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Recommended Citation

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KEVIN M. VANDER SCHEL

CHRIST AND THE PERFECTION OF CREATION IN SCHLEIERMACHER'S DOGMATIC THEOLOGY

A b s t r a c t. To many of his critics, Schleiermacher's Christology signals an explicit weakness in his theological system, as his emphasis on religious feeling and subjectivity seems to undermine any claims of the distinctive revelatory or supernatural character of Jesus Christ. This essay by contrast underscores both the originality Schleiermacher's understanding of Christ in history and its centrality to his overall thought by attending to the subtle theme of the "supernatural-becoming-natural" in his *Glaubenslehre* and *Christliche Sittenlehre*. Here the appearance of Christ yields a transformative influence that operates within natural and historical processes, inaugurating the reign of God that does not abolish the natural world but draws creation to its completed perfection.

Key words: Schleiermacher; Christology; supernatural; grace; history; rationalism.

No one has ever seen God; the only Son [...] has made him known.
— John 1:18 (NRSV)

Since his earliest theological publications, Schleiermacher's innovative work on Christology has served as a common focal point for evaluating his dogmatic system. Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre* provides one of the first modern recastings of Christology, and his analysis of the doctrine in the work is both intriguing and provocative. Eschewing the traditional language of persons and natures, he depicts Jesus Christ as the single historical individual to whom God was fully present, and who on the basis of his unique and perfect consciousness of God is alone exalted as the Redeemer (*Erlöser*) in

human history.¹ This account has spurred on numerous attempts by subsequent thinkers to reformulate and reinvigorate traditional teachings on Christ. Yet it has also fueled some of the most trenchant criticisms of Schleiermacher's thought. His novel description of Christ, along with his notorious discussions of the consciousness of God (*Gottesbewußtsein*) and the feeling of absolute dependence (*schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl*) in the introduction to his *Glaubenslehre*, are often taken as evidence that Schleiermacher's theology is anchored in an underlying anthropology of religious feeling, in which the figure of Jesus Christ functions only as a subjective symbol and plays no historically meaningful role. Indeed, for many of his readers, the role of the historical Christ in Schleiermacher's theology can be aptly summarized in a comment by Karl Barth: Jesus of Nazareth fits into this system "desperately badly."²

This brief essay offers a modest retrieval of Schleiermacher's contributions to Christology by examining the influence of Christ in his dogmatic theology according to the subtle theme of the "supernatural-becoming-natural" in his thought. In contrast to the prevailing rationalist and supranaturalist positions of his time, his dogmatic treatments in both his *Glaubenslehre* and lectures on *Christliche Sittenlehre* present Christ as originating a new and unsurpassable form of human historical living: a higher, relatively supernatural influence irreducible to natural explanation yet mediated in and through natural and historical process. Schleiermacher thus depicts Christ's influence as bringing about a gradual transformation of human history from within, inaugurating the reign of God that does not destroy or oppose the created and historical world but draws it to completion.

¹ The focus upon Jesus Christ as the Redeemer, for Schleiermacher, is what distinguishes the specific character or "peculiar essence" (*eigentümlichen Wesen*) of Christianity. See Friedrich D.E. SCHLEIERMACHER, "Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt, Zweite Auflage (1830/31)", in: *Kritische-Gesamtausgabe* (KGA) I.13.1-2, ed. Rolf Schäfer (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), § 11, 13. Hereafter, this volume will be cited as "CF."

² Karl BARTH, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background & History* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1976), 432.

1. A TWO-SIDED LEGACY

Recovering Schleiermacher's insights into Christology, however, requires first attempting to unravel his somewhat tangled theological legacy. Appraisals of Schleiermacher's significance in post-Enlightenment theology have been beset by a curious two-sided narrative. On one hand, his *Glaubenslehre* is widely regarded as a modern classic, with even his most outspoken critics acknowledging the originality and sophistication of his theological system.³ Yet packaged together with this recognition is the frequent portrayal of his work as grounded in an intriguing yet untenable system of religious subjectivity, which ultimately reduces all particular doctrinal content – including the person and work of Christ – to merely accidental moments of pious feeling. This interpretative trend became especially prominent in the early twentieth century with the rise neo-orthodox theology, yet it has remained a common refrain for subsequent generations of systematic theologians, especially within Anglophone scholarship.⁴ This account also often resurfaces with only slight variations in contemporary writings in philosophy of religion. George Lindbeck's influential text *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984) describes Schleiermacher as inaugurating an “experiential-expressive” approach to religion, which regards religious teachings as “nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations.”⁵ More recently, the religious theorist Russell

³ In this respect, for instance, Barth approvingly records the impression of the nineteenth-century theologian Wilhelm Gass, who wrote to Schleiermacher, “There is no one who can make me waver in my belief that your dogmatics herald a new era, not only in this one discipline, but in the whole study of theology in general.” Quoted in K. BARTH, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, 425.

⁴ Emil Brunner's 1924 work, *Mysticism and the Word*, offered one of the most sustained critical treatments of this period, and one which set the stage for many of the critiques that followed. While he identifies Schleiermacher as the last great theologian, Brunner strongly objects to his approach and seeks to overturn the brand of religion he sees in Schleiermacher's doctrine. In his view, Schleiermacher's description of human religion as the feeling of absolute dependence offers at base a kind of general mysticism, a fundamental experience of unity that divinizes the natural world, reduces God to an impersonal principle, and sets aside questions of the truth of Christianity in favor of descriptions of the manner of this experience. See Emil BRUNNER, *Die Mystik und das Wort* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1924), 129: “The Christian has the feeling of absolute dependence accidentally in the form of a connection with Jesus Christ, whereas another monotheist, a Stoic for instance, lacks this special element without thereby missing anything essential in piety itself.” Quoted in Brian GERRISH, *Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 24.

⁵ George A. LINDBECK, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 16.

McCutcheon has argued that it is Schleiermacher who initiated the practice of confining religion to the inner world of private experience, as something that can only be apprehended through “direct intuition” and is not open to objective study or rational analysis.⁶ In this fashion, the view that Schleiermacher’s theological system minimizes specific Christian teachings and introduces a generalized account of religious anthropology has achieved an almost canonical status in later treatments of his work.

Yet despite its prevalence, this often-invoked interpretation overlooks a crucial aspect of Schleiermacher’s theological approach, and one that closely concerns his work in Christology. Together with his bold descriptions of religious experience and its place in human consciousness, his dogmatic writings display a consistent emphasis on both the radical contingency of historical living and on the centrality and unsurpassability of the redemptive influence of Christ. Indeed, Schleiermacher describes his own work as a critical response to what he viewed as the primary theological challenge of his time: the need to secure a more adequate understanding of the continuing influence of Christ in human history. Appreciating Schleiermacher’s specific contributions on this point, however, requires attending to a developing crisis in his own theological context, particularly in the opposition between the two schools of rationalism and supranaturalism.⁷

⁶ Russell MCCUTCHEON, “Introduction: The Autonomy of Religious Experience,” in: *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, ed. R. McCutcheon (New York: Continuum, 2005), 68. Wayne Proudfoot also argues that Schleiermacher begins the trend of viewing religious belief as expressive of autonomous and privileged human experience. See W. PROUDFOOT, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 1-40. More recently, Proudfoot has offered a more nuanced reading of Schleiermacher’s thought. See his “Immediacy and Intentionality in the Feeling of Absolute Dependence,” in: *Schleiermacher, the Study of Religion, and the Future of Theology*, ed. Wilhelm Gräß and Brent Sockness (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 27-38.

⁷ The heated opposition between the two schools of rationalism and supranaturalism was the dominant theological debate of Schleiermacher’s lifetime. On the history and relationship of these schools, as well as a helpful summary of the theological positions proffered over the course of this controversy, see Emanuel HIRSCH, *Geschichte der neuern evangelischen Theologie im Zusammenhang mit den allgemeinen Bewegungen des europäischen Denkens*, vol. 5 (Darmstadt, Germany: C. Bertelsmann, 1964), 1-144. Carl Schwarz also offers a clear and accessible account of the roots and questions at stake in the controversy in his *Zur Geschichte der neuesten Theologie*, 4th ed. (Leipzig: F.A. Brodhaus, 1869). See also Kevin M. VANDER SCHEL, *Embedded Grace: Christ, History, and the Reign of God in Schleiermacher’s Dogmatics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, forthcoming November, 2013), 17-43. Here the term “supranaturalism” is employed in place of “supernaturalism” to remain consistent with common usage and to distinguish this specific movement from broader conceptions of supernaturalism.

2. COORDINATING REASON AND REVELATION: THEOLOGICAL RATIONALISM AND SUPRANATURALISM

Schleiermacher developed his academic work in theology against a backdrop of widespread social, political, and educational turmoil. The bridge period, or *Sattelzeit*, spanning the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries marked a time of cultural crisis and religious transition across Europe. Yet while elsewhere this unrest took predominantly political form, within the German lands this revolution was at its basis *wissenschaftlich*, an upheaval in the conception and organization of human knowing itself.⁸ This transitional period carried urgent challenges for theologians of the time, as it starkly illuminated the growing need to coordinate faith and traditional doctrine with the rapidly developing progress of the natural and historical sciences.

Taken in itself, this tension between accepted doctrinal positions and the progressing scholarship of the sciences was already firmly established throughout the eighteenth century. It was readily apparent, for example, in the diverging forms of Pietism and Enlightenment-inspired *Neologie*, as well as the heated controversies surrounding the application of historical and critical methods to biblical interpretation.⁹ Yet by the time Schleiermacher began constructing his own dogmatic theology, this contrast had sharpened into a more pointed opposition, and one that had shifted from the broader questions concerning the rationality of Christian beliefs and biblical teachings to a narrower concentration on the specific status of supernatural revelation and the character of the new and distinctive teaching made known in Christ.

In the face of this rising challenge, theological opinions of the time coalesced into two conflicting camps. On one side was the increasingly popular position of rationalism, a view clearly reflecting the influence of Kant, which minimized the role of revelation and measured all biblical and theological teaching against the universal standard of natural and ordinary human reason.¹⁰ According to this position, Jesus of Nazareth introduced his followers

⁸ See Carl SCHWARZ, *Zur Geschichte der neuesten Theologie*, 4-5. Of course, Germany also experienced its own political upheavals during this time. See John E. WILSON, *Introduction to Modern Theology: Trajectories in the German Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 4-12.

⁹ See James C. LIVINGSTON, *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 28-31; and K. VANDER SCHEL, *Embedded Grace*, 3-8.

¹⁰ The terms “rationalist” and “supernaturalist” seem to enter into general usage following their appearance in Kant’s 1793 work *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. See

to no new mysterious or supernatural doctrines but instead served as a providential teacher, whose clear teachings illuminate the simple rational and moral truths of the natural religion that is open to all. In this respect, the figure of Christ retained a privileged place in communicating religious truth in human history but did so in the modest and demythologized role of the “friend of reason” in divine matters.¹¹ In the words of the well-known rationalist preacher Johann Friedrich Röhr, who popularized this approach through his 1813 book *Briefe über den Rationalismus*, the figure of Jesus of Nazareth was:

a natural product (*ein natürliches Produkt*) of his people and his age; but in view of spirit, wisdom, virtue, and religiosity surpassed by no mortal of the previous or subsequent world; a hero of humanity in the noblest sense; a—if this figurative expression is allowed to me—a heavenly phenomenon in this sub-lunar world.¹²

The contrasting position of supranaturalism represented a pronounced counter-reaction to this rationalizing trend in theology, and sharply objected to such dismissal or softening of cherished Christian beliefs. Theologians associated with this movement sought to safeguard the immediate and supernatural quality of revelation, arguing that Christ and the biblical witness disclose distinctive and authoritative truths that exceed the grasp of natural human reason alone. On this view, any attempt to reduce the figure of Christ to a simple teacher of the religion of reason – however highly esteemed – not only forfeits the specific content of Christian faith but also inverts the true character of revelation, with the result that the transformative message of Christ becomes a mere reflection of prevailing ethical and cultural attitudes. The spirited supranaturalist preacher Claus Harms, for example, clearly conveys this sentiment in his *95 Thesen* against theological rationalism:

E. HIRSCH, *Geschichte der neuern evangelischen Theologie* (1964), 6-7; and Immanuel KANT, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 142-143.

¹¹ Jesus as the “friend of reason” was a recurrent theme in the sermons of Johann Friedrich Röhr. See Gustav FRANK, *Geschichte der protestantischen Theologie: Geschichte des Rationalismus und seiner Gegensätze* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1875), 370.

¹² Johann F. RÖHR, *Briefe über den Rationalismus*. Wissen und Kritik, vol. 8, ed. Wolfgang Erich Müller (Waltrop: Hartmut Spenner, 1997), 26. Translation by author. For a fuller discussion of the rationalist thought of Röhr, and its contrast with the supranaturalist position of Claus Harms, see K.M. VANDER SCHEL, *Embedded Grace*, 19-32.

When our Master and Lord Jesus Christ says 'Repent!' he desires that human beings should conform themselves according to his teaching (*sich nach seiner Lehre formen sollen*); but he does not conform the teaching according to human beings, as one does now, according to the varied spirit of the times (2 Tim 4:3).¹³

The dispute between these two theological schools framed an impasse that persisted into the mid-nineteenth century, and gave rise to a variety of attempts to reinterpret or salvage central Christian doctrines through philosophical speculation or historical-critical research.¹⁴ Schleiermacher himself also recognized the severity of this conflict. He described it as the major division facing the Protestant church of his time, and noted that many of his contemporaries understood the fundamental tasks of theology in terms of this divide. Indeed, much of the criticism of Schleiermacher's theology in his own time came from thinkers committed to one or the other side of this controversy, who alternately faulted his writings for downplaying the role of reason or for undermining the claims of supernatural revelation.¹⁵ For his own part, however, Schleiermacher understood the opposition of rationalism and supernaturalism to rest upon a deeper misunderstanding. For theology to adequately respond to the growing divide between faith and the developing sciences, he argued, it must move beyond the rigid dichotomies of "reason and revelation" and "nature and the supernatural" and must resist the temptation to resolve the difficulties of Christian thought through abstract speculation divorced from the life and practice of the church. In contrast to such tendencies, he sought to orient his own theological reflections around a more central concern: understanding the new and decisive character of Christ's influence amidst the ongoing development of human history.¹⁶

¹³ See Claus HARMS, *Claus Harms: Ein Kirchenvater des 19. Jahrhunderts: Auswahl aus seinen Schriften*, ed. Johann Schmidt (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1976), thesis 1, p. 61. Translation by author.

¹⁴ The speculative theology of F.C. Baur and the historical positivism of D.F. Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* offer clear examples of these trends. Such efforts can also be found in the writings of the dogmatic theologian Alois Biedermann and the church historian Philipp Marheineke. See J.C. LIVINGSTON, *Modern Christian Thought* (2006), 127-132, 215-221.

¹⁵ See Friedrich D.E. SCHLEIERMACHER, *On the Glaubenslehre: Two Letters to Dr. Lücke*, trans. by James Duke and Francis Fiorenza (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1981), 34-37, 68, 83-89.

¹⁶ See *ibidem*, 34-47, 69-72; and CF §13, p.s.

3. AN ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY: THE ‘SUPERNATURAL-BECOMING-NATURAL’

While sharing his contemporaries’ concern with these formal or foundational questions in theology, then, Schleiermacher developed his own approach along significantly different lines. He was dissatisfied with attempts to isolate a natural basis for Christian belief, which would seek to filter out “the pure truth of a universal rational faith” from historical character of Christianity.¹⁷ Yet he also objected to approaches that would reduce Christianity to an immediate disclosure of eternal or supernatural truths, thus restricting Christian piety to a narrowly cognitive domain as something that is “originally and essentially doctrine” (*ursprünglich und wesentliche Lehre*).¹⁸ Furthermore, Schleiermacher regarded the reigning theological categories of the time – most particularly in the strict separation between the concepts of “natural” and “supernatural” – as misleading and ill-suited to the task of adequately describing the uniquely historical character of redemption through Christ. Christ’s appearance in history, he writes to his colleague Friederich Lücke, can only be explained as “a new creation, as the beginning of a higher development of spiritual life.”¹⁹ Yet as this higher form of life can only be mediated in and through the historical realities of the natural world, he also maintained it should be considered neither purely natural nor absolutely supernatural.²⁰

While affirming “that absolute revelation is in Christ alone,” Schleiermacher thus took care to elaborate his own position in alternative terms.²¹ To better highlight the distinctiveness of redemption in Christ, he sought a clearer means of describing Christ’s continuing influence in human living, one that would recognize the redemptive activity of Christ as something initially God-given – and so “supernatural” – while treating the further growth of this

¹⁷ See F.D.E. SCHLEIERMACHER, *Two Letters to Dr. Lücke* (1981), 42, 78; cf. also CF, §10, p.s.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, §10, p.s., KGA I.13.1: 90.

¹⁹ F.D.E. SCHLEIERMACHER, *Two Letters to Dr. Lücke* (1981), 64.

²⁰ Schleiermacher indicates his dissatisfaction with these categories in the introductory sections of his *Glaubenslehre*: “The appearance of the Redeemer in history is, as divine revelation, neither something absolutely supernatural nor something absolutely suprarational” (CF, §13, KGA I.13.1: 106).

²¹ F.D.E. SCHLEIERMACHER, *Two Letters to Dr. Lücke* (1981), 78-79.

influence as unfolding entirely through natural and historical means. He describes this unique strategy as follows:

Whenever I speak of the supernatural, I do so with reference to what comes first, but afterwards it becomes, secondly, something natural. Thus creation is supernatural, according to its origin, but it afterwards becomes the natural order (*Naturzusammenhang*). Likewise Christ is supernatural, in his origin, but he afterwards becomes natural as a genuine human being. And it is the same with the Holy Spirit and the Christian church.²²

This unique approach illuminates an important feature of Schleiermacher's theological system and signals a subtle theme he employs throughout his dogmatic works. The focus of his treatment falls on the redemptive activity of Christ as it develops and takes shape in human history. The appearance of Christ inaugurates the gradual emergence and becoming of the reign of God, and for Schleiermacher this is nothing other than—as he describes it in his *Glaubenslehre* – “the supernatural-becoming-natural” (*Naturwerden des übernatürlichen*).²³ This descriptive device highlights a central thread guiding the discussion of Christ in Schleiermacher's dogmatic theology. The redemptive influence of Christ marks a new and decisive development in the world, one which does not oppose the historical development of human living but perfects it from within.

4. CHRIST AS THE REDEEMER OF CREATION

Schleiermacher's discussions of Christ in both his *Glaubenslehre* and lectures on *Christliche Sittenlehre* underscore this vital connection with the original influence of the Redeemer. His treatment of the person and work of Christ occupies the central point of his presentation in his *Glaubenslehre*, and it anchors his teaching on the consciousness of grace in the larger second part of the work. Significantly, Schleiermacher renounces from the outset any attempt to ground his system on an anthropological foundation or a speculative understanding of God developed outside the lived reality of the Christian church.²⁴ He makes clear that although the discipline of dogmatic theology

²² Translation by author. See Friedrich D.E. SCHLEIERMACHER, *Schleiermachers Sendschreiben über seine Glaubenslehre an Lücke*, ed. Hermann Mulert (Gießen: Töpelmann, 1908), 68; cf. F.D.E. SCHLEIERMACHER, *Two Letters to Dr. Lücke* (1981), 89.

²³ CF, §88.4, KGA I.13.2: 26.

²⁴ CF, §2, 19; see also Friedrich D.E. SCHLEIERMACHER, *Brief Outline of Theology as*

calls for ever more incisive and rigorous thinking, it also necessarily remains responsible to the distinctive forms of piety that have emerged in historical Christian communities. Consequently, while acknowledging that the “dialectical” (*dialektisch*) or “scientific” (*wissenschaftlich*) language and thought-forms of philosophy play an indispensable role in the task of theological understanding, Schleiermacher maintains that dogmatics should refrain from adopting the position of any particular philosophical school and from any speculation that would sever the meaning of Christ from the lived consciousness experience of concrete believers.²⁵ Instead of envisioning theology as a purely speculative endeavor to distill the meaning of Christian doctrines into independent and universal philosophical or anthropological concepts, he presents theological inquiry as a heuristic and historical undertaking rooted in the shared horizon of the Christian community of faith.²⁶ Schleiermacher organized the structure of the work to reflect this fundamental commitment. His treatment centers on the opposition of sin and grace in Christian consciousness and follows the growing emergence of the reign of God in human living, as it first appears in Christ, continues in the Spirit and the church, and reaches its consummation in the triune governance of the world.

Yet while the growing historical influence of the Redeemer forms the focus of Schleiermacher’s theological system, he coordinates this specific treatment of Christ with the ancillary and preparatory discussions of the work’s first part, specifically in the treatments of creation, divine causality,

a Field of Study: Translation of the 1811 and 1830 Editions, trans. Terrence N. Tice, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), §3, 8-13.

²⁵ CF, §28, KGA I.13.1: 183.

²⁶ In this respect, Schleiermacher’s view of *wissenschaftlich* theology differs significantly from the calls for philosophical theology found in contemporaries such as Schelling and Hegel. Schelling’s 1803 *Lectures on the Method of Academic Study* offered the category of “philosophical theology” as a way to recapture the excitement of theological inquiry by uncovering the necessary philosophical ideas in Christianity from the later accretions of dogmatic confessionality. In similar fashion, Hegel also sought to restore new life and meaning to Christian teachings through philosophical reinterpretation. See HOWARD, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern University* (2006), 158-163; and J.C. LIVINGSTON, *Modern Christian Thought* (2006), 116-127. By contrast, Schleiermacher describes theology as a “positive science” (*positive Wissenschaft*), a discipline that is not derived from the pure structures of human knowing (and thus not a subordinate part of philosophy), but one which appropriates concepts and distinctions borrowed from other areas of inquiry in service to a specific community. While Schleiermacher’s *Brief Outline* takes up Schelling’s language of “philosophical theology,” then, he assigns it the narrower, critical task of identifying the distinctive character of Christianity amidst its historical manifestations. See F.D.E. SCHLEIERMACHER, *Brief Outline* (2011), §24, 27, 28, 32, 34.

and God's relationship to the world. In these early discussions, which concern some of the most disputed doctrines in the conflict between rationalism and supranaturalism, Schleiermacher insists upon the close connection of divine causality and the natural order and the inseparability of the notions of God and world in Christian thought. Indeed, for Schleiermacher the heart of the doctrine of creation consists not in speculation upon the world's beginnings but in the fundamental awareness that everything in the interconnected system of nature depends upon divine causality.²⁷ According to this view, the distinguishing feature of the Christian understanding of the world is its original and intrinsic orientation to divine activity. Schleiermacher describes the original perfection or "completeness" (*Vollkommenheit*) of the world as its fundamental openness to God, a recognition that the entire natural order, including human beings, is wholly suited to be taken up and incorporated into the divine plan.²⁸ Within this framework, then, the natural relationships of the created world are not opposed to divine activity. Instead, creation in its entire range "lends itself" (*behandeln lasse*), as it were, as an "instrument" (*Organ*) or "means of presentation" (*Darstellungsmittel*) for God, to allow the reign of God to emerge and become dominant in human living.²⁹

It is in this connection that Schleiermacher's well-known depictions of the consciousness of God and the feeling of absolute dependence find their place in his theological system. At root, the consciousness of God, as a "general consciousness of finitude" (*allgemeinen Endlichkeitsbewußtsein*) and of one's co-existence with the finite world, represents an imprint or trace of createdness in conscious human living.³⁰ The human being, as the only being in creation to attain to reason and self-consciousness, possesses an inescapable awareness of the entirety of finite existence as dependent upon something other. In this fashion, this feeling of absolute dependence expresses an original and indirect "relation to God" (*Beziehung mit Gott*).³¹ Yet of itself such consciousness of God retains a merely formal orientation, which serves to indicate that human nature – like the natural order as a whole – retains a basic openness and vital receptivity to God. Accordingly, while this awareness is intermittently present in each person as a sign of the capability for this higher life, Schleiermacher makes clear that it must also be called forth and

²⁷ CF, §36-37.

²⁸ Ibidem, §57.1.

²⁹ Ibidem, §59, KGA I.13.1: 363.

³⁰ Ibidem, §8.2, KGA I.13.1: 67.

³¹ Ibidem, §4, KGA I.13.1: 32.

realized through a particular historical relation: “Christians have their complete consciousness of God only as it is produced in them through Christ.”³²

In turning to consider grace and work of Christ in the later portions of his *Glaubenslehre*, Schleiermacher thus describes Christ’s historical influence in twofold fashion. On one hand, the connection to Christ yields a new form of life and a genuine transformation in human living. Christ’s redemptive influence awakens and animates the consciousness of God that lay dormant under sin, bringing a decisive change to one’s entire life and individual identity. It is the essence of redemption, he writes, that through fellowship with Christ “the previously weak and suppressed (*vorher schwache und unterdrückte*) consciousness of God” is lifted up and “given dominion” (*zur Herrschaft gebracht*) in human nature, emerging as a new principle of human thought and action.³³ In this regard, the working of grace that overcomes the force of sin does not simply indicate a further step in the linear development of historical human living. It entails the rise of a “new human being” (*neuer Mensch*) and a “new creature” (*neues Geschöpf*) – a new form of life grafted onto the old.³⁴

At the same time, however, Schleiermacher insists upon the continuity of redemption with the created order. The appearance of Christ does not contradict the historical realities of human life. Rather, the divine causality at work in nature and the redemptive activity at work in Christ operate towards the same end: the perfection of the created world in the Reign of God. Thus the realms of nature and of grace do not designate separate or independent orders; instead, the entire system of the nature and the full development of redemption through Christ form two aspects of the single divinely ordained reality.³⁵ It is intrinsic to Christian belief, Schleiermacher explains, that “everything has been created for the sake of the redemption (*daß alles zu dem Erlösung geschaffen ist*),” and “that already through creation everything is arranged in advance and retrospectively with regard to the revelation of

³² See F.D.E. SCHLEIERMACHER, *Two Letters to Dr. Lücke* (1981), 55, 58. Accordingly, to properly grasp the true character of human nature in relation to God, Schleiermacher argues that one must look not to the world’s beginning but to its end. The “original completeness of the world,” he writes, “is not to be sought for in Adam, in whom it would again have to be lost, but rather in Christ, in whom it has brought benefit to all.” CF, §61.5, KGA I.13.1: 387; cf. also Edwin VAN DRIEL, *Incarnation Anyway: Arguments for Supralapsarian Christology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9-32.

³³ CF, §106.1, KGA I.13.2: 164-165.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, §164.1.

God in the flesh and to the most complete possible transmission of this revelation to the entire human nature, for the sake of the formation of the reign of God.”³⁶ The natural and created world provides the stage or “theater” (*Schauplatz*) for redemption and is fulfilled by it.³⁷

Schleiermacher’s treatment of the person of Christ also reflects this two-fold understanding. He structures his discussion around “the exclusive dignity” (*die ausschließliche Würde*) of Christ. Through this focus, he aims both to clarify Christ’s distinction from all other human individuals and to affirm the “pure historicity” (*reinen Geschichtlichkeit*) of his person. For Schleiermacher, a proper conception of Christ’s dignity must be rooted in the insurmountable conviction that redemption is completely and originally present in him alone, and that as Redeemer Christ brings about the highest development of human historical living.

Schleiermacher takes special care here to avoid errors on either side, once more excluding conceptions of Christ approximating rationalist and supranaturalist approaches. He objects, for example, to any position that would attribute only “an exemplary dignity” (*eine vorbildliche Würde*) to Christ while denying the absolute fullness of God’s presence in him. Yet he also rejects those understandings that highlight this presence of God in Christ without fully acknowledging him as historically conditioned.³⁸ His own treatment affirms that Christ, as a historical human individual, shares the identical nature, reason, and activity of all other human beings and yet is at the same time distinguished from all others through the unique and perfect existence of God in him, by virtue of the “constant potency” (*Kräftigkeit*) of his consciousness of God.”³⁹ It is this complete consciousness of God, free from the inhibitions sin, which sets Christ apart from all other prophets or religious founders. In Christ the consciousness of God was complete and domi-

³⁶ Ibidem, §164.1, KGA I.13.2: 494-495.

³⁷ Ibidem, §169, KGA I.13.2: 510. Schleiermacher argues that this connection between creation and redemption is in fact so pronounced in Christian consciousness that without redemption the entire development of the natural world would be altered: “That is to say, everything in our world, first human nature and then all other things in proportion to how closely they are connected with [human nature], would have been arranged otherwise, and so too for the entire course of human contingencies and natural events, if the union of the divine essence with human nature in the person of Christ, and as a result of this also with the community of persons of faith through the Holy Spirit, had not been the eternal divine decree (*der göttliche Ratschluß*) (§164.2, KGA I.13.2: 496, translation by author).

³⁸ Ibidem, §93.2-3, KGA I.13.2: 42-43, 47.

³⁹ Ibidem, §94, KGA I.13.2: 52.

nant even from the very inception of his life, permeating all moments of his self-consciousness and forming the center of all his thought and action, so that it marks “a genuine existence of God in him” (*ein eigentliches Sein Gottes in ihm*).⁴⁰ Consequently, the being of Christ is at once the perfect presence of God to human nature and the “absolute perfection” (*schlechthinige Vollkommenheit*) of human nature.⁴¹

In this regard, the appearance of Christ according to Schleiermacher reveals a distinct “supernaturality” (*Übernatürlichkeit*), albeit still in a relative sense.⁴² Christ’s emergence is “a miraculous appearance” (*eine wunderbare Erscheinung*), and indeed forms the one true miracle in the world, an event that cannot be explained by the historical and communal life that preceded him. Yet this “supernatural influence” (*übernatürliche Einwirkung*) of Christ always operates in and through the natural and historical order.⁴³ In this manner, the advent of the Redeemer does not abrogate or abolish existing historical reality but serves as a manifestation of the true goal of the created world in the fulfillment of historical human living in the reign of God.

5. REDEMPTION AS THE GROUND OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Schleiermacher further develops his account of Christ’s singular redemptive influence in his lectures on *Christliche Sittenlehre*, or Christian ethics, which comprise the second and practical side of his dogmatics and concern the formation of distinctively Christian action.⁴⁴ Although this discipline offers no additional or separate treatment of Christology in itself, Schleiermacher emphasizes the foundational connection to Christ throughout, and he locates the first step of developing a responsible Christian ethics in the need to properly understand the relation to the Redeemer.

Here again, as with his *Glaubenslehre*, Schleiermacher’s approach stands in notable contrast to the prevalent theological tendencies of his age. In the

⁴⁰ Ibidem, §94, KGA I.13.2: 52. Moreover, Schleiermacher holds, this is the only manner in which the infinite being of God can be fully present in a historical human individual (cf. §3-4, §32, §94.2).

⁴¹ Ibidem, §98.1, KGA I.13.2: 90; also §94.2-3; 97.2; and 110.3.

⁴² Ibidem, §97.2, KGA I.13.2: 75, 77.

⁴³ Ibidem, §93.3, KGA I.13.2: 46.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of the development of Schleiermacher’s *Christliche Sittenlehre*, as well as its structure and organization, see K.M. VANDER SCHEL, *Embedded Grace*, 149-180.

field of Christian ethics, the theological school of rationalism held particular sway, with its strong practical emphasis and its concern to relate Christian doctrines to concrete moral teachings.⁴⁵ Schleiermacher indicates that the rationalist influence in this area was in fact so pronounced that when dealing with questions of morality even staunch supranaturalist theologians tended to follow their opponents' lead.⁴⁶ Consequently, in treating matters of theological ethics, theologians on both sides followed a common approach, relating specifically Christian elements to more general ethical concerns and basing distinctively Christian action upon the sanitized foundation of natural human reason.⁴⁷

To provide his own treatment of Christian action more sufficient grounding, Schleiermacher insisted on resisting this narrow rationalistic trend from the beginning. Christian action, he maintains, find its genuine foundation in that which sets it apart. At its basis is the relation to the irreducible "basic fact" (*Grundfactum*) of Christianity: the original influence of the Redeemer.⁴⁸

This fundamental relation to the Redeemer constitutes an ever-present theme of Schleiermacher's *Christliche Sittenlehre*. Yet Schleiermacher makes clear early on in his lectures that this founding influence of Christ allows two notably different lines of interpretation. The rationalist position, he argues, also recognizes an original influence of Christ. According to this view, however, the significance of the Redeemer is largely honorific. While the appearance of Christ occasions the emergence of a better or more ethically developed form of living than had existed before him, the content or character of this action remains in principle independent or separable from its relation to him. As such, the status of the new ethical teaching of Christ is no different

⁴⁵ See E. HIRSCH, *Geschichte der neuern evangelischen Theologie* (1964), 10-11.

⁴⁶ See Friedrich D.E. SCHLEIERMACHER, *Christliche Sittenlehre (Vorlesung im Wintersemester 1826 / 27): Nach größtenteils unveröffentlichten Hörernachschriften und nach teilweise unveröffentlichten Manuskripten Schleiermachers*, vol. 1, ed. Hermann Peiter (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2010), 66. Hereafter this text will be designated as "CS."

⁴⁷ See CS, 6-7, n. 1 (Ms. 1828, p. 2^v): "One rationalizes dogmatics, now one does the same also with the study of Christian ethics. That [Dogmatics] is then the theoretical part of philosophy, this [Christian ethics] the practical [part of philosophy]. However, because that which is distinctive and given from God would thus be transformed into something demonstrable and general—and this I cannot accept—then the only thing remaining for me is to set as the foundation (*zum Grunde zu legen*) the difference of both from philosophy" (translation by author).

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 28.

from other ethical truths attained and communicated through human reason. In principle such teaching is surpassable and can be supplemented or replaced as human reason itself continues to develop and progress.⁴⁹ From this rationalist standpoint, then, Christ's real significance consists solely in guiding human beings to those universal ethical truths that apart from him would be discovered only later and with much toil, and any further emphasis given to his historical influence only leads to misunderstanding and superstition.⁵⁰

Schleiermacher's own portrayal of Christ in the lectures on *Christliche Sittenlehre* moves in a significantly different direction. He conceives the relation to the Redeemer in a more originaive sense, arguing that what is most basic is not a particular set of ethical insights or propositions but the recognition of the unique and irreducible activity of God in Christ. Most fundamentally, the shape of distinctively Christian action does not proceed from any of Christ's specific teachings but is grounded in an impression from his whole person, an "impression of the divinity of the Redeemer" (*Eindruck der Göttlichkeit des Erlösers*).⁵¹ In this way, the true significance of Christ's redemptive activity is not found in the anticipation of as-yet unrecognized ethical insights or in the provision of regulative guideposts to further direct moral reflection. It is rather the introduction of a new and efficacious principle into human historical living, through which God's activity is united to and finds enduring presence in human action.⁵²

Adequately grasping the foundation for the treatment of Christian action for Schleiermacher thus demands going beyond merely naturalistic or rationalistic representations of the Redeemer and recognizing, in some measure, the "fact of divine revelation in the person of Christ" (*das Factum der göttlichen Offenbarung in der Person Christi*).⁵³ This point is unmistakable in the 1826–1827 lectures:

⁴⁹ The eighteenth-century biblical scholar J.S. Semler argued for a concept of the "perfectibility" of Christian doctrine, according to which Christ's activity and teaching could be subsequently improved and perfected by further cultural and moral development. See Gottfried HORNIG, "Der Perfektabilitätsgedanke bei J.S. Semler," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 72(1975), 4: 381-397; cf. CSI, 138.

⁵⁰ CS, 28-32.

⁵¹ Ibidem, 23.

⁵² Ibidem, 29-30.

⁵³ Ibidem, 29.

All this depends solely on the notion (*Vorstellung*) that one has of the person of Christ. If one has a purely natural (*natürliche*) notion, then one must say he could bring forward nothing other than what human reason would have also found later. But if one says that with the person of Christ and through Christ something has become real and appears in human nature, which previously was not there and now too can occur only there (*darin*) insofar as the union with Christ exists, then one must admit that, nevertheless, human reason does not have this by itself. Therefore, the existence of a special Christian ethics (*christlichen Sittenlehre*) stands and falls with the superhuman (*übermenschlichen*) notion of the person of Christ, and for the purely naturalistic view of Christianity it is always inconsistent to set forth a separate Christian ethics and consistent always to become involved in the teaching of pure reason.⁵⁴

No less than his *Glaubenslehre*, then, Schleiermacher's *Christliche Sittenlehre* has its basis in the conviction of the "uniqueness of Christ" (*die Einzigkeit Christi*) and the "distinctive dignity of Christ" (*die eigenthümliche Dignität Christi*).⁵⁵ The original influence introduced in the Redeemer perseveres in the Spirit and forms the abiding basis and continuing principle of action within the Christian community. This founding influence also lends the various expressions of Christian action their characteristic shape. Schleiermacher's lectures describe Christian action in threefold fashion, first as it reflects within itself the blessedness of this connection to the Redeemer through representational (*darstellendes*) action, and then as it steps forward to advance this efficacious historical influence through the two further forms of purifying (*reinigendes*) and propagative (*verbreitendes*) action.⁵⁶ Distinctively Christian action, for Schleiermacher, thus does not proceed from the lofty prescriptions of a consecrated moral law but from the lively communication of grace through Christ and the Spirit. His ethics depicts Christian action not as an otherworldly form of life operating outside normal historical development but as a productive force at work within it, proceeding forth from the Christian community to modify and transform existing institutions, social customs, and historical structures.⁵⁷ Accordingly, the emphasis on redemption through Christ not only distinguishes the origin of this new life but also its end. The aim of Christ's redemptive activity is to "encompass the entire human life" (*das ganze menschliche Leben umfassen*), not by annulling the

⁵⁴ Ibidem, 30-31. Translation by author.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, 350; cf. 10-11.

⁵⁶ Schleiermacher's mature conception of *Christliche Sittenlehre* is organized around these three forms of distinctively Christian action. See K.M. VANDER SCHEL, *Embedded Grace*, 168-176.

⁵⁷ On this point, see *ibidem*, 189-215.

forces and phenomena of the natural and historical world but by mediating itself within them.⁵⁸

In this fashion, Schleiermacher's *Christliche Sittenlehre* aligns with neither the rationalist nor the supranaturalist positions but once more exhibits the subtle theme of the "supernatural-becoming-natural." The influence of Christ introduces a new beginning, spurring historical human living to its completion in the reign of God:

Christ is the starting point from which the divine life in the human being took its origin, and the endpoint... can be none other than that the entire society of human beings will be taken up into his life (*die ganze menschliche Gesellschaft in sein Leben wird aufgenommen werden*).⁵⁹

6. CONCLUSION

These reflections upon the descriptive theme of the supernatural-becoming-natural in Schleiermacher's theological works cast light on a consistent feature of the treatment of Christ in his dogmatic thought. Shifting away from more established formulas and categories in Christology, and setting aside the prevalent rationalist and supranaturalist views of his time, his work attends to the specific challenge of grasping the character of Christ's ongoing redemptive influence in history. His dogmatic works describe redemption through Christ neither as illuminating a general set of moral truths available to all persons of sound reason nor as signaling an extrinsic supernatural order fitted atop the existing natural and historical world. Instead, the appearance of Christ initiates a new and higher life that exercises a continued influence within human history. It distinguishes a subtle yet decisive form of historical causality: the enlivening influence of the Redeemer that transforms the created world from within, elevating it to its completed perfection in the reign of God.

While this unique dynamic gives Schleiermacher's Christology a somewhat peculiar shape, his work nonetheless responds to central and enduring questions in the tradition of christological thought, as it reflects upon the singular "self-communication" (*Selbstmitteilung*) of God to humanity revealed in the

⁵⁸ CS, 17, 43-44.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 277-278.

figure of Christ.⁶⁰ Moreover, despite the unusual language of his account of Christ's person and work, Schleiermacher argues that it remains faithful to the underlying biblical understandings of the incarnation: Therefore if this expression departs greatly from the previous language of the schools, it rests nevertheless on the Pauline "God was in Christ" (*Gott war in Christo*) and on the Johannine "the Word became flesh" (*das Wort ward Fleisch*)....⁶¹

Yet Schleiermacher's considerations also offer a further insight for modern and contemporary treatments of the doctrine of Christ. He presents the redeeming revelation of God in Christ not as a somber matter of long-settled ecclesiastical formulas but as a fresh source of wonder, which should evoke awe and inspire sustained critical thinking within the Christian community. The task of Christology, within his dogmatic system, remains ever incomplete. It continuously calls for new interpretation, insight, and criticism in order to remove misunderstandings and uncover the abiding meaning of the appearance of the Redeemer in history.⁶² In this fashion, beyond the particular aspects of his portrayal of Christ, Schleiermacher's dogmatic writings provide a notable contribution to what remains a significant difficulty in philosophical and theological thought: the challenge of coordinating the ongoing meaningfulness of Christ with the contingency of historical living.

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⁶⁰ CF, §169; see also §97, KGA I.13.2: 70: "In the union of the divine nature with the human [nature], the divine alone was active or self-communicating, and the human only passive or taken up [...]." This distinction complicates the frequent portrayal of Schleiermacher's Christology as 'from below.' For a fuller discussion of this point, see Kevin W. HECTOR, "Actualism and Incarnation: The High Christology of Friedrich Schleiermacher," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8(2006), 3: 307-322.

⁶¹ CF, §96.3, KGA I.13.2: 69-70.

⁶² CF, §95.

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CHRYSTUS I DOSKONAŁOŚĆ STWORZENIA
W TEOLOGII DOGMATYCZNEJ SCHLEIERMACHERA

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Artykuł stanowi próbę nowego odczytania roli odkupienia realizowanego przez Chrystusa w historii i świecie natury. Koncepcja teologiczna Friedricha Schleiermachersa jest źródłem licznych kontrowersji i dyskusji, z uwagi na jego rozumienie nadprzyrodzonego i objawionego charakteru Jezusa Chrystusa poprzez silne akcentowanie roli uczucia (*Gefühl*) oraz religijnej podmiotowości w refleksji teologicznej. W kontraście do powyższej opinii, artykuł stanowi próbę odzyskania unikalnego spojrzenia Schleiermachersa na chrystologię poprzez skoncentrowanie się na powracającym temacie „supernatural-becoming-natural”. Objawienie się i rola zbawcza Chrystusa nie oznacza dla niego ani absolutnej nadprzyrodzoności, ani absolutnej przyrodzoności. Schleiermacher opisuje Jezusa Chrystusa jako inaugurującego decydujący i nieprzekraczalny wpływ na historię, a jednocześnie taki, który pośredniczy w świecie przyrody, nie naruszając jej autonomii, aby doprowadzić ją do transformacji ludzkiej historii od wewnątrz. Jest to zasadniczy ruch w kierunku doskonalenia i dopełnienia świata i historii.

Słowa kluczowe: Schleiermacher; chrystologia; łaska; historia; racjonalizm.