Dogmatics of Redemption

The Nature and Status of Christian Doctrine within the *Glaubenslehre*

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My contribution to this volume is to clarify §15 of the *Glaubenslehre*: *"Christian doctrines are accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech."*[1] But since this proposition alone seems too formal, I shall connect it to §14: *"There is no other way of obtaining participation in the Christian communion than through faith in Jesus as the Redeemer."*[2] What I propose to discuss, then, is the relationship between *doctrine as speech* (*Glaubenssatz als Rede*) and human *affect* (*Gemütszustand*), and this in light of the meaning of Christian *redemption* (*Erlösung*). To do this, I will devote the first section of my paper to a characterization of the place of the *The Christian Faith* in the history of Christian doctrine. We will see that the *position* of the *Glaubenslehre* in this historical framework (which I understand to indicate the *nature* of Christian doctrine) will require us to seek out the *function* of the *Glaubenslehre* within religious communication (which I understand as indicative of the *status* of Christian doctrine). My thesis will be that Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre* represents a modern type of dogmatics that is able to serve as a hermeneutical instrument for interpreting human life as well as a means for the kerygmatic deepening of Christian faith.

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1 "Christliche Glaubenssätze sind Auffassungen der christlich frommen Gemütszustände in der Rede dargestellt." Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt* (1830/31), in KGA I/13.1, §15. Henceforth CG, followed by the proposition.

2 "Es gibt keine andere Art, an der christlichen Gemeinschaft Anteil zu erhalten, als durch den Glauben an Jesum als den Erlöser" (ibid., §14).

1. The *Glaubenslehre* within the History of Christian Doctrine: Or, the Nature of Christian Doctrine in Schleiermacher

It is obvious that the source and role of Christian doctrine has changed in history. However, we must assume at the very beginnings of Christianity a religious communication issuing from a Jewish context and closely related to the Old Testament, yet concentrated on the person and the fate of Jesus in a such a manner that a transition (*Übergang*) was provoked and a new religious movement came into existence. The New Testament contains evidence of many tensions and divergent accents involved in its formation, a wealth of understandings kept in check only by the local preferences of diverse early traditions bearing witness to Jesus. As soon as Christianity became a religious institution, the need to unify its core message had to be emphasized. The birth of doctrine, then, occurred with this binding together of various modes of preaching and religious self-understanding in early Christianity. It is admirable that the ancient church was able to concentrate so intensely on the essentials of Christianity, namely, on the conceptions of the triune God and of Jesus as God-man. And it is clear that these two insights belong closely together; one cannot exist without the other. But it is also clear that the concentration on these fundamentals had immense strategic relevance for religious proclamation within early Christianity: by identifying the distinguishing characteristics of what counts as essentially Christian, such core doctrines served as touchstones for Christian preaching during the time of transition to a new religion. We can characterize this kind of doctrine as a type of *prescriptive dogmatics*.

Matters change when the Christian faith becomes "universal." The catholic period of Christianity still has its transitions (*Übergänge*) to faith, conversions that happen more or less voluntarily. But now the character of doctrine begins to change. It no longer tends to prescribe a particular standard of preaching and basic structures of faith for the purpose of reaching certainty, but aspires to describe the givenness of this world and the character of eternity beyond. The religious function recedes and doctrine begins to take on the function of articulating a worldview. This movement is completely concurrent with the transformation of the church into a worldly institution that bears increasing responsibility for the secular lives of believers. Meanwhile, the moment of transition in one's religious life has shifted from conversion as an act of joining the church to a gradual religious progress throughout one's life under the rule of the gospel as the guide to behavior and belief.

This medieval type of *descriptive dogmatics* underwent a severe critique by early Protestantism. The Reformation movement more or less brought the initial emphasis on making a transition to real faith, on constituting an authentic and immediate relation to God, back into the framework of the now widespread Christianity of the time. For this reason, Luther insisted on penance as an outstanding model of Christian renewal. And as we can see in Melanchthon's *Loci*, all of the traditional material of dogmatics was shaped in a new way, namely, concentrated on the overcoming of the law by the gospel, on the forgiveness of sin, and on the justification of the sinner. The emphasis was so strongly laid upon this transition from the person qua sinner to person qua justified in Christ that all questions concerning whether such a change of life must not presuppose some continuities between the Old Adam and the New were ignored or silenced. Dogmatics, however, regained its early function of informing the preaching and guiding the application of the gospel to Christian lives.

