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The Nineteenth Century

All historical labels oversimplify, but there is at least some truth to the idea that in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century the age of reason gave way to an age of Romanticism. Appeals to feeling and intuition challenged the cold rigors of logical analysis. Writers, artists, and musicians took a new interest in tradition—in the particular traditions of their own nations and in the romanticized Middle Ages. All these themes appear in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who dominated German theology in the early part of the century.

His colleague at the University of Berlin, G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), exercised a similar dominance in philosophy. Hegel believed that philosophy must grow out of the riches of history, and his philosophy owed much to the Christian tradition, but his own stance with regard to that tradition remains unclear. He certainly believed that the Trinity and the incarnation are powerful symbols of important philosophical truths, but his interpreters have debated ever since whether he took them only as such symbols or as really embodying claims to historical or ontological truth.

In the generation after Hegel, his more important and more controversial followers took a more radical direction. As a New Testament scholar, D. F. Strauss concluded that the Gospels are unreliable as historical documents and that we can really know little about Jesus. But as a radical Hegelian, Strauss did not think it mattered, since the story of Jesus should really serve as a symbol of eternal philosophical truths. Ludwig Feuerbach went even further. In Friedrich Engels's famous phrase, he turns Hegel right side up. Where Hegel taught that God creates the world through thought, Feuerbach claimed that human beings invent God out of their own imaginations—an idea that has influenced Marx, Freud, and a host of others.

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The Danish writer Søren Kierkegaard posed a different challenge to Hegel and to the general optimism of the century. Where Hegel thought we could make sense of the whole of reality by fitting it into a great system, Kierkegaard insisted that we always live in the midst of an unfinished reality whose direction and shape cannot be proved, and we can therefore be guided only by faith. Where many of his contemporaries sought to get beyond the faith of earlier ages to a more sophisticated level of understanding, Kierkegaard found the heroic faith of earlier times more impressive than the comfortable complacency of his own world.

Some currents in Catholic theology shared that suspicion of the modern age. To be sure, some Catholic theologians, such as Johann Sebastian von Drey (1777–1853), had much in common with Schleiermacher, and at the end of the century Pope Leo XIII made progressive comments on social issues. But the First Vatican Council, in 1870, aggressively reaffirmed much that was traditional in the face of the modern world. The greatest Catholic theologian of the century, John Henry Newman, had begun as an Anglican. He and a number of his friends had founded the Oxford Movement in the Church of England, reemphasizing the importance of doctrine and sacraments in the face of a liberalism that had grown theologically vague. Though Newman himself found that the logic of his position led him to the Church of Rome, the Oxford Movement's influence continues in the "high church" party of the Church of England.

The theology of Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889) and his students dominated Germany in the later nineteenth century as that of Schleiermacher had earlier. Ritschl turned theology away from metaphysics to ethics: an ethics of love, forgiveness, and human efforts to move closer to the kingdom of God. By the end of the century, Ritschlian theology faced at least two challenges. New Testament scholarship seemed to imply that by "the kingdom of God" Jesus had meant a radical, apocalyptic end to the present age, not gradual moral improvement. And the "history of religions school" had learned both how diverse was Christianity and how morally and intellectually impressive were the non-Christian religions. The Ritschlian effort to summarize a simple essence of Christianity and show its moral superiority seemed now dubious, and the awareness of cultural diversity that had seemed such a positive force at the beginning of the century now pointed to an awkward kind of relativism.

FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER (1768–1834)

From *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*

Schleiermacher published these speeches in 1799, when he was a young hospital chaplain in Berlin. Raised in a Pietist family, he had fallen in with the avant-garde

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writers at the forefront of German Romanticism. He was here addressing his culturally sophisticated friends, hoping to persuade them that the concern for feeling that guided them in literature and the arts ought to lead them to greater sympathy for religion, and that the new value they put on traditions ought to lead them away from the "natural religion" of the age of reason and toward Christianity, the religion of their own tradition. In later works such as The Christian Faith (1821), Schleiermacher worked more within the framework of traditional theological language. Those works probably represent his greater contribution to theology, but these speeches convey his youthful enthusiasm.

Permit me to speak of myself. You know that what is spoken at the instigation of piety cannot be pride, for piety is always full of humility. Piety was the mother's womb, in whose sacred darkness my young life was nourished and was prepared for a world still sealed for it. In it my spirit breathed ere it had yet found its own place in knowledge and experience. It helped me as I began to sift the faith of my fathers and to cleanse thought and feeling from the rubbish of antiquity. . . .

Let us then, I pray you, examine whence exactly religion has its rise. . . . You start with the outside, with the opinions, dogmas and usages, in which every religion is presented. . . . Wherefore religion generally can be nothing but an empty pretense which, like a murky and oppressive atmosphere, has enshrouded part of the truth. . . .

If you have only given attention to these dogmas and opinions, therefore, you do not yet know religion itself, and what you despise is not it. Why have you not penetrated deeper to find the kernel of this shell? I am astonished at your voluntary ignorance, ye easygoing inquirers, and at the all too quiet satisfaction with which you linger by the first thing presented to you. Why do you not regard the religious life itself, and first those pious exaltations of the mind in which all other known activities are set aside or almost suppressed, and the whole soul is dissolved in the immediate feeling of the Infinite and Eternal? In such moments the disposition you pretend to despise reveals itself in primordial and visible form. He only who has studied and truly known man in these emotions can rediscover religion in those outward manifestations. . . .

Wherefore, you must not rest satisfied with the repeated oft-broken echo of that original sound. You must transport yourselves into the interior of a pious soul and seek to understand its inspiration. In the very act, you must understand the production of light and heat in a soul surrendered to the Universe. Otherwise you learn nothing of religion. . . .

Let me interpret in clear words what most pious persons only guess at and never know how to express. Were you to set God at the apex of your science as the foundation of all knowing as well as of all knowledge, they would

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accord praise and honor, but it would not be their way of having and knowing God. From their way, as they would readily grant, and as is easy enough to see, knowledge and science do not proceed.

It is true that religion is essentially contemplative. You would never call anyone pious who went about in impervious stupidity, whose sense is not open for the life of the world. But this contemplation is not turned, as your knowledge of nature is, to the existence of a finite thing, combined with and opposed to another finite thing. It has not even, like your knowledge of God—if for once I might use an old expression—to do with the nature of the first cause, in itself and in its relation to every other cause and operation. The contemplation of the pious is the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things, in and through the Infinite, and of all temporal things in and through the Eternal. Religion is to seek this and find it in all that lives and moves, in all growth and change, in all doing and suffering. It is to have life and to know life in immediate feeling, only as such an existence in the Infinite and Eternal. Where this is found religion is satisfied, where it hides itself there is for her unrest and anguish, extremity and death. Wherefore it is a life in the infinite nature of the Whole, in the One and in the All, in God, having and possessing all things in God, and God in all. Yet religion is not knowledge and science, either of the world or of God. Without being knowledge, it recognizes knowledge and science. In itself it is an affection, a revelation of the Infinite in the finite, God being seen in it and it in God. . . .

If then this, that I trust I have indicated clearly enough for you all, is really the nature of religion, I have already answered the questions, Whence do those dogmas and doctrines come that many consider the essence of religion? Where do they properly belong? And how do they stand related to what is essential in religion? They are all the result of that contemplation of feeling, of that reflection and comparison, of which we have already spoken. The conceptions that underlie these propositions are, like your conceptions from experience, nothing but general expressions for definite feelings. They are not necessary for religion itself, scarcely even for communicating religion, but reflection requires and creates them. Miracle, inspiration, revelation, supernatural intimations, much piety can be had without the need of any one of these conceptions. But when feeling is made the subject of reflection and comparison they are absolutely unavoidable. In this sense all these conceptions do certainly belong to the sphere of religion, and indeed belong without condition or the smallest limit to their application. . . .

What is a miracle? What we call miracle is everywhere else called sign, indication. Our name, which means a wonder, refers purely to the mental condition of the observer. It is only in so far appropriate that a sign, especially when it is nothing besides, must be fitted to call attention to itself and to the

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power in it that gives it significance. Every finite thing, however, is a sign of the Infinite, and so these various expressions declare the immediate relation of a phenomenon to the Infinite and the Whole. But does that involve that every event should not have quite as immediate relation to the finite and to nature? Miracle is simply the religious name for event. Every event, even the most natural and usual, becomes a miracle, as soon as the religious view of it can be the dominant. To me all is miracle. In your sense the inexplicable and strange alone is miracle, in mine it is no miracle. The more religious you are, the more miracle would you see everywhere. All disputing about single events, as to whether or not they are to be called miraculous, gives me a painful impression of the poverty and wretchedness of the religious sense of the combatants. One party show it by protesting everywhere against miracle, whereby they manifest their wish not to see anything of immediate relationship to the Infinite and to the Deity. The other party display the same poverty by laying stress on this and that. A phenomenon for them must be marvelous before they will regard it as a miracle, whereby they simply announce that they are bad observers.

What is revelation? Every original and new communication of the Universe to man is a revelation, as, for example, every such moment of conscious insight as I have just referred to. Every intuition and every original feeling proceeds from revelation. As revelation lies beyond consciousness, demonstration is not possible, yet we are not merely to assume it generally, but each one knows best himself what is repeated and learned elsewhere, and what is original and new. If nothing original has yet been generated in you, when it does come it will be a revelation for you also, and I counsel you to weigh it well. . . .

At present I have something else to deal with, a new opposition to vanquish. I would, as it were, conduct you to the God that has become flesh; I would show you religion when it has resigned its infinity and appeared, often in sorry form, among men; I would have you discover religion in the religions. Though they are always earthly and impure, the same form of heavenly beauty that I have tried to depict is to be sought in them. . . .

The different existing manifestations of religion you call positive religions. Under this name they have long been the object of a quite pre-eminent hate. Despite of your repugnance to religion generally, you have always borne more easily with what for distinction is called natural religion. You have almost spoken of it with esteem.

I do not hesitate to say at once that from the heart I entirely deny this superiority. For all who have religion at all and profess to love it, it would be the vilest inconsequence to admit it. They would thereby fall into the openest self-contradiction. For my own part, if I only succeeded in recommending to you this natural religion, I would consider that I had lost my pains. . . .

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You will then find that the positive religions are just the definite forms in which religion must exhibit itself—a thing to which your so-called natural religions have no claim. They are only a vague, sorry, poor thought that corresponds to no reality, and you will find that in the positive religions alone a true individual cultivation of the religious capacity is possible. Nor do they, by their nature, injure the freedom of their adherents.

Why have I assumed that religion can only be given fully in a great multitude of forms of the utmost definiteness? Only on grounds that naturally follow from what has been said of the nature of religion. The whole of religion is nothing but the sum of all relations of man to God, apprehended in all the possible ways in which any man can be immediately conscious in his life. In this sense there is but one religion, for it would be but a poverty-stricken and halting life, if all these relations did not exist wherever religion ought to be. Yet all men will not by any means apprehend them in the same way, but quite differently. Now this difference alone is felt and alone can be exhibited while the reduction of all differences is only thought.

You are wrong, therefore, with your universal religion that is natural to all, for no one will have his own true and right religion, if it is the same for all. As long as we occupy a place there must be in these relations of man to the whole a nearer and a farther, which will necessarily determine each feeling differently in each life. Again, as long as we are individuals, every man has greater receptiveness for some religious experiences and feelings than for others. In this way everything is different. Manifestly then, no single relation can accord to every feeling its due. It requires the sum of them. Hence, the whole of religion can be present only, when all those different views of every relation are actually given. This is not possible, except in an endless number of different forms.

From Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1893), pages 9, 14–16, 18, 35–36, 87–89, 211, 214, 217–18.

DAVID FRIEDRICH STRAUSS (1808–1874)

From *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*

Strauss spent most of this massive work, published in 1835, analyzing the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus and showing their historical unreliability. At the end of the book, he set out the theological conclusions that he believed survive this critical onslaught. Strauss uses the framework of Hegel's philosophy: Spirit can exist only by becoming concrete; the infinite must appear in the finite. But for Hegel, whether

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