



E. D. SCHLEIERMACHER  
MARTIN BUBER

ON RELIGION  
I AND THOU

**FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER**

**ON RELIGION**

**SPEECHES TO ITS CULTURED DESPISERS**

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY  
RICHARD CROUTER

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## ON RELIGION

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## I AND THOU

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**FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER**

**ON RELIGION**

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RICHARD CROUTER

**To  
BJC**

For without doubt it must hold for art as it does for science that form and content serve mutually to confirm one another.

Schleiermacher, *Kritik der Sittenlehre*

Authors in whose works one finds everything one expects and nothing more are absolutely logical and impersonal. But they are very poor writers. The productive spirit always brings forth something that could not have been expected.

Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*

Schleiermacher is the Protestant theologian of the Romantic movement. One will have difficulty imagining Schleiermacher without this, but will also not grasp the significance of the Romantic school for the development of theory in the nineteenth century without knowing and recalling that in him a theologian wholly dedicated to the Romantic school exercised the determining influence on theology. His *Speeches* show this relationship not only in their substance, but also in their form.

Martin Kähler, *Geschichte der protestantischen Dogmatik im 19. Jahrhundert*



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This edition, published in the Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy series, keeps the relevant scholarly annotations of the 1988 version intact, while making a few changes to the translation. The Introduction has been somewhat recast, and a Chronology, Further Reading, and a Note on Editions added, in order to produce a leaner, more accessible volume.

## Abbreviations

- Ath.* *Athenaeum: Eine Zeitschrift.* 1–11. Edited by August Wilhelm Schlegel and Friedrich Schlegel. 3 vols., Berlin, 1798, 1799, 1800
- Br.* *Aus Schleiermachers Leben. In Briefen.* 1–IV. Edited by Ludwig Jonas and Wilhelm Dilthey. 4 vols., Berlin, 1860–63
- Dierkes Hans Dierkes, "Die Problematische Poesie: Schleiermachers Beitrag zur Frühromantik," *Schleiermacher-Archiv*. Edited by Hermann Fischer et al. *Internationaler Schleiermacher-Kongress Berlin 1984*. Vol. I, edited by Kurt-Victor Selge. Berlin, 1985, pp. 61–98
- KGA* 1.1 *Friedrich Schleiermacher Kritische Gesamtausgabe I Schriften und Entwürfe. Band 1 Jugendschriften 1787–1796*. Edited by Günter Meckenstock. Berlin, 1984
- KGA* 1.2 *Friedrich Schleiermacher Kritische Gesamtausgabe I Schriften und Entwürfe. Band 2 Schriften aus der Berliner Zeit 1796–1799*. Edited by Günter Meckenstock. Berlin, 1984
- KGA* 1.3 *Friedrich Schleiermacher Kritische Gesamtausgabe I Schriften und Entwürfe. Band 3 Schriften aus der Berliner Zeit 1800–1802*. Edited by Günter Meckenstock. Berlin, 1988
- KGA* v.1 *Friedrich Schleiermacher Kritische Gesamtausgabe v Briefwechsel 1774–1796 Band 1*. Edited by Andreas Arndt and Wolfgang Virmond. Berlin, 1985
- Oman Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*. Trans. by John Oman. Louisville, 1994

## Introduction

### *On Religion* in its cultural milieu

The work of Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768–1834), inaugurated by this book, brilliantly reflects the tensions between the religious thought of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. When *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* was published in 1799, its author was an all but unknown cleric and member of the German Romantic circle. At the time of his death Schleiermacher was the most distinguished theologian of Protestant Germany, the author of a modern post-Enlightenment system of theology that ranks with Calvin and Aquinas in the history of Christian thought. *On Religion* is the premier expression of an understanding of religion as rooted in immediate pre-reflexive feeling and intuition, and only secondarily at the level of intellectual cognition or in moral systems and deeds. This classic theory of religion arose from the Romantics' intense critique of Kant's moral and religious philosophy in the repressive political atmosphere of a Prussia that feared the social upheavals of the French revolution. A many-faceted work, *On Religion* belongs to modern intellectual history, to German studies, to philosophy, religious studies, and theology.

