

Faith, language and experience: An analysis of the feeling of absolute dependence

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Abstract

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This article deals with the essence of religion proposed by Schleiermacher, namely 'the feeling of absolute dependence upon the Infinite'. In his theory of religious experience, and the language he used to express it, he claimed his work to be independent of concepts and beliefs. Epistemologically this is incompatible. In our century, where Christianity needs to be reinterpreted in the light of modern science, Schleiermacher has left us with a hermeneutical challenge to communicate the dynamic experience of a relationship with God in an intelligible way. The author argues that systematic theology's obligation to rationality must at least include a dialectic interplay of interpretative schemes, events and experience.

*Communication is sharing the wonder of experience with other people.
Therefore I am dedicated to communicate through music.*

Leonard Bernstein
(70th Anniversary Concert 1989: Boston Symphony Orchestra)

For the past two centuries, the issue of 'religious experience' has been central to the work of religious thinkers and scholars of religion. The late eighteenth and the early years of the nineteenth century, especially, figure prominently as the period in which the desire originated for an accurate description and explanation of that experience

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(Proudfoot 1985:xi, 1; cf 196-198).

The emergence of the concept of religious experience and its centrality for religious thought stems largely from the work of the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who merited the title 'Pioneer of modern theology' (Clements 1987:7). The explicit aim of his first book *On religion - speeches to the cultured among its despisers* (published in 1799), was to free religious doctrine and practice from dependence on metaphysical beliefs and ecclesiastical institutions for their justification, and to ground them in human experience (cf Hebblethwaite 1972:264). Schleiermacher wrote this book to convince his friends and fellow members of a circle of Romantic artists, poets, and Berlin critics that their sensibilities were more in tune with the genuine spirit of religious life than much that went on in churches and synagogues.

Schleiermacher's concept of religion was inspired and shaped, inter alia, by the pietistic (Moravian) tradition that nurtured him (cf Proudfoot 1985:224-227), as well as by the world of the Enlightenment (the 'Age of Reason') into which he was born, and against which he took a firm stand. Twenty-two years after his first book, he wrote another (for the proposed union of the Lutheran and Reformed churches in Prussia): *The Christian Faith: Presented systematically according to the fundamental doctrines of the Evangelical Church*. In the second book he provided a more careful statement of the relation between religious doctrine and experience (Proudfoot 1985:xiii, 16, 31, 238).

Schleiermacher was the earliest and most systematic proponent to appreciate religion as an autonomous and independent moment of experience with its own integrity - 'the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things, in and through the Infinite' (Clements 1987:24, 36). This is a moment which is irreducible to science or morality, belief or conduct, and in principle invulnerable to rational and moral criticism. Any attempt to assimilate (the essence of) religion in scientific or moral paradigms, or any other nonreligious phenomena, would be an attempt to reduce it to something other than it is. For Schleiermacher reductionism would thus be the chief error to be avoided in the study of religion (Proudfoot 1985:xiv, 2-3, 6, 9, 233).

His ascription of religion to the realm of feeling marked the start of modern Protestantism's habitual emphasis on the knowledge of God as being inward and experiential. It was actually part of a whole new (relational) anthropology of human existence, in which he offered 'a positive, new vision of what it is to be truly human, in a wholeness, richness and freedom not known by the passing wisdom of the age' (Clements 1987:36, 37).

The opening chapter of Proudfoot's book *Religious Experience* (which is the focal point of this paper) is an examination and criticism of Schleiermacher's theory of religious experience, with particular attention being given to his claim that it is independent of concepts and beliefs, as well as to his account of the way that experience is expressed in language.

THE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTER OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Schleiermacher was concerned to show the distinctive character of religion, and to present it in its most original form. Unlike orthodox Christians, Jews and Enlightenment critics who depicted religion as 'a system of beliefs or doctrines or as a moral code prescribing behavior' (Proudfoot 1985:2; cf Clements 1987:8-15), he first wanted to show that the religious component in experience has its own integrity, by presenting an accurate description of the religious consciousness itself. He wanted to show the artists and critics with whom he associated that what they despised was not religion, but the dogmas and institutions that result from mistaking external forms for the inner life of the spirit.