If we now place Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre* against this background, we can observe the following: Schleiermacher followed in the tradition of the Reformation by concentrating the whole of Christian doctrine on the process of transition, namely *redemption*. But he attempted to address the unresolved issue concerning the continuity between the old and the new man in a way that was completely different from the medieval Catholic position. He saw that what can and must be respected as the enduring structure with regard to which *redemption* is communicated is not the nexus of man and world, but rather the specifically religious dimension of human existence as lived under the challenge of an non-worldly based freedom. Schleiermacher thereby opened up a new field for the reconstruction of Christian doctrine, namely, religion as an anthropological structure of self-understanding. Correspondingly, he defined a new approach to Christian doctrine—a hermeneutical one that serves to understand the givenness of life and the various attempts to conduct one's life in the spotlight of religious renewal or *redemption*. Religion concerns us in every moment of our lives—this is what is permanent and consistent. But to live life in an individual manner we need to concentrate on the sharp difference between sin and redemption as a means of effecting a singular transition into a heretofore unknown domain of our own lives—this is the moment of transition. Religion establishes independence from the world (*Weltunabhängigkeit*): this is the transformation of the notion of transition under the conditions of an abiding temporal situation. For this reason I propose to call Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre* a *hermeneutical dogmatics*.

Through this characterization, the *Glaubenslehre* finds its place within a typology of Christian doctrine, and such a characterization enables us to see two crucial traits of the *Glaubenslehre*. The first, the anthropological one, has long-term and wide-ranging consequences. As soon as religion is defined as an autonomous dimension of human existence, it can be explored for its own sake. It is not to be submitted to the normal way of understanding human behavior and to the reigning scientific ways of perceiving the world. This, from the perspective of theology, marks the birth of an autonomous Religious Studies. If religion is an anthropological phenomenon, then there must be several methods of dealing with it in a scholarly way. Opening the field of religion means exploring the field for religious competition. That is to say, religious phenomena are compared with each other as such, even though it is true that they always stand in historical contexts related, of course, to concrete surroundings such as culture, climate, technological development, etc. To be sure, the theological approach within the academic study of religion depends upon the study of history—an insofar, it has its necessary historical side. But it is remarkable the extent to which Schleiermacher's conception of dogmatics is able to support and advocate Religious Studies according to their methodological requirements. That means that with respect to Schleiermacher's legacy, a serious conflict between theology and Religious Studies is not necessary.

The second crucial trait I want to highlight is a dogmatic one. Schleiermacher begins his considerations not only from an anthropological point of view—namely, that religion has already touched the interior life of man—but also from the Reformation conviction that belief is the deepest possible determination of the human heart and that this determination has actually occurred. This is the reason for speaking of Christian doctrines as "accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech." If we bear in mind that these affections (*Gemütszustände*) are shaped by the difference that marks the movement of transition (between sin and redemption), then we can see that all statements—or better: communications, so as to include language games—that are formulated to re-present Christian faith are intended to precipitate and accompany this transition. This means, evidently, that they all have a pragmatic use, irrespective of their semantic content. The "setting forth in speech" (*die Darstellung in Rede*) is, strictly speaking, not simply a reflection of religious affections *(innere Gemütszustände)*, but rather a severe critique of the ways in which religious communication is often used in Christianity. Hence, it follows that even the affections lack any suggested immediacy; as born out of a communicative interaction among persons, they are themselves induced by

these communications. Thus, the task of dogmatics in the *Glaubenslehre* is not merely descriptive with regard to inner states of consciousness, but also deliberate and critical towards the claimed immediacy of affections. The work of deliberation taking place in every moment feelings are uttered paves the way for a critical testing of the ostensible immediacy of states of feeling.

Now to summarize the first part of my paper: Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre* represents a type of dogmatics that operates simultaneously in a hermeneutical and a critical-kerygmatic manner. Its hermeneutical aspect invites a relation to Religious Studies and enables the comparison among religions without negating their claims to truth and authenticity. The kerygmatic aspect underscores the critical nature of dogmatics, which is to sharpen by way of reflection and deliberation the way religious experience is modeled in religious communication. A remaining point requires further treatment, namely, the question of how the hermeneutic and the kerygmatic aspects are interwoven. This leads us to the second part of this paper, the *status* of the *Glaubenslehre.*

2. The Function of Christian Doctrine: Or, the Status of the *Glaubenslehre*

What is remarkable is the fact that the function of the *Glaubenslehre* flows directly from its nature. To see this, we need only look more closely at the coherence of the two distinguished aspects. By doing so, we will reach a conclusion that may seem rather surprising.

There can be no doubt that the constructions and distinctions Schleiermacher deals with in the famous third and fourth propositions of the *Glaubenslehre* are among the most important and well-known of his theorems. Nevertheless, they still present a challenge to the understanding. I will here take up just one element of the theory. We all remember well the distinction between "immediate" (*unmittelbares*) and "sensible self-consciousness" (*sinnliches Selbstbewußtsein*). The normal condition is one in which our *self-consciousness* is bound up with the consciousness of states in the world, and that this situation gives us the impression of freedom as well as of dependence. Indeed, if we seek to analyze this situation of the self further, we find that it can neither be derived from a total dependence (which would leave us unable to account for the existence of freedom) nor from an original kind of self-made freedom (which would scarcely be able to explain the occurrence of restrictions in the world—unless, of course, we wished to become Fichteans). In other words: immediate self-consciousness cannot be de-

rived from innerworldly conditions; nor can it immediately posit itself. For this reason we must inquire about an origin of this immediate consciousness that does not itself originate in the world. The important consequence of these well-known reflections is that our innerworldly freedom has a transcendental basis, and, furthermore, that religion is the way we communicate about this structure of our existence. What I wish to stress with regard to this reconstruction of Schleiermacher's theory is the need to hold two kinds of communication together: the religious communication about the foundation of freedom and the everyday communication about the partial realization of freedom in the world. As soon as the specific religious function is distinguished as such (and understood as the absolute basis of finite freedom), there comes into existence a constant tendency that demands realizing freedom in our empirical life. Schleiermacher's identification of this distinction is the beginning of a realization of self-understanding and, consequently, of responsible actions of self-conscious subjects. To put it another way, religions as such bear within themselves an inexorable trend to deal with freedom and to promote freedom, at least once the precise distinction between religious and sensible self-consciousness has been made. In other words, the identification of religion as such as the consciousness of the ground of our finite freedom—the moment when Religious Studies as a field of its own comes into existence—is a landmark on the map of freedom.

If we take this result to be a structural moment within any religion, it is easy to see that the theme of transition becomes crucial for a Christian dogmatics built upon this theoretical basis. We must realize that the distinction in question has been made in time; there was a time before, and now we live in the time after. This performative aspect will be reflected in the structure of any given religion. This means that any religion has to configure the transition from a state of predominant dependence to one of predominant freedom. And the quality of religion can be gauged by its ability to describe the process of transition realistically and accurately. From this perspective, we can appreciate the *Glaubenslehre* as an outstanding example of a dogmatics organized to represent and help realize this transition. Moreover, we can understand—and I am pleased here to be in agreement with Julia Lamm—why Schleiermacher's "treatise on grace" really is the core of his dogmatics.[3] There is not time to discuss this extensively, but allow me at

3 Julia A. Lamm, "Schleiermacher's Treatise on Grace," *Harvard Theological Review* 101, no. 2 (2008): 133-68.

least to give you a brief glimpse into the movement of transition that Schleiermacher has in mind.

"Regeneration" (*Wiedergeburt*, CG §107) is the comprehensive term for this movement as a whole, the transition to a new or redirected life. The metaphor is striking. It refers to a fundamental change of life that can be effected only through the impact of something outstanding. Such a total renewal of life occurs only when the basis of freedom has appeared in a manner we can grasp. This means that we can speak about regeneration only as a consequence of the appearance of Christ as the personal representative of a divinely grounded freedom. Through contact with Christ in the words of the gospel we come under the influence of a new form of life, which we are to adopt in undergoing the transition as a redirection or redetermination of life—"conversion" (*Bekehrung*, CG §108). The moments in this transition unfold as follows: confronted by Christ with the new way of living in the spirit of freedom, we regret being dependent upon any other thing, and we look back to our old determination with a feeling of "repentence" (*Buße*). But we can do this only if we simultaneously look forward and are ready to accept the pure determination by and towards freedom. This is the point of "faith" (*Glaube*), which is the necessary positive counterpart to the negative feeling of repentance. We can say that in this double awareness of repentance and faith we experience a change of determination in our life.

But the change of determination requires accomplishing and fulfilling this new way of life as well. This is the true meaning of "justification" (*Rechtfertigung*, CG §109). We must not forget that we once really acted under the old determination, that is, we performed many wrongful deeds. The vestiges of old life must be erased—and this happens in the "forgiveness of the sins" (*Sündenvergebung*). When we accept this forgiveness—which is clearly a matter of faith—we become "children of God" (*Kinder Gottes*). This "*Gotteskindschaft*" means that we belong totally to God after the transition to a new life. It remains to the doctrine of "sanctification" (*Heiligung*, CG §110), which comes next in Schleiermacher's account, to describe the new form of life (*Lebensform*) as dominating one's life praxis and to inform our thinking so that we do not confound the absolute basis of our freedom with the relatively free actions that are born out of that freedom and represent it.