Ultimately Schleiermacher's fame derives from his systematic interpretation of Christian theology, *The Christian Faith* (*Glaubenslehre* [1821–2, 1830–1]), whose relationship to *On Religion* is often disputed. Yet Schleiermacher never renounced his early book and considered his revisions (1806, 1821) to be more stylistic than substantive. Both works share a strategy of moving from abstract to more concrete structures of experience; for both religion arises from immediate self-consciousness and expresses itself individually and socially within a historical community of faith.

For nearly two hundred years *On Religion* has been deeply appreciated and severely criticized. Seekers of a religious perspective that challenges traditional belief find in it a host of stimulating ideas. Students of theology assess the author's heterodox Christian belief alongside its twentieth-century nemesis Karl Barth, whose critique of Schleiermacher's religious liberalism and Romanticism rests on a

revealed theology of biblical faith. Yet today Schleiermacher's realism as a thinker and his interdisciplinary cast of mind have been rediscovered by an age that seems unsure of its ability to embrace religious faith even as it remains suspicious of prevailing philosophies, moral creeds, or political ideologies.

Schleiermacher's career was marked by unusual versatility. His work covers fields of Christian theology that range from systematics and ethics, to sermons, historical essays, and exegetical studies. His *Life of Jesus* inaugurated the nineteenth-century quest for the historical Jesus. Lifelong devotion to classical Greek philosophy is reflected in papers presented to the Berlin Royal Academy of Sciences, and his Plato translation became a standard work in modern German philosophy. A pathfinder in interpretation theory and hermeneutics, Schleiermacher moves beyond the specialized concerns of biblical and philological criticism to raise questions about the general conditions and principles that hold sway when we interpret texts. His theory of interpretation constitutes a turning point in the history of the field and still delineates the major problems. Shaped by the Platonic dialogue form, his theory views interpretation on the analogy of speaking and listening, a stance that is emulated in *On Religion*.

Born in Breslau in Lower Silesia, Schleiermacher grew up among the pietistic traditions of the Moravian Brethren (*Herrnhuter*) of southeastern Saxony. Founded by Count Nicholas L. von Zinzendorf in 1722, the Herrnhuter community sought to revive the reformist aims of P. J. Spener's *Pia Desideria* (1675). His schooling included an enlightened humanistic curriculum of languages (Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, English) and mathematics along with the experiential, biblical, and Jesus-centered piety of the Brethren. At the seminary at Barby, he encountered a narrow, theological pedagogy and took part in a secret club where Kant and Goethe were read and debated. Here he became skeptical about whether the one who called himself "Son of Man was the true, eternal God," and whether "his death was a vicarious atonement, because he never expressly said so himself," and maintained that he cannot believe Christ's death to have been necessary "because God, who evidently did not create men for perfection, but for the pursuit of it, cannot possibly intend to punish them eternally, because they have not attained it."<sup>1</sup> His inability to obtain clear answers to these religious doubts led to disillusionment, a painful exchange of letters with his father ("written with trembling hand and tears"), and his transfer to the (pietistic but more worldly) University of Halle.<sup>2</sup> Yet his early training at boarding school was never renounced. Looking back in 1802 he wrote:

<sup>1</sup> Letter to his father (21 January 1787) in *The Life of Schleiermacher as Unfolded in His Autobiography and Letters*, trans. Frederica Rowan (London, 1860), 1, pp. 46–7.

<sup>2</sup> See B. A. Gerrish, *A Prince of the Church: Schleiermacher and the Beginnings of Modern Theology* (Philadelphia, 1984), pp. 24f.; *Schleiermacher-Auswahl*, ed. Heinz Bolli (Munich, 1968), pp. 262–8; *KGA* 1.1 has over fifty letters between father and son, occasionally mother and son, between 1781 (Schleiermacher's thirteenth birthday) and 1794 (shortly before the father's death); see pp. lxvi–lxvii.

