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978-0-521-47975-2 - Friedrich Schleiermacher: On Religion Speeches to its Cultured Despisers

Edited by Richard Crouter

Excerpt

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On Religion
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First Speech

Apology

It may be an unexpected undertaking, and you might rightly be surprised that someone can demand from just those persons who have raised themselves above the herd, and are saturated by the wisdom of the century,¹ a hearing for a subject so completely neglected by them. I confess that I do not know how to indicate anything that presages a fortunate outcome for me, not even the one of winning your approval of my efforts, much less the one of communicating my meaning and enthusiasm to you. From time immemorial faith has not been everyone's affair,² for at all times only a few have understood something of religion while millions have variously played with its trappings with which it has willingly let itself be draped out of condescension.

Especially now, the life of cultivated persons is removed from everything that would in the least way resemble religion. I know that you worship the deity in holy silence just as little as you visit the forsaken temples, that in your tasteful dwellings there are no other household gods than the maxims of the sages and the songs of the poets, and that humanity and fatherland, art and science (for you imagine yourselves capable of all of this) have taken possession of your minds so completely that no room is left over for the eternal and holy being that for you lies beyond the world, and that you have no feelings for and with it. You have succeeded in making your earthly lives so rich and many-sided that you no longer need the eternal, and after having created a universe for yourselves, you are spared from thinking of that

¹ On the heightened sense of the Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Prussia, see Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment" in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (New York, 1959), pp. 90–1, which attests to "the age of Enlightenment, or the century of Frederick" (Friedrich II, 1740–86, patron of artists and philosophers), while adding that even in that era, "much is lacking which prevents men from being, or easily becoming, capable of correctly using their own reason in religious matters with assurance and free from outside direction."

² Thessalonians 3:2: "For not all have faith" (unless otherwise noted, English Bible references are to the Revised Standard Version); cf. Luther's, *Der Glaube ist nicht jedermanns Ding*.

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which created you. You are agreed, I know, that nothing new and nothing convincing can be said anymore about this matter, which has been sufficiently belabored in all directions by philosophers and prophets and, if only I might not add, by scoffers and priests. Least of all – something that can escape no one – are you inclined to listen to something on this subject from the last mentioned, who have long since made themselves unworthy of your trust, as the kind of people who best like to dwell only in the dilapidated ruins of the sanctuary and who cannot live even there without disfiguring and damaging it still more. All this I know and am nevertheless convinced to speak by an inner and irresistible necessity that divinely rules me, and cannot retract my invitation that you especially should listen to me.

With regard to this last point I could probably ask you, How does it happen that on every subject, be it important or insignificant, you most desire to be instructed by persons who have dedicated their lives and their intellectual powers to it, and your thirst for knowledge does not shun even the huts of peasants and the workshops of humble artisans,³ and yet in matters of religion you consider everything more suspicious that comes from those who claim to be experts on the subject and are considered to be such by the state and the people? You will surely not be able to show that they are not that and that they rather hold and preach everything else but religion. Thus reasonably disdaining such an unfounded judgment, I confess before you that I also am a member of this order and I do so at the risk, if you do not listen to me attentively, of being thrown into the same category with the same bunch.

It is at least a voluntary confession, for my speech would not have betrayed me, and the eulogies of my fellow guildmembers would not either. What I intend lies almost completely outside their sphere and would hardly resemble what they want to see and hear. I do not chime in with the cry for help of most of them concerning the demise of religion, for I would not know what other age may have accommodated it better than the present; and I have nothing to do with the old-fashioned and barbaric lamentation with which they would like to clamor for the caved-in walls of their Jewish Zion and its Gothic pillars.⁴ I am aware that I fully deny my profession in all that I have to say to you; why should I not, therefore, acknowledge it like any other contingency? The prejudices desirable for it shall not hinder us, and the boundaries of all questioning and communicating it holds sacred shall have no validity among us. I speak to you as a human being about the holy mysteries of humanity according to my view; about that which was in me when, still with youthful enthusiasm, I sought the unknown; about that which has been the innermost mainspring of my existence ever since I have thought and been alive and

³ Schleiermacher alludes to the scientific investigation of artisans' procedures that characterizes the scientific revolution from Frances Bacon (1561–1626) through the *Encyclopédie raisonnée des sciences, des arts, et des métiers* (1751–1772) of Diderot and d'Alembert.

⁴ The text plays upon the dominant Enlightenment view of Judaic and Roman Catholic traditions as closed, legalistic systems that are out of keeping with the age.

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which shall eternally remain for me the highest, whichever way the fluctuations of time and humanity might move me. That I speak does not originate from a rational decision or from hope or fear, nor does it happen in accord with some final purpose or for some arbitrary or accidental reason. It is the inner, irresistible necessity of my nature; it is a divine calling; it is that which determines my place in the universe and makes me the being I am. Even if it were neither suitable nor prudent to speak of religion, the thing that thus drives me crushes these petty notions with its heavenly power.

