

Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion
by H. Richard Niebuhr (S.C.M.)

Reviewed by Geoffrey W. Grogan

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It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of Schleiermacher in the history of modern theology. If Brunner's description of him as the only great theologian of the nineteenth century does Ritschl an injustice most would agree that the further we move away from them both historically the more the greater importance of Schleiermacher becomes apparent. His was the first constructive attempt to build a theological system which did not rest upon some objective basis treated as authoritative. His was a Liberalism with a positive aim, concerned to show the faith by which it lived. As a pupil of Semler at Halle, he had imbibed his views on Scripture but had also realised that his rationalism could not furnish any secure basis for theology. He had been deeply influenced early in life by the Moravians, and although rejecting their doctrine of Scripture had inherited their stress upon feeling in religion. He was an emotional and sensitive man, and the Romantic revolt against classical forms in the interests of life and feeling and spontaneity had a strong appeal for him.

There is no doubt that for the majority of twentieth century theologians, he is something of a *bate noire*. This book, which is the first in English on this theologian for over twenty years, seeks to rehabilitate its subject. Dr. Niebuhr considers that Schleiermacher has suffered greatly from the biased interpretation of him by Barth and Brunner. 'Something very nearly approaching a Barthian captivity of the history of modern Christian thought reigns in theology outside of ultra-orthodox circles'. (p. 11). He is probably right in contending that most modern students of theology learn their Schleiermacher chiefly from those who are unfavourably disposed towards him (whether they be neo-orthodox, existentialist or conservative evangelical) and that he deserves to be heard for himself. He accuses critics of this theologian of 'not trying on his manner of thinking' before rejecting it (pp. 11f). We can therefore be grateful to the late Dr. Niebuhr for giving us the opportunity of viewing this nineteenth century theologian through more sympathetic eyes.

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He complains that Schleiermacher is usually estimated purely on the basis of his *magnum opus* *The Christian Faith*. Like H. R. Mackintosh he holds that he can be understood properly only in the light of his biography, but he allows this to influence his method of treating his thought more fully than did Mackintosh. He selects four 'moments' in his thinking, as represented by his dialogue *The Christmas Eve*, his lectures on hermeneutics, his ethical theories as set forth in his lectures on ethics, and *The Christian Faith*. The examination of this last occupies almost half the book. There are sundry references also to other works, especially to the *Speeches on Religion to its Cultured Despisers* and his *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology*.

The Christmas Eve is a dialogue somewhat in the style of Plato. Niebuhr remarks, 'The dialogue... provides us with an audition of certain dominant motifs seeking their proper contrapuntal relationships; here the reader familiar with the *magnum opus* can already

distinguish in the sound of voices in dialogue the logic and spirit of *The Christian Faith*' (pp. 36f). The dialogue was written in 1805 and is set in the context of a Christmas Eve gathering of a family and friends. Many shades of opinion are represented, from the sceptical Leonhardt to the almost orthodox Ernst and the simple-hearted Ernestine. Many voices speak, and none of them lacks significance but which is the voice of the author? It is not easy to say, and Niebuhr may well be right in suggesting that none of the ideas in it was wholly foreign to his nature at the time of writing. Indeed, he helpfully applies to this work a hermeneutical rule upon which Schleiermacher was himself to lay stress later, that a reader should always pay attention not only to what a writer says but also to his omissions. Applying this principle he says, 'No reader can overlook the silence of all voices that might represent a consistent biblicism or a really speculative idealism or a sterner moralism' (p. 40). Having given us quite a full impression of the scope of this dialogue, Niebuhr draws some conclusions from his study of it (pp. 68-71). He notes 'the steadfast retention of nature and grace in an unending dialectic' and the way in which Christ, the church and humanity are related to each other. He asks, 'Does Eduard leave sufficient room between Christ and the church for the absolute son of man to exercise a true criticism of his community's stewardship of humanity? This question is particularly relevant to *The Christmas Eve*, because the dialogue makes so little use of the New Testament history, of the concrete Christ over against the idea of the redeemer.' He notes also the danger present in his liberal use of philosophical language in shaping the form of theological reflection lest this should affect content as well as form. Finally, he points to the fact that Schleiermacher shows clearly his realisation that knowledge of an object means knowledge of it in its relationships, so that in the Logos made flesh 'we celebrate humanity'.

Does the reader of Dr. Niebuhr's apologetic for Schleiermacher find all this very reassuring? Have we not here already the seeds of that excessive immanentism which came to full flower in *The Christian Faith*?

The second chapter of the book is entitled 'Hermeneutics and History' and discusses Schleiermacher's lectures on interpretation and ethics, which he gave concurrently. This is a very important section of the book, for in it we are given some insight into the philosophy and psychology of the theologian. Niebuhr notes 'a number of affinities between Schleiermacher's idea of interpretation and the hermeneutics of contemporary theological existentialists' (p 88n.) and quotes

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with approval (p. 92) the words of F. Lücke, 'Schleiermacher belongs to the class of those (interpreters) who are far more strongly inclined towards a distinctive individuality of apprehension, than to self-surrender; who rather draw over the author to their own position, than allow themselves to be drawn by him'. This admission seems to the reviewer to be most significant.

The section of this chapter which Niebuhr entitles 'The Self in Feeling' seeks to demonstrate that when he speaks of feeling he does not intend us to understand this as the irrational in the self. *Gefühl* (feeling) for him, in fact, is 'the mode through which (the) inner givenness of the self achieves expression and enters into consciousness'. (p. 121). This means that 'feeling arises out of the self in its totality' (*ibid.*). 'Feeling as the form of consciousness that expresses the inner unity of the person possesses a range that is co-extensive with personal

existence and activity' (p. 125). 'Hence, feeling does not stand for the irrational in the self. It is, rather, as much a part of the rational consciousness as the capacity for the most critical and scientific reflection' (p. 126). A person, as a thinking/speaking and feeling/gesturing self enters into dialogue on two levels, communicating directly through language and indirectly in gestures, the one seeking to be understood, the other to be 'divined'. Both aspects are present in all communication. In a suggestive comparison and contrast between Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard (p. 128), Niebuhr states that the former affirmed that 'where subjectivity is not present, there we have no real knowing and willing but only historically meaningless recitation of propositions and empty imitation'. The church is 'the final community of personal individuality, for the religious is the highest grade of feeling.... The true office of the church is the development of the means for the stimulation and expression of this highest feeling (or "subjective knowing")' (pp. 131f).

It is quite true that the word 'feeling' requires definition and that it is often employed with a shift of sense by writers who do not always appreciate that this is taking place. H. R. Mackintosh described the meaning of 'feeling' in Schleiermacher's works as 'perhaps the most baffling of all problems in the interpretation of Schleiermacher' (*Types of Modern Theology*, p. 47). Indeed, Mackintosh's interpretation, brief as it is, probably provides us with a better key to the use of the word than Niebuhr's. 'If we go by words, in what is perhaps a minority of cases he is undoubtedly guilty of the psychological subjectivism of which so many critics have accused him'. In religion the soul's main preoccupation is with its own states. However, in other cases 'feeling' is 'a mode of objective apprehension'. 'There can be little doubt, I think, that Schleiermacher intended "feeling" to be read in this second sense, and we must read it so wherever we can. But his argument often proceeds on the first sense. What is more, it is impossible not to feel that the ambiguity served him well, and that at various points his argument would have broken down irretrievably had the ambiguity been cleared up' (*ibid.*, 47f). Even if Niebuhr's thesis were correct and we accepted his understanding of the use of the word 'feeling' in Schleiermacher's work, does this mean that we can acquit him of the charge of theological subjectivism? Surely not! We may compare Schleiermacher's descriptions of the essence of religion with those of Jonathan Edwards. (Note that Niebuhr himself compares the two men on pp. 142f, 192f.) Indeed, his description of religion in *Speeches on Religion to its Cultured Despisers* (p. 39) as 'a sense and taste for the Infinite' could easily be mistaken for a quotation from Edwards' *Religious Affections*. The two men are poles apart in reality, however,

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because for all Edwards' interest in the subjective aspect of religion he had an equally strong emphasis upon its objective character as apprehension of Divine revelation. It is just this latter which is so disconcertingly absent from Schleiermacher's work. It is probable that Niebuhr's book will be estimated largely in terms of its effectiveness or otherwise in refuting the charge of subjectivism which is usually brought against Schleiermacher. Every reader must make up his own mind, but this important section of the book left the reviewer unconvinced.

The large final section deals with Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith*. The editors of the English translation of this book, writing of course in 1925 and therefore before the production of Barth's massive *Church Dogmatics*, declared (p. v) 'In the opinion of competent thinkers the Christian Faith of Schleiermacher is, with the exception of Calvin's Institutes, the most important work covering the whole field of doctrine to which Protestant theology can point....

Whether for acceptance or rejection, it is necessary for serious students to know what Schleiermacher has to say'. A cursory perusal of the title page would not adequately prepare the reader for its contents. It abounds in descriptions of the material which have an orthodox ring: 'Sin as a State of Man' is to be discussed first in terms of Original Sin and then of Actual Sin. There are sections on 'Regeneration', 'Conversion', 'Justification', 'Sanctification', 'Election', 'Predestination', etc. However, the treatment within the book is anything but orthodox at point after point.

Niebuhr's discussion highlights Schleiermacher's views on the function of dogmatics. The reviewer found himself not only interested in Dr. Niebuhr's comparisons and contrasts with more recent thinkers but found others coming to his own mind. A contrast with Cornelius Van Til suggests itself on page 140 in the words, 'Schleiermacher... rejected the claim that in fact theological thinking is the architectonic impulse of the mind, giving to all knowing its principles and limits and acting as the science of all human sciences'. Like James Denney and many others he insisted that theology exists from first to last in the interests of preaching (p. 145), while his view that 'exegetical theology is not the function of "dogmatics"' (p. 149) reminded at least one reader of the almost complete absence of biblical quotation from Brunner's *The Mediator*. Paul Tillich finds occasional mention earlier in the book but there is not a single reference to him in this section and yet one was reminded time and again of the similarity between the two. The statement that 'the traditional theological distinction between nature and supernature... seemed to him clumsy and incapable of genuinely productive use in theological discourse' (p. 165) might well have come straight out of a book on Tillich.

There is much that the reader will find stimulating and illuminating in the discussion of Schleiermacher's doctrinal standpoint and formulations as set forth in his greatest work. Whatever Niebuhr has said about the necessity for understanding him biographically, it remains true that he must be estimated chiefly on the basis of *The Christian Faith*, for it is here that his mature thought finds expression and it is undoubtedly from this work that his greatest influence has stemmed. The dominant impression left upon the mind is that a long list of serious charges of defection from orthodox Christianity could be drawn up merely on the basis of Niebuhr's own admissions. Earlier he had conceded the abiding influence upon Schleiermacher of Spinoza's failure to draw a distinction between God and the world (p. 90). Now he declares that for all practical purposes he restricted Scripture to the New Testament (p. 149). 'He construes the perfectly regnant

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God-consciousness as the dwelling of God in Christ, and this then is Schleiermacher's equivalent for the notion of the divine nature of the redeemer' (p. 157). 'The reader necessarily misses the characterisations of sin as disobedience of God and as infidelity' (p. 200). 'Without consciousness of sin, sin does not exist as sin' (p. 208). Again he says, 'The present-day reader can scarcely deny that the appearance of immanentism in Schleiermacher's thought remains. *The Christian Faith* lacks an adequate expression of the transcendence of God' (p. 191).

This book may lead to the redrawing of one or two lines but it cannot be said that it has made Schleiermacher's theology any more acceptable to the man who is concerned to build his own upon a biblical foundation.

Geoffrey W. Grogan, "Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion by H. Richard Niebuhr (S.C.M.)," *Vox Evangelica* 5 (1967): 88-92.

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