To summarize this point briefly: In his "treatise on grace," Schleiermacher fully meets the demand to describe the process of transition that is implicitly involved in religion. And he does so by arguing that the transition is absolutely fundamental insofar as it involves a total redirection or redetermination of human existence—just as the meta-

phor of "regeneration" vividly suggests. In this way dogmatics fulfils the role of describing a change in one's form of life and thereby functions as a hermeneutics of life. Without the precision of dogmatic description, life would be poorer and less transparent to itself. With it, dogmatics contributes to the advancement of freedom.

This insight, however, brings us to our next consideration. We hold that dogmatics contributes to the clarification of self-understanding by virtue of its religious symbolization of freedom. But how can we assert that dogmatic description is really capable of producing such a radical transition? Are we to suppose that the conceptual presentation alone is what changes lives?

To answer these questions we must return to the introduction of the *Glaubenslehre*. What is communicated in the hearing of the gospel—the reality of freedom based in God—is not strange to human ears. We want to find a solid foundation for the freedom we feel. But it comes to us powerfully only by the words of Christ in which his inner life finds verbal expression. We must therefore admit that the anthropologically grounded elementary striving for freedom only becomes satisfied by a historical event, a human person. But if there really existed a person such as we suppose Jesus was, then all the words that come to us in the media of historical communication possess an inexhaustible content. Each time that the gospel is preached, freedom is realized in Jesus. What dogmatics, in turn, articulates is nothing other than a structural description of the infinite movement of life as this movement is communicated in and as gospel in historical reality. The process of religious communication in Christianity lives by the reality of Christ present in it. The description of "religious affections" shows itself to be part of a religious movement in which the reality of freedom is symbolized as well as transmitted. If we do not forget the initial insight that the conceptual distinction between religious and sensible self-consciousness implies an act of freedom in itself, we now find that this distinction plays a fundamental role within the universal development of freedom in history. Theological reflection must itself be understood as a matter of realizing freedom, and this holds for the discovery of religion as such.

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Allow me to conclude: I set out to explain two fundamental traits of Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre.* I wanted to emphasize the fact that his dogmatics was proposed at the crossroads of Christian doctrine. It

looks back upon history and takes up the original duty of dogmatics to structure the Christian gospel. Yet it does so by expanding the basis for understanding the gospel to that of the religious field. The religious task of symbolizing "transitions" now becomes the task of actualizing freedom, and this latter task is the distinguishing mark of Christianity among the religions. This leads to the second point I wanted to make: the characterization of a religious transition as the grounding of a new life (regeneration or *Wiedergeburt*) is the most dramatic case of transition that we can imagine. Such a life lives from the reality of liberation that has appeared in Christ. Hence the dogmatic construction also serves this aim—more conceptually, to be sure, but nevertheless with a kerygmatic impact. Thus, as my final thesis concerning the nature and status of Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre,* I would reiterate that it has a kerygmatic as well as a hermeneutical character, and submit that these are the two most crucial attributes for a Church dogmatics in general. For this reason, I would not hesitate to call the *Glaubenslehre* a Church dogmatics of its own kind.

Now given that an overarching theme of this conference is the relationship between theology and the study of religion, permit me one final remark, namely, that the nature and status of the *Glaubenslehre* should be of consequence for theorization in Religious Studies as well. This can be seen in two ways. First, we must not forget that the academic study of religion arose from a specific period in modern intellectual history. In contrast to ancient and early modern philosophies of religion, Religious Studies/*Religionswissenschaft* appears to acknowledge the intrinsic worth of the religions. Overlooked is the fact that Schleiermacher's theory of *immediate self-consciousness* actually offers a theoretically satisfying scheme for articulating the presupposition of Religious Studies. If this were more widely recognized, however, a second consequence not at all at home in Religious Studies circles would follow. Religious Studies practitioners typically respect the particularity of religions by dealing with them historically. The claims for the superiority of one religion over others are ignored, and value judgments are generally suppressed. Yet Schleiermacher's theory of the independent status of religion suggests that such restrictions lack plausibility. According to my reconstruction of his account, anyone who treats religion—to whatever extent and with whatever intensity—and anyone who wishes to examine the specifics of a religion, takes part in the history of realizing freedom. Thus even the most "scholarly" and arid investigation breathes the air of freedom. Likewise, even the most recent politically correct debates regarding the living religions are impregnated by the idea of freedom originating in the religions them-

selves. Religious Studies, therefore, contributes in one way or another to the realization of freedom. Those who advocate Religious Studies understand the program's significance and may, therefore, confidently promote the discipline.