Here it was that for the first time I awoke to the consciousness of the relations of man to a higher world . . . Here it was that that mystic tendency developed itself, which has been of so much importance to me, and has supported and carried me through all the storms of skepticism. Then it was only germinating; now it has attained its full development, and I may say, that after all that I have passed through, I have become a Herrnhuter again, only of a higher order.<sup>3</sup>

At Halle, which was dominated by the philosophical rationalism of Leibniz and Christian Wolff (d. 1745), Schleiermacher continued to pursue theology, philosophy, and classical studies.

Schleiermacher passed his theological examinations in 1790 in Berlin under the prominent Berlin churchman and family friend, F. S. G. Sack, who encouraged him to translate Joseph Fawcett's *London Sermons*.<sup>4</sup> Unable to secure immediate church appointment, Schleiermacher became a house tutor (*Hofmeister*) at Schlobitten in East Prussia. The apprenticeship among an upper-class royalist family served, as it were, as a window on the world. During his first year at Halle the storming of the Bastille (14 July 1789) occurred, a foundational experience for his generation. His Schlobitten years coincided with the growing radicalism of the Jacobins in France, the dissolution of the Legislative Assembly, the declaration of a French Republic, and the execution of King Louis XVI (January 1793). Schleiermacher shared his peers' enthusiasm for the movement's aspirations, even if he found the execution of the king repugnant and came to see that peace could only be restored by the overthrow of the Jacobins.<sup>5</sup> Life among the upper classes in Schlobitten provided a taste of the literary and cultural milieu that soon became his own in Berlin.

The tutoring appointment enabled Schleiermacher to continue a process of philosophical and theological self-education. When his duties took him to Königsberg he had a half-hour meeting with Kant, but no obvious intellectual significance was attached to the visit. At the time, the German Enlightenment typified by Kant had not yet undercut efforts to shore up orthodox forms of Protestant Christian belief by appealing to reason. To be sure, naturalistic (today we would say behavioristic) tendencies in human development theory were pursued by Karl Friedrich Bahrdt (1741–92) and Johann Bernhard Basedow (1724–90). The Old Testament scholar Hermann Samuel Reimarus's radically skeptical fragments remained unknown until published by Lessing, while the works of conservative, popular religious poets and writers, like Christian Fürchtegott Gellert (1715–69) and Friedrich Nicolai (1733–1811), enjoyed great popularity. In Germany the new wave of pietistic self-examination and the dominant rationalism of Christian Wolff

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Georg Reimer (30 April 1802), *Br.* 1, pp. 294–5; Rowan, *Life of Schleiermacher*, 1, pp. 283–4.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Fawcett, *Predigten*, trans. F. Schleiermacher with a preface by F. S. G. Sack (Berlin, 1798).

<sup>5</sup> See Kurt Nowak, *Schleiermacher und die Frühromantik: Eine literaturgeschichtliche Studie zum romantischen Religionsverständnis und Menschenbild am Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland* (Göttingen, 1986), pp. 92–5, and Richard Crouter, "Schleiermacher and the Theology of Bourgeois Society: A Critique of the Critics," *Journal of Religion*, 66 (July 1986), 301–17.

often went hand-in-hand in trying to show that reason and divine revelation were mutually compatible and the existence of God capable of demonstration.