Secondly, Schleiermacher hoped that by presenting religion in its original, characteristic form, he would demonstrate the inapplicability of the Enlightenment's criticism of religious belief, and especially of Immanuel Kant's contention that our experience is structured by the categories and thoughts we bring to it (cf Hebblethwaite 1972:266; Clements 1987:10, 11).

For Schleiermacher 'descriptive accuracy is to be obtained and reductionism is to be avoided by insisting on the immediacy of religious experience, and on its radical independence from beliefs and practices. It is a moment in human experience which remains unstructured by, though it is expressed in thoughts and actions' (Proudfoot 1985:3). Proudfoot (1985:3, 11, 228, 229, 233) finds this theory of the immediacy of the religious experience epistemologically inadequate, although descriptively accurate. To use Pannenberg's distinction: 'Psychologically' (from the subject's point of view) the experience seems to be immediate and non-inferential, but 'logically' (as most contemporary philosophers of religion would agree) it cannot be totally independent of concepts, beliefs, grammatical rules and linguistic practices (cf Van Huyssteen 1986:154-158).

Within the Kantian context a moment of religious experience unstructured by the forms and categories of the mind would be no knowledge and would have no epistemological significance. According to Proudfoot's evaluation of Schleiermacher, the fact that God is always the intentional object of religious experience would implicitly mean that such piety would at least have some cognitive value (cf

Proudfoot 1985:5, 6, 11, 35).

From a twentieth-century perspective, this immediately brings the complexities of human communication to the fore. When on the subjective side of experience, we necessarily 'bring to and extract from experience a variety of attitudes, presuppositions, and schemata of interpretation, which change from age to age. Not only do our subjective attitudes vary, but also what is to count as an objective event varies according to our interpretative presuppositions' (Hebblethwaite 1972:265). With this in mind, it seems to me that Schleiermacher, if I understand him correctly, lost sight of this inevitable aspect of communication.

Schleiermacher also resisted Kant's identification of religion with morality (in terms of reason). In doing so he gave priority to the religious affections. In this way he contributed to a tradition in which religious experience as affective experience, and differentiated from both intellect and will, would be regarded as the original and characteristic form of religion. In this tradition scholars like William James and Rudolf Otto would at least agree that the original and characteristic form of religion is a pious consciousness, a sense or feeling that is not to be identified with either belief or practice (Proudfoot 1985:7; cf Clements 1987:36-40, 66-107).

THE PRIORITY OF THE AFFECTIVE MODE

In his book *On Religion* Schleiermacher identifies true religion as a sense, an affection, an intuition, a taste for the Infinite (Proudfoot 1985:9-11; Clements 1987:36). In *The Christian Faith* he describes this sense more clearly as 'the feeling of total or absolute dependence' (Proudfoot 1985:17-19, 22-23, 31-34; Clements 1987:37). According to him religion, or piety (man's yearning for God), is distinct from both the theoretical and practical functions of reason (the making of moral judgments). In opposition to the Enlightenment tendency to rationalism and abstraction (i.e. the cognitive mode), he views 'feeling' (the inward, emotional nature of religion) as the means of apprehending God (Clements 1987:66). For him the point of origin or the essence of religion is neither a way of thinking nor a way of acting, neither a set of beliefs nor a collection of practices. It is a matter of *feeling*. It is directly experienced, not shaped by thought, and is raised above all error and misunderstanding (Proudfoot 1985:10-12).

But while Schleiermacher contends that religious experience is immediate and independent from thought, this experience includes an intuitive and intentional component whose object is the Infinite (cf Clements 1987:37). He keeps on saying that it is not dependent on concepts and beliefs, yet it can be specified only by reference to the concept of the Infinite. This combination is an impossible one: 'If

the feeling is intentional, it cannot be specified apart from reference to its object and thus it cannot be independent of thought' (Proudfoot 1985:11; cf 13, 32-36, 237 footnote 7). Attitudes, emotions, and beliefs are intentional and always directed toward objects. A thought is always a thought of something. Schleiermacher thinks that he has identified a moment of consciousness independent of thought and yet still having cognitive significance. In actual fact his claim functions as a protective strategy which precludes any conflict between religious belief and the results of scientific inquiry (Proudfoot 1985:199-209, 233).

Since piety is an immediate sense, Schleiermacher argues, it cannot be understood by description but only by acquaintance, by discovery in oneself (cf Hick 1969:20-22, 26). Therefore Schleiermacher would direct his listener or reader to such a particular moment in his or her own experience (Proudfoot 1985:11-12; cf 36-37). The word 'experience' by definition implies a first hand, personal acquaintance of something. The word itself is derived from the Latin verb 'experior', meaning try, prove, put to the test, the state of being consciously affected by an event (Hebblethwaite 1972:265).

For Schleiermacher the study of religion and religious thought ought to be approached as the attempt to describe that experience through an examination of its expressions. One of his criteria for identifying an experience as religious is that it be caused or produced by God. 'The sum total of religion is to feel that our being and living is a being and living in and through God' (Schleiermacher, as quoted by Proudfoot 1985:14). A second criterion for identifying the religious consciousness includes reference not only to concepts but also to a specific belief about how the experience is to be explained, in spite of Schleiermacher's insistence that religious ideas be restricted to descriptions of religious affections.

To summarise, one can say that Schleiermacher's account of religion as an affective state has two components. First, that ideas and principles are foreign to religion (which is rather a matter of feeling), distinct from and prior to concepts and beliefs, in other words pre-linguistic, pre-reflective and therefore irreducible (Proudfoot 1985:22, 23, 31). Second, he identifies piety as a sense and taste for the Infinite, an identification that requires reference to God, and which also assumes a judgment that this feeling is the result of divine operation. According to Proudfoot (1985:15, 32, 33) these components are incompatible: 'Piety cannot be independent of concepts and beliefs and at the same time an intentional state that can only be specified by reference to objects of thought and explanatory claims'. Schleiermacher has mistaken a felt sense of immediacy for a guarantee that piety is not formed or shaped by thought or inference (Proudfoot 1985:36; cf 211). Even in his later work this incompatibility remains.

In this regard Hebblethwaite (1972:266) would probably add: 'To identify some experience as an experience of God is to correlate my subjective states, my feelings and impressions, with a whole interpretative scheme given to me by my religion' (cf Van Huyssteen 1986:154). By that he does not deny the importance of one's subjective state. What Hebblethwaite probably means is that his interpretative scheme makes sense of his subjective experience, and this enables him to construe it as an experience of God. This links up with the main thought in John Hick's striking article (1969:25; cf 33-35): 'To recognise or identify is to experience - as in terms of a concept; and our concepts are social products having their life within a particular linguistic environment.' Hick offers a theory by which faith is considered 'the interpretative element within our cognitive religious experience' (1969:33) - the element 'within what the religious man reports as his experience of living in the presence of God' (1969:35).

The interpretation is not just read off the experience however, as if experience were, in itself, authenticating. Any particular experience, if it is claimed to be an experience of God, can only be identified as such within the whole framework of interpretation which a given religion provides. In fact, in the case of Christianity it is the already interpreted fact of Jesus Christ that provides the criterion for identifying a specifically Christian experience of God (Hebblethwaite 1972:267, 269; cf Van Huyssteen 1986:155, 160-162; Hick 1969:32, 33).

In *On Religion* Schleiermacher gives a romantic account of religion which had its roots in eighteenth-century pietism, but had not been given a clear intellectual formulation in that context. He incorporates the insight of the pietists that religion is chiefly a matter of the heart, of the affections. But this thesis provides no criteria for distinguishing between more or less adequate theological formulations. If the essence of piety consists in the immediate relation of the self to the Infinite, *how* can religious doctrine be critically assessed? (Proudfoot 1985:15, 16).

Schleiermacher addressed this question in his later work, *The Christian Faith*, in which he developed a new theological method. His most important contribution, according to Proudfoot (1985:16), was to describe the task of systematic theology as 'the science that systemizes the doctrine prevalent in a particular community at a specific time'. But what is that doctrine if it is not a collection of beliefs? 'The subject matter of theology is neither God nor evidence of divine creation and governance in the world but the self-consciousness of the religious believer in the context of his or her community' (Proudfoot 1985:16; cf Clements 1987:37). The theologian is an empiricist, says Schleiermacher, and his aim is to provide an accurate account of the religious affections within a particular community.

'Religious communities, like individuals, are characterized by their own peculiar

states of affection. These states are expressed in primary religious language, which is the relatively un-self-conscious language of hymns, prayer, personal journals, and preaching. The theologian examines this primary language for its coherence and its clarity in expressing the religious affections of that community. He then systemizes it in the secondary language of his discipline' (Proudfoot 1985:16).

THE FEELING OF ABSOLUTE DEPENDENCE

Schleiermacher's dual thesis that piety is independent of thought and practice, and that it has an intentional object, is made more precise in *The Christian Faith*. 'The common element in the religious consciousness is now specified not as a sense and taste for the infinite, ...but as a feeling of absolute or total dependence upon a source or power that is distinct from the world' (Proudfoot 1985:17, 31-33; Clements 1987:99-102). Schleiermacher (as quoted by Proudfoot 1985:19; Clements 1987:99) puts it this way: 'The self-identical essence of piety, is this: the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or, which is the same thing, of being in relation with God'. The sense of finitude is thus being equated with the consciousness of being in relation to God.

Far from being a kind of subjectivism, the self-consciousness of which Schleiermacher speaks is a consciousness of the self in a relationship - as determined by, or acted upon by, what is other than the self. It is the self as well as the whole finite realm grounded in the Infinite. Ultimately, the heart of religious awareness is our consciousness of the world as the medium through which the infinite God is acting upon us. It is a sense of ourselves and all else being utterly dependent on the Infinite (Clements 1987:37, 38).

Piety so defined, however, is certainly not independent of concepts and beliefs. To say that the religious person is conscious of being absolutely dependent is to attribute to him or her some rather sophisticated concepts and beliefs, including the concept of complete dependence, as well as that of some source on which he is totally dependent. The concept of total dependence assumes at least the concept of God. The content of the concept of God, says Schleiermacher, is derived from the immediate moment of consciousness, rather than the religious consciousness being derived from or shaped by the concept of God. The word God presupposes an idea that is 'nothing more than the expression of the feeling of absolute dependence' (Proudfoot 1985:20, 21; cf 31-32). In Schleiermacher's view, that would at the same time mean that God takes the initiative in imparting faith and new life to the believer (cf Clements 1987:55). Religious experience is thus considered the origin of religious beliefs and practices, and of models and theories in theology, in which it

finds its expression, and not vice-versa.

Against this, Hebblethwaite (1972:271; cf 275) would argue that 'doctrine is not rightly understood in terms of some original experience, but in terms of its ability as a rationally structured system to make sense of the actual relation between God and man', that is, to interpret experience in a dynamic way. This can obviously only happen when the particular framework of interpretation (still) communicates *life* and *meaning*.

Although Schleiermacher does disclaim any attempt to practise natural theology, many have criticised him for equating religious experience with a subjective feeling that has no cognitive component and which may even be a personal or cultural artefact (Proudfoot 1985:21, 22, 31). Apart from the epistemological criticism that can rightly be voiced against Schleiermacher's theory of religion, one has to appreciate his very important contribution towards an intensely relational view of humanity, and man's experience of this reality. He saw 'that in the face of rationalism and post-Christian Romanticism, there was a crucial need to state the unique and essential nature of religion as an indelible aspect of human existence, not an antique and superfluous adornment' (Clements 1987:36). The 'feeling of absolute dependence' represents that primary moment when we are virtually one with the object in consciousness, the infinite God.

The feeling of absolute dependence can further only be communicated and cultivated by human fellowship, one to another. Here is one point where in Schleiermacher's case theology and life converge most conspicuously (Clements 1987:37, 38). 'The religious consciousness, especially, is drawn into a fascination with how the Spirit has affected selves in other times and contexts, and in this way the self becomes part of a still wider communion, educative and enriching, in a fellowship where communication takes place even across the centuries' (Clements 1987:39).

RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE AS EXPRESSION

An integral part of Schleiermacher's programme is the assimilation of religious language to natural and spontaneous expression (Proudfoot 1985:30). His opposition to reductionism enters his claim that the religious moment in consciousness is original. By that he means that (1) it can be accurately described only as a feeling of absolute dependence; and (2) it is not an artefact of the constructive activity of the mind, and is not dependent on concepts, thoughts, or cultural representations of any kind. Religious language derives from the distinctive moment of immediate self-consciousness, and is to be explained by reference to the religious affections, and

not vice-versa (Proudfoot 1985:23, 30-31).

In Schleiermacher's theory of religious language the expressive function of the language is dominant, in so far as it expresses the peculiar piety that is distinctive of a particular religious community. In his *On Religion* he (quoted by Proudfoot 1985:16) said: 'Christian doctrines are accounts of the religious affections set forth in speech'. But before undertaking to describe and systematise the affections of a particular religious community, one must clarify *how* religious affections are set forth in speech, and *how* language expresses the self-consciousness of an individual or community (Proudfoot 1985:17, 24).

Schleiermacher addresses these questions directly in *The Christian Faith*. He offers a theory by which religious language is to be interpreted and explained by reference to the religious affections of which it is the expression. Primary or original religious language for him is an extension of natural expression. According to him feelings can determine speech in either of two ways: by manifesting themselves naturally and spontaneously in language, or by employing language in reflection upon one's mental state. The first is a natural expression of piety in speech, the second a figurative expression, indicating its object in an indirect way (Proudfoot 1985:24, 32).

The central thesis of Schleiermacher's doctrine is that religious language is determined by the religious affections and not by antecedent thought. The emotions spontaneously manifest themselves in language. All religious emotions will at some stage manifest themselves outwardly in the most immediate and spontaneous way by means of facial features and movements of voice and gesture (i.e. non-verbal language), which he regards as their expression. 'In fact, religious affections may be expressed in sacred signs and symbolic acts...without words or thoughts having been associated with them at all. They are independent of concepts and thoughts, though they naturally express themselves in language' (Proudfoot 1985:25).

According to Alston (1965:15-34), these kinds of 'expression' would not be regarded as an adequate and reliable expression of religion. He argues that non-verbal utterances like squeals, looks, and tones of voice do not express feelings in anything like the sense in which they are expressed verbally by interjections or declarative sentences in the first person, present tense. In terms of his distinction between regularities and rules, he would rather say that non-verbal communication shows, demonstrates, evinces, manifests or betrays (indicates) a certain feeling, but that it does not necessarily *express* it.

My conclusion from Alston's very meaningful article is that expression as a verbal or non-verbal utterance of religious feeling can only be valid and reliable (according to the 'rule' of Scripture) when these two (words and deeds) correspond

(cf Alston 1965:21, 23-25, 30, 31). The reliability of any kind of meaningful communication/expression, to my mind, further depends on the willingness of the speaker to be open/honest and sincere, on his/her personality type and cultural background, his/her ability to express himself, on the situation/context, and on the sensitivity of the hearer/observer.

Schleiermacher further contends that two forms of primary and original speech can be identified in every religious community: the poetic and the rhetorical. Poetic language results from the natural expression of a mental state, in which the impetus for expression comes strictly from within; rhetorical language is elicited by a stimulus from without. Primary religious language includes both. A third type, namely didactic language, is derivative and secondary, and results from the attempt to comprehend what is given in a direct way in the poetic and rhetorical forms. These three types of speech complement one another in the expression of the underlying religious self-consciousness (Clements 1987:134-135). But, Schleiermacher concludes, the authority of doctrinal propositions stems only from the religious consciousness that they express and represent (Proudfoot 1985:25, 26).

Schleiermacher has thus offered a theory of religion in which religious language and practice are derived from religious experience conceived as feeling, and not the other way around. In other words, he claims that the common element in religious experience is the feeling of absolute dependence. But, as we have seen, that necessarily includes reference to a co-determinant ('a stimulus from without') of that feeling, a 'whence' that is the source of the religious use of the term 'God'. For him this experience is immediate, original, and underived - independent of any concepts and beliefs.

To maintain this independence, the distinctive character of doctrine must be produced by the religious consciousness. Schleiermacher cannot allow the possibility that the common element in religious experience itself derives from or is essentially dependent on something else - like the language employed to express it. Were that the case, the descriptive and explanatory priority he attributes to the religious consciousness would be compromised. He wants to avoid a reduction of the feeling of absolute dependence either by descriptions of that feeling which omit reference to its codeterminant, or by purported explanations of piety which portray it as consequent upon antecedent concepts and beliefs (Proudfoot 1985:30, 31). This seems to be incompatible.

From a twentieth-century perspective we realise that the wonder of religious experience can only be expressed, described and explained in terms of metaphorical and relational language, which necessarily depends on the symbolic ability and linguistic framework of the one experiencing (cf McFague 1982:1-66; Van Huys-

steen 1986:151-168). Metaphorical faith language refers to a Reality - which lies beyond our intellectual grasp - in a way that is not only expressive, but also explains (in a reliable though provisional way) that which has been experienced (Van Huyssteen 1986:158-163, 176).

EXPRESSIONS AND THOUGHT

So far we have seen that, according to Schleiermacher, piety is chiefly a matter of feeling - a receptive mode of consciousness which is unstructured by the forms and categories of the mind. He argues that religious experience may be expressed in thought, but that thought does not constitute the experience. For this programme to succeed, religious language and doctrines must be viewed not as assertions or judgments, but as extensions of the natural and spontaneous expressions of the sense or consciousness, that is, primary religious language. For Schleiermacher the connection between religious consciousness (i.e. the inner states of an individual or religious community) and language is unproblematic. Secondary religious language develops out of an attempt to understand and interpret religious consciousness expressed in primary language (Proudfoot 1985:31-34, 43).

Schleiermacher's thesis that religious language is grounded in and continuous with the natural expression of inner states is indeed a complicated one. He attempts to associate religious language with non-linguistic phenomena, yet claims that it can develop naturally to such a point that it can be considered an account or interpretation of religious consciousness. He wants to show that the language of religious belief and doctrine emerges from the religious affections, without being contaminated, and it is thus reduced by thoughts and claims about the world, which might make it vulnerable to philosophical criticism. The link between the direct utterances of the religious moment and religious language is thus not a logical or grammatical one, but a causal one. His theory of the expressive character of religious language is thus meant to be an explanation of the emergence of that language (Proudfoot 1985:34, 38).

For Schleiermacher religious statements would not be true or false in the same sense that either scientific or philosophical statements are (cf Hebblethwaite 1972:267), but they can be assessed for their coherence and their adequacy in expressing the religious consciousness. Such assessments, Proudfoot (1985:35, 36) rightly argues, assume that they have a logical structure and that religious consciousness has a conceptual component. No class of behaviour, including linguistic behaviour, can be designated as expressive without qualification. Depending on the context and circumstances in which it appears, it is expressive

only when it provides evidence that warrants an inference of some belief, desire, emotion, or attitude. To identify something as an expression is to offer an explanation of that phenomenon and regard it as evidence for the ascription of an intentional state. For Schleiermacher, though, the feeling of absolute dependence is an original moment within the mind which cannot be explained away; for him this is of course not an argument for the validity of that feeling (Proudfoot 1985:38, 231).

The recognition that religious language is not only constitutive, but often also expressive (shaped by certain affections), remains one of Schleiermacher's contributions to the study of religion. But it is not only the expressive, receptive medium he takes it to be. It also plays a very active and formative role in shaping emotions and religious experience (Proudfoot 1985:39, 40, 221; cf Hebblethwaite 1972:267; Van Huyssteen 1986:156-158).

Schleiermacher's strong emphasis on the role of experience in determining the content of Christian doctrine would probably qualify for Hebblethwaite's critique (1972:263, 264) on the one-sided appeal to experience which is often found in Christology. He finds the claim to experience in order to establish Christian doctrine inadequate and insufficient. By analysing the concept of experience and the scope of appeals to experience, he shows that appeals to Christian experience should never be expected to decide the credibility of Christian doctrine.

Hebblethwaite (1972:264) argues that the widespread tendency to take refuge in appeals to experience - after the collapse of the old authorities of Scripture and tradition - has been too hasty. That is not the only resort when the old authorities have gone. In his article (1972:268, 275, 278) he suggests a positive alternative criterion of rationality, namely, an appeal to the 'inner rationale' (which I understand as the determining 'cosmological perspective' or life and world view - cf Rousseau 1986:57-63, 400-414) of the interpretative scheme of Christian doctrine, that is, its dynamic and creative ability to interpret experience in an intelligible way.

CONCLUSION

The concept of religion and the idea of religious experience are both products of modern, Western, largely Christian, thought of the past three centuries. They have developed during a period in which Christianity has been criticised and reinterpreted in the light of modern science, the recognition of the varieties of religious belief and practice in other cultures, and the collapse of the appeal to such traditional authorities as metaphysics, scripture, and ecclesiastical pronouncements (Proudfoot 1985:232).

Schleiermacher's argument for the autonomy of religious experience is a protective strategy built on an erroneous separation of religious life from ordinary belief and inquiry, which resulted in an artificial block to inquiry, and which would normally serve an apologetic purpose. This resulted in the use of ambiguous terms like 'immediate', 'original', 'sense', and 'experience', each of which can be read in such a way as to capture the experience from the subject's point of view and remain neutral to the proper explanation of the experience (Proudfoot 1985:233, 234).

Schleiermacher and his followers left us with the hermeneutic challenge to communicate the dynamic experience of a relationship with God in a way that will be intelligible, that will bring LIFE and make sense to all peoples and cultures of our time. The discussion has at least made us aware of the importance of an ongoing critical reflection on what we understand as 'religious experience'. With our twentieth century knowledge of the multifaceted nature and interrelatedness of human communication, we today realise that the subject of biblical hermeneutics is a complex one (cf Rousseau 1986:19-74). The ongoing reflection will thus at least have to include a continuous critical look at faith as the interpretative scheme of every church and individual, which should encourage us continuously to develop and rewrite Christian doctrine (cf Van Huyssteen 1986:154-163; Hebblethwaite 1972: 269).

Instead of appealing to experience alone for either establishment, refutation or just the keeping alive of religious language and doctrine, the answer probably lies in the dialectic interplay of (1) previous interpretative schemes, (2) particular events (like the Christ event - cf Hick 1969:34), and (3) the individual and group experience of the early church as well as our community today (cf Hebblethwaite 1972:267-278; Van Huyssteen 1986:177-187). This could be a meaningful part of an ongoing 'cumulative argument' which might lead to explain in an increasingly adequate and credible way why it makes sense to believe in the living God (cf Proudfoot 1985:43, 63, 69-74, 216-227).

In other words - as Christian believers we live in the constant hope and expectation that the Spirit of God will continuously inspire us to find relevant methods and theories which will bring us nearer to experiencing and expressing in a valid and plausible way something of the paradox of religious experience - that which in actual fact is beyond our understanding.

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