You know that the deity, by an immutable law, has compelled itself to divide its great work endlessly, to fuse together each definite being only out of two opposing forces, and to realize each of its eternal thoughts in twin forms that are hostile to each other and yet exist inseparably only through each other. This whole corporeal world, penetration into whose interior is the highest goal of your investigations, appears to the best informed and most thoughtful among you only as an eternally prolonged play of opposing forces.⁵ Every life is only the result of a continuous appropriation and repulsion; everything has its determinate being only by virtue of the way in which it uniquely combines and retains the two primal forces of nature: the thirsty attraction and the expansion of the active and living self. It seems to me as if even the spirits, as soon as they are transplanted into this world, would have to follow such a law.

Each human soul – its transitory actions as well as the inner peculiarities of its nature that lead us to this conclusion – is merely a product of two opposing drives. The one strives to draw into itself everything that surrounds it, ensnaring it in its own life and, wherever possible, wholly absorbing it into its innermost being. The other longs to extend its own inner self ever further, thereby permeating and imparting to everything from within, while never being exhausted itself. The former desire is oriented toward enjoyment; it strives after individual things that bend toward it; it is quieted so long as it has grasped one of them, and always works only mechanically on whatever is at hand. The latter drive despises enjoyment and only goes on to ever-increasing and heightened activity; it overlooks individual things and manifestations just because it penetrates them and finds everywhere only the forces and entities on which its own force breaks; it wants to penetrate and to fill everything with reason and freedom, and thus it proceeds directly to the infinite and at all times seeks and produces freedom and coherence, power and law, right and suitability. But just as among corporeal things no individual exists alone through one of the two forces of material nature, so each soul participates in the two original functions of spiritual nature. The perfection of the intellectual world consists in the fact that not only are all possible combinations of these two forces between the two opposed ends really present in humanity, with now one and now the other nearly excluding everything and leaving only an infinitely small part to its

⁵ Schleiermacher's "two opposing drives" reflect a fundamental polarity that is widely shared in eighteenth-century aesthetics, literary theory, natural philosophy, and physics.

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opposite, but also a common bond of consciousness embraces them all so that each person, even though he can be nothing other than what he must be, nevertheless recognizes all others as clearly as himself and perfectly comprehends all individual manifestations of humanity.⁶

Those who lie at the extreme ends of this great series are fervent natures, who are completely turned in upon themselves and self-isolating. The insatiable sensuality commands the ones at this extreme to gather around them an ever greater amount of earthly things that it would gladly tear from the context of the whole in order to absorb them solely for itself. In the eternal alternation between desire and pleasure, they never get beyond perceptions of the individual phenomenon; always occupied with egoistic concerns, the nature of the rest of humanity remains unknown to them. An uncultivated enthusiasm that flies beyond its goal restlessly drives the others about in the universe; without forming and fashioning something really better, they hover around empty ideals and, uselessly diluting and expending their energy, return to their starting point, inactive and exhausted. How shall these remote extremes be brought together in order to shape the long series into that closed ring that is the symbol of eternity and perfection?

There is indeed a certain point where an almost perfect equilibrium unites the two. This you are accustomed to overestimate far more often than to underestimate, in that it is generally only the magic of nature playing with the ideals of humanity, and only seldom the result of strenuous and accomplished self-formation. But if all those who no longer dwell at the extremes were to stand at that point, no uniting of those ends with this middle would be possible, and the final purpose of nature would be wholly thwarted. Only the thoughtful expert penetrates into the secrets of such a combination brought to rest; the individual elements in it are completely hidden for every common eye, and it would never recognize either its own element or that opposed to it.

Therefore at all times the deity sends people here and there in whom both tendencies are combined in a more fruitful manner, equips them with wondrous gifts, prepares their way with an all-powerful word,⁷ and employs them as translators of its will and its works and as mediators of what would otherwise remain eternally separated. Look to those whose nature demonstrated a high level of that force of attraction that actively seizes surrounding things, but who also possess so much of the spiritual penetration drive, which strives for the infinite and impregnates all spirit and life, that they express it in the actions to which the former impels them. It is not sufficient for these, as it were, destructively to devour

⁶ An initial version of the translation rendered Schleiermacher's highly personal prose without using generic male language. In the end, however, I realized that consistent translation of singular male pronouns as plurals interferes with the movement of the text from individual to plural examples. Since I wished to let Schleiermacher speak as nearly as possible within the idiom of his own world, a decision was made to emulate his usage in this respect, as well as in others. The work's argument makes it clear that human beings as such, and not just males, are being addressed.

⁷ Wisdom of Solomon 18:15.

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earthly things in a raw state, but they have to place something in front of themselves, order and shape it into a small world that bears the impress of their spirit, and thus rule it more rationally while enjoying it more constantly and humanely. Thus they become heroes, lawgivers, inventors, conquerors of nature, and benevolent genies who quietly create and disseminate a nobler happiness. By their mere existence such people prove themselves to be ambassadors of God and mediators between limited man and infinite humanity. They show the inactive, merely speculative idealist,⁸ who splits his nature into individual empty thoughts, that this thing is active, which he merely imagined, and that what he hitherto despised is the material he should actually treat; they explain to him the misunderstood voice of God, and reconcile him with the earth and with his place in it. Merely earthly and sensual people, however, require such mediators even more, who teach them to comprehend that higher elemental force of humanity, since they embrace everything in a contemplative and illuminating manner without the drive and activity of mediators and wish to know no other limits than the universe they have found. If God also adds that mystical and creative sensuality, which seeks to give external reality to everything inward, to the striving toward extