacher and the "culture-protestantism" that resulted from Schleiermacher's work. Barth saw this line of thinking as the eventual downfall of Christianity. He saw Christian thought heading in precisely the wrong direction. Barth believed that writers like Schleiermacher were leading Christianity

down the road to destruction. He says:

In the former undertaking (philosophical existentialism) I can see only a resumption of the line which leads from Schleiermacher by way of Ritschl to Herrmann. And in any conceivable continuation along this line I can see only the plain destruction of Protestant theology and the Protestant Church.

Barth wanted to return to supernaturalism. He saw the miraculous nature of Christianity being lost. In many respects, Barth wanted to flee to traditionalism. This is why he has been called the father of the "Neo-orthodoxy" movement. This school wanted to return to orthodox formulations of Christian faith. Barth is the major spokesman and most prolific writer for this tradition.

Barth claims that man is utterly debilitated by sin. For this reason, all attempts to explore man's self using his own reason and modes of inquiry are wrong. Any results we obtain in this manner will not give us ultimate truth, for all of man's faculties are impeded by sin, even man's reason. Therefore, all that came from man is subjective and limited. We cannot pull ourselves up out of our depravity because of our sin. Barth firmly believed that theology cannot become anthropology, because of our sinful state. Barth does not want to give up on supernaturalism. He reacted intensely when man is seen as being able to reach God on his own. Man has to be seen from the point of view of God. Barth says:

The standard by which all men are measured is not of this world. It is eternal, as God is; it is itself God. God seeks continually that men should be open to him and to him only. By dissolving us, he establishes us; by killing us, he gives us life.¹³

Barth argues that there is a radical distance between God and man. Man is separated from God by his sinful state. Barth thinks that modern theology has made God another object in the world subject to empirical inquiry. Barth sees this as a severe misunderstanding. We have to see God as a radically and wholly "Other." God cannot become just another thing we investigate in the world the same way we investigate things in the sciences. Barth believes that we have to see God as wholly separated from man and his condition, and there being no way for us to know him. We cannot deal with God the same way as anything else in the world. We have to see God as Wholly Other.

Barth believes that the judgment of men cannot be given much credence. Since our reason is destroyed by sin, we cannot trust the argumentation of men. Truth does not come from men. Truth comes from God.

This leaves us in a poor state. We have no way to know God. However, Barth thinks that we do know God. How is this possible? We know him because he has revealed himself to us. This is the only way we could know him. Unless God showed himself to us, we could never know him. Barth thinks that this is the case because of the supreme

distance between God and man. Revelation is the Word of God, and the Word of God is not to be found in its entirety anywhere except in Christ. The Bible attests to the Word of God, but it is not the word of God in itself.

Barth is no fundamentalist. He says:

In calling the Holy Scripture the Word of God...we mean by it Holy Scripture as the witness of the prophets and the apostles to this one word of God, to Jesus,...who is God's Christ...when we say, I believe in God, the concrete meaning is that I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁴

Barth's theology, then, is purely a Christology. Revelation occurs solely in Christ, and this is how God shows himself to us. We know God in Christ and solely in Christ. Christ bridges the tremendous gap between God and man. Barth sees the Christ event as the turning point in human history. There is a gulf between God and man that cannot be bridged except by Christ.

Barth sees the Bible as he distills it through the creeds of the Church. He claims:

There is, however, one criterion...this... is the text of Holy Scripture, which according to Anselm forms the basic stability of the Credo to which to credere and intelligere refer.¹⁵

Also:

If Holy Scripture has binding authority, we cannot say the same of the confessions. Yet there is still a non-binding authority, which must be taken seriously.¹⁶

The Bible is interpreted through the Nicene Creed, the

Apostle's Creed and other formulations of the early church. The Holy Spirit guided the early church to interpret the Bible in certain ways. These interpretations are the most accurate to the Word of God found in scripture. Faith comes through the Credo of the church:

Faith, however, is related to the Credo of the church into which we are baptized.A "science of faith, which denied or even questioned the faith (the Credo of the church) would ipso facto cease to be either "faithful" or "scientific".¹⁷

We have to test all other proclamation of the church by using scripture, Barth thinks. If a church tradition is not upheld by the Bible, then we should not continue the tradition. Barth argues that the salvation history of the church shows us that God does not work now as he did then. God acted through Christ and the Holy Spirit in the early church and that is our norm to guideline. We have to understand that God works in different ways at different times. We can see God and his will now, through Christ. Barth is trying to return to the orthodox position of the church, that God did his decisive act in Christ and that he continues to work in history. The Holy Spirit works in the Church, but not in the same fashion it did in the first century. This does not mean that we stop theologizing. On the contrary, we have to constantly speak to the problem of the day. It is God who works through us. Barth says:

Fundamentally it is possible and indeed necessary for the science of theology to advance along its entire front...it is also certain that the Lord who has promised to be with the church until the end of the world will not cease to pour out the gifts of his grace in her midst.¹⁸

Barth's theology is radically different than Schleiermacher's because he starts with God and not man. Barth wants to get across the clear message that we have to kneel before God, and not men.

Part Three: Comparisons and Criticisms

There are some comparisons to be made between Schleiermacher and Barth. Schleiermacher's Gefühl or feeling, is the way we know God. Barth sees all of our own feelings as subjective and twisted by sin:

What man can know by his own power according to the measure of his natural powers, his understanding, his feeling, will be at most something like a supreme being, an absolute nature....This absolute and supreme being...has nothing to do with God. It is part of...man's contrivance. Man is able to think this being but he has not thereby thought God.¹⁹

Barth thinks that Schleiermacher has made God another object of investigation in the world. Theology has become a "worldly" enterprise. Barth also believes that Schleiermacher has done away with any true revelation. He thinks that Schleiermacher has worked his way to God. Barth thinks we know God only because God chose to let himself be known. Schleiermacher would think that Barth has reverted to the irrational aspects of religion. We have to understand

religion as a distinctly human activity. Schleiermacher believes that we will realize our religious nature when we inquire into the true nature of ourselves. We do not have to rely on God reaching down to us. We have the freedom to realize our own nature. Barth thinks that only God can rescue us from sin. This cannot be stressed enough.

I think there are some basic criticisms that can be made of Barth and Schleiermacher. Both of their positions are open to discussion. I will look at Barth first for I see the most problems with his position. I do not pretend to be able to examine both of their positions fully in this paper, but I do think that I can point out some areas where I find their work problematic. I think that Barth's theology is less useful than Schleiermacher's, for reasons I will explain.

Barth has a problem, I think, when he claims that Christianity is the religion and that we know God only through Christ. Barth seems to think that this is a problem in Schleiermacher's work:

There is no doubt that Schleiermacher sought to assert something like the absoluteness of Christianity....why Christ in particular? Why can we not manage without him? Schleiermacher does not seem to be able to say that there is an eternal significance of Christ...²⁰

Barth does not seem to realize the historical nature of Schleiermacher's work. It is Barth himself who is confusing.

Why, for Barth, do we believe in Christ? I do not think that Barth answers this satisfactorily. Barth needs to deal with the world religions. When he says we only know God in Christ, I am led to wonder how he came to such a conclusion. Barth does not tell us. He seems to take no account of the other religions of the world. Millions of people find comfort and meaning for their lives in the traditions of Buddhism. Barth does not deal with why these people are religious and why they hold to their beliefs. He does not tell us how we know that Christ is the sole revelation of God--he just asserts that it is the case. I think that Barth does not use historical research of the Bible, and he ignores data from other disciplines. I think that one gets a good idea of what becomes of historical inquiry for Barth when he says:

The historical-critical method...has its rightful place....But if I were driven to choose between it and the venerable doctrine of inspiration, I should without hesitation adopt the latter, which has a broader, deeper...justification.²¹

He never inquires into the nature of religious experience by using the tools of modern psychology, for instance. He seems to deny in an implicit fashion that all of these other disciplines exist.

I think that this lack of interest in other areas of knowledge is symptomatic of a larger problem in Barth's work. Unless one understands Barth's language, symbols,

and tradition, unless one starts where he already is, then one will find him close to being incomprehensible. He has little to say to the person outside the Christian tradition who is trying to understand the faith. One has to accept all of Barth's language and terms before one can understand him. I think that Barth "preaches to those in the pew" to an extent. He does not seem sympathetic with the person who does not understand the language used in the church. I do not think that Barth meant for this to be the case, but I do think that he does not speak clearly to those outside of the Christian realm. He assumes that everyone finds meaning in the traditional terminology of the church.

Barth claims that he does not think that God can become another object of inquiry in the world. But Barth does not seem to realize that if God were not somehow immanent in the world, there would be no way for us to know him. How can Barth claim that Christ came into the world and yet is not an object of inquiry? It seems that if Christ were here on earth then he would be open to the same sort of investigation as any other historical person. Barth seems to want to have it both ways:

Does...He (Christ) exist as one thing amongst others, and that as such he can be perceived...like other things? Well, we cannot deny that he is a thing like this....But...a man is not merely a thing or an object. He became the Thou of the ...one eternal God.²²

Barth does not seem to realize that he wants to see God as wholly Other, but that if we are to know him at all, he must become knowable in the world.

I have a similar criticism of how Barth sees the nature of man. Barth thinks that man is utterly sinful. If this is the case, how do we ever come to know and see the truth? How do we see the Word of God in Christ? Barth again makes a strong traditional claim but he does not realize the extent of it. We cannot be totally sinful or we would never see God at all.

Part Four: Conclusions

Barth accuses Schleiermacher and the people like him of falling into religious subjectivity. If all we have to go on is our "feeling" of the transcendent, then how do we make any normative judgments at all about religious traditions? Barth thinks that Schleiermacher has allowed the validity of any "religious experience." I think that Barth, along with many others, has essentially misunderstood Schleiermacher. Many recent writers on Schleiermacher have agreed that Schleiermacher is a religious subjectivist, but this is not the case.

I think that this constitutes a rather severe misunderstanding of Schleiermacher's work. Schleiermacher wrote before the philosophical school of phenomenology arose, but I think that his thought can be interpreted

through the work of the modern phenomenologists, such as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Robert Williams argues that Schleiermacher should be interpreted as a phenomenologist. He says:

To anticipate some of the results of this study, I have been led to reject virtually all of Barth's adverse judgements on Schleiermacher....Barth either misses or simply ignores Schleiermacher's major methodological moves and...in sum, Barth-Hegel et al. fail to come to terms with Schleiermacher, and thus fail as responsible criticism.²³

Schleiermacher should be seen as one who is claiming that the typical distinctions between subject and object are no longer valid. It is not possible to explain the whole of phenomenological thought here. Williams says:

In short, if we did not have...phenomenology, we should have to invent or create something very much like it in order to appreciate and understand Schleiermacher!²⁴

I will attempt to explain Williams' interpretation of Schleiermacher and how Schleiermacher can be seen in a new light.

Williams argues that Schleiermacher did not see anything like a subject-object distinction in reality. He thinks that Schleiermacher is saying that reality as such is filtered through and comprehended through our structures of consciousness and pre-consciousness. We cannot apprehend anything without the reality of our consciousness as a background to all. Williams says of the lack of subject-object distinctions:

...belief means to take something as true on the basis of feeling or immediate self-consciousness...it is an intuitive certitude. ...It is a certitude generated by the direct, concrete interaction with and apprehension of the things themselves as they give themselves.²⁵

Williams argues that for things to be for us as they really appear, we have to see them through our structures of consciousness. This consciousness is not the same one that psychologists speak of. This is at a deeper level than the psyche. Schleiermacher is trying to show how knowledge is not what it is traditionally assumed to be. Schleiermacher tells how he "knows"/something:

Consider how you delineate an object. Is there not both a stimulation and a determination by the object...which for one particular moment forms your existence? The more definite your image, the more you become the object, and the more you lose yourselves.²⁶

As we realize the fundamental background that "ourselves" represent, we start to realize that objects are us. We cannot be "objective" because it is always us doing the viewing and observing. Williams thinks the calling of Schleiermacher a "religious subjectivist" is essentially wrongheaded. Schleiermacher wants to point out that all reality comes to us through ourselves, through the structures of our consciousness. At the most primordial level of this consciousness we see ourselves as utterly dependent.

If I see a problem in Schleiermacher, it is that he made such value judgements about non-Christian traditions.

He wanted to claim that Christianity is the "highest" religion. This is a result of Schleiermacher not following his thought to its logical conclusion. If all humans feel utterly dependent, then there is not way we can make truth claims about how their piety is manifested in history. Schleiermacher never deals with the world religions in any meaningful way. I realize that much of the reason for this is the time in which he lived. There was little study in comparative religion in the early nineteenth century.

I think that Schleiermacher's thought is vastly superior to that of Barth. I do not think that Barth takes history and the realities of the world as seriously as Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher mounts a more complex and useful argument. He shows us that the way we think we view the world is essentially not how we do. We have to see ourselves as unities. Perceptions are not somethings "out there" that are not part of us. As we perceive things, those things are us, in a very real sense. He is better than Barth because he does not redefine Christianity in traditional and problematic ways. He gives us an interpretation of religious activity and of God and how we know him that can be constantly reinterpreted for every situation. Barth ignores historical criticism but Schleiermacher takes account of it. He says:

...we have no desire to keep the leaders of science from...passing judgement...upon...piety itself....since piety and the church, like other things, are material for scientific knowledge.²⁷

I think Schleiermacher speaks to the problems that plague the man of faith. People want to know what the Christian tradition is saying. Traditional language as Barth uses about God does not speak to their problems. I think Schleiermacher can show us, as he showed the nineteenth century "despisers" of religion, how we can see religious faith as a part of our existence that is the precursor to all other modes of being. We are religious beings. I do think that we need to modify Schleiermacher's argument in respect to other religious traditions. We cannot be making normative judgments about other belief systems. We have to see that we are Christians because we were raised in a Christian environment, and that others on this earth were raised in their own particular tradition.

Barth's approach is a rather uncritical return to supernaturalism, in my opinion. He simply does not have the ability to speak to the pressing issues of today in the Christian tradition. I do not think that his work is near the level of Schleiermacher's thought.

FOOTNOTES

¹Richard R. Niebuhr, Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), p. 6.

²Karl Barth, Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1973), p. 425.

³Freidrick Schleiermacher, On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 1.

⁴Ibid., p. 41.

⁵Jack Forstman, A Romantic Triangle: Schleiermacher and Early German Romanticism (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1977), p. xii.

⁶Schleiermacher, On Religion, p. 61.

⁷Idem, The Christian Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 16.

⁸Ibid., p. 6.

⁹Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁰Idem, On Religion, p. 45.

¹¹Idem, The Christian Faith, p. 33.

¹²Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1975), Volume 1: The Doctrine of the Word of God, p. xiii.

¹³Idem, The Epistle to the Romans (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 61.

¹⁴Idem, Dogmatics in Outline (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), p. 17.

¹⁵Idem, Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum (London: SCM Press, 1960), p. 33.

- ¹⁶Idem, Dogmatics in Outline, p. 13.
- ¹⁷Idem, Anselm, p. 26-27.
- ¹⁸Ibid., p. 31.
- ¹⁹Idem, Dogmatics in Outline, p. 23.
- ²⁰Idem, Protestant Theology, p. 470-71.
- ²¹Idem, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 1.
- ²²Idem, Church Dogmatics: A Selection (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 45.
- ²³Robert R. Williams, Schleiermacher the Theologian (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. xi.
- ²⁴Ibid., p. x.
- ²⁵Ibid., p. 30.
- ²⁶Schleiermacher, On Religion, p. 42.
- ²⁷Idem, The Christian Faith, p. 6.

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