Such defenders of Protestant orthodoxy were, however, being challenged by a newer, more liberal perspective called "neologism," which maintained biblical authority but restricted the content of revelation to what can be known by natural reason. Where the Bible teaches miracles, Jesus and his followers were merely accommodating their views to popular belief. By acknowledging the role of the human will and feeling in shaping biblical faith "neologism" gave fresh impetus to the historical criticism of scripture. Such writers had not yet discovered that a historical understanding of religion confronts them with the radical otherness of the biblical world. Lessing's and Herder's understanding of history as progressive revelation had not penetrated into the world of official theology. Alongside the philosophical challenge to religious belief of a Diderot, Voltaire, Hume, or Kant, both orthodox rationalists and "neologists" seemed like traditional voices. In Berlin circles, the popular preacher Johann Joachim Spalding (1714-1804) represented "neologist" theology. His *On the Usefulness of the Preaching Office and Its Continuity* (1772; 3rd ed., 1791), which demanded that religious doctrines be left out of sermons so the church could attend to society's moral needs, drew ironic commentary from Herder.<sup>6</sup>

The contrast between the "liberalism" of these Enlightenment contemporaries and Schleiermacher's perspective is illustrated by his ecclesiastical superior's comments about *On Religion*. Sack objected to the work as pantheistic and Spinozistic: "No art of sophistry and rhetoric will ever be able to convince any reasonable person that Spinozism and Christian religion can coexist" and strongly disapproved of Schleiermacher's association with Friedrich Schlegel and the Jewish salons.<sup>7</sup> Defending himself, Schleiermacher wrote, "Have I indeed spoken with contempt of religion, in the sense in which you take the word, or of belief in a personal God? Never, certainly. I have only said that religion does not depend upon whether or not in abstract thought a person attributes to the infinite, supersensual Cause of the world the predicate of personality."<sup>8</sup> Spinoza was an example of profound piety, not a model of Christian belief, and his choice of friends was also vigorously defended.

A clash between religious parties and the Prussian state in the last decade and a half of the eighteenth century coincided with German fears regarding the revolution in France. Having entered into coalition with Austria against France (1792), Prussia declared peace in 1795 and preserved its neutrality for the next eleven years. The ethos among Prussian burghers was thoroughly conservative. "Gen-

<sup>6</sup> J. G. Herder (1744-1803), *To Preachers, Fifteen Provincial Letters*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vii, (1774; Hildesheim, 1967), pp. 225-312, was aimed at Spalding; see Robert T. Clark, Jr., *Herder: His Life and Thought* (Berkeley, 1955), pp. 196-201.

<sup>7</sup> Albert L. Blackwell, "The Antagonistic Correspondence of 1801 between Chaplain Sack and His Protégé Schleiermacher," *Harvard Theological Review*, 74 (1981), 113.

<sup>8</sup> Blackwell, "The Antagonistic Correspondence," p. 118.

erally sympathetic to the revolution in France, they attributed it to specifically French causes, without application to themselves."<sup>9</sup> But the issue of badly needed reform raised hopes for greater freedom and constitutionalism.

In this repressive setting fresh interpretations of religion challenged the assumptions of the churches' revealed theology. Rousseau's natural religion in "the confessions of the Savoy vicar" (*Emile*, 1762) and Lessing's understanding of revelation as historical development (*The Education of the Human Race*, 1780) pointed to a more naturalistic and historical understanding of religion. The controversy about Spinoza that broke out after Lessing's death embodied the same tensions. J. G. Hamann's (1730-88) dialectical defense of personal conversion and revelation attacked the spiritual barrenness of the Enlightenment, while Herder's aesthetic appreciation of Hebrew poetry (*The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, 1782) provided an alternative deeply aesthetic and literary understanding of the Bible. Hamann's review of Kant's first critique was not published out of deference to Kant, and Herder's *Understanding and Reason: A Metacritique of the Critique of Pure Reason* appeared the same year as *On Religion*.<sup>10</sup> Among contemporary critiques of Kant, only *David Hume on Belief; or, Idealism and Realism* (1787) by F. H. Jacobi (1743-1819) was of direct use to Schleiermacher.

The religious conflicts came to a head as Friedrich Wilhelm II (1786-97) sought to end nearly fifty years of Prussia as a bastion of French thought. In 1788 Johann Christoph Wöllner (1732-1800), a former pastor, landowner, freemason, and Rosicrucianist promulgated his infamous "Edict concerning the constitution of religion in the Prussian states." The edict aimed at suppressing "rampant freedom" and combatting unbelief, superstition, and moral decay by requiring all acts of worship and religious instruction to conform to established church confessions. Such measures were opposed by the "neologists" and by public sentiment. Upon coming to power in 1797, Friedrich Wilhelm III invalidated the edict and dismissed Wöllner. But the decade of state-supported repression of critical thought regarding religion governed the world of the young Schleiermacher.

In this repressive period Kant published *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793).<sup>11</sup> Kant was thus faced with a direct conflict between his duty to uphold the state ("A subject of the Prussian state is declared free to hold what religious views he likes, so long as he quietly performs his duties as a good citizen of the state," in the words of the edict) and his freedom as a scholar. Exercising a right of the German universities to conduct reviews, Kant obtained an imprimatur from the philosophical faculty of Jena for the remaining parts of the book. But Prussia forbade Kant from publishing additional work on religion ("If you continue to resist, you may certainly expect unpleasant consequences to yourself"). In this perilous atmosphere Kant made a "mental reservation" in submitting to the king.

<sup>9</sup> R. R. Palmer, *The World of the French Revolution* (New York, 1971), p. 237.

<sup>10</sup> Henry E. Allison, *The Kant-Eberhard Controversy* (Baltimore, 1973), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> T. M. Greene (ed.), *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York, 1960), pp. xxxii-xxxvii.

He kept his vow to "refrain from all public statements on religion," but took it as binding only until the king's death in 1797, after which he published a second, larger edition of the book. Like *On Religion*, published two years after the first edition, the book challenged the right of biblical theologians and traditionalists to be the sole interpreters of religion.

Kant's situation typified current relationships between intellectuals and the state. To teach at a university was to be bound to the state as a civil servant. But Germany, which, in the words of R. R. Palmer, had "philosophized the French revolution," could scarcely repress the tide of criticism.<sup>12</sup> It is little wonder that a new generation, nurtured as much by Rousseau and Herder as by rationalism, could no longer espouse the options of religious orthodoxy and dogmatism. Friedrich Wilhelm III's accession was marked by hope for a new beginning. Responding to his troubles with the censor, Kant in *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798) argued for academic freedom in the life of the university.

Hopes for a greater measure of academic and religious liberty were also present in the mind of the young Schleiermacher. After a brief pastorate in Landsberg, Schleiermacher returned to Berlin in 1796 as the Reformed hospital chaplain at the Charité, an institution that served some three thousand persons a year. His social and intellectual life reached beyond the Charité to include his old schoolmate, Karl Gustav von Brinckmann (1764–1847), who shared his passion for Plato and Kant. Through friendship with his Schlobitten employer's son, Count Alexander von Dohna (1771–1831), Schleiermacher was introduced to the literary salon of Markus Herz (1747–1803), a wealthy Jewish physician and pupil of Immanuel Kant, and his talented wife, Henriette (1764–1847). The circle included the linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), whom he would later serve in the founding commission of the University of Berlin. In another literary group, the "Wednesday Society," Schleiermacher came to know Friedrich Schlegel (August 1797), who quickly emerged as his most significant friend.<sup>13</sup> Although the venture only lasted three years, Friedrich and his brother August W. Schlegel's literary journal, the *Athenaeum*, remains the best introduction to the intellectual world of the young Schleiermacher.

Collaboration with Friedrich Schlegel was enhanced when he moved into Schleiermacher's house near the Oranienburg Gate on 21 December 1797. Among his many projects, Schlegel was at work on *Lucinde*, a novel that was notorious for its bold literary form as well as for its lightly disguised portrayal of his sexual relationship with Dorothea Veit. Spurred on by these friends, Schleiermacher's work appeared as aphorisms in the *Athenaeum* along with book reviews, poetry, and criticism by the Schlegels and Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg; 1772–1801). In quest of a moral philosophy that would challenge rationalism, Schleiermacher

<sup>12</sup> *World of the French Revolution*, pp. 233–50.

<sup>13</sup> F. Schlegel's letter to A. W. Schlegel attests to Schleiermacher's many talents and proposes a role for him in contributing to the *Ath.*; *KGA* 1.2, pp. xii–xiii and n. 10.



worked on a study of the principles and conditions of society that enabled free sociability (*Geselligkeit*) to develop. But the project was interrupted by the writing of *On Religion*, where the fruits of these reflections influenced the arguments of the fourth address.<sup>14</sup>

*On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* was conceived amid this literary and philosophical ferment that surrounded Friedrich Schlegel, Henriette Herz, and their friends. As a Christian clergyman – and thus a “natural enemy” of the literary avant-garde – Schleiermacher was an enigma. At a surprise twenty-ninth birthday party on 21 November 1797, Schlegel, Herz, and Dohna urged him to write a book, presumably to explain his view of religion. To some extent his own circle constitutes the “cultured despisers” addressed by the book. The idea of doing the book actually dates from late summer 1798, but the writing only took shape in 1799 when Schleiermacher accepted an interim position as court preacher at Potsdam. There, in the more relaxed atmosphere outside Berlin, *On Religion* was written between mid-February and mid-April. Letters from Henriette Herz and Schlegel helped keep him focused. Schlegel wrote that, “I hope that the boredom, which you seem to enjoy there, will serve it well and chain you to the desk”<sup>15</sup> and, like Herz, commented on style as well as substance. The book arose from the qualities of sociability (*Geselligkeit*) and shared philosophizing (*sympphilosophieren*) that the group admired. Schlegel kept Schleiermacher informed about work on his *Lucinde* and affairs in Berlin.<sup>16</sup> While completing the last part of the second speech on God and immortality, Schleiermacher expressed a fear that the work might be suppressed as “atheistic” or possibly turned over to Sack as censor. Pressure to finish was exerted by the publisher, who hoped to have the book in time for the Easter book fair. Its completion brought him exhilaration (“the joy of fatherhood”) as well as a curious fear of death.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the book *On Religion* and his aphorisms in the Schlegels’ literary journal, Schleiermacher had begun work on a German translation of David Collins’s *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales* (1798).<sup>18</sup> Upon hearing that his first published sermon would appear in a collection of sermons by the outgoing court preacher, Johann Peter Bamberger, he expressed delight: “I should like someday to write a book about everything; but I shall have to postpone this a good many years. I should require a long time to gather my materials and should also be somewhat at a loss about the form.”<sup>19</sup> He ends by remarking that the

<sup>14</sup> KGA 1.2, pp. I–lii, 163–84.

<sup>15</sup> Jack Forstman, *A Romantic Triangle: Schleiermacher and Early German Romanticism* (Missoula, MT, 1977), pp. 65–6; KGA 1.2, p. liii; Br., III, p. 103 (2 March 1799).

<sup>16</sup> KGA 1.2, pp. lvif.; Br., III, p. 105.

<sup>17</sup> KGA 1.2, p. lv, Br. I, pp. 197, 201; in Br., III, p. 103, Schlegel informs him that the censor was Upper Consistory President von Scheve. KGA 1.2, p. liv. The book was, however, only completed on 15 April with copies first in circulation in June; see KGA 1.2, p. lx and also Br. I, pp. 217f.

<sup>18</sup> KGA 1.2, pp. xivf., and n. 27; such travel accounts were immensely popular among Germans in the period; Herz had collaborated on two others, on Africa and on North America.

<sup>19</sup> Rowan, *Life of Schleiermacher*, I, p. 209; Br. I, pp. 219–20, letter to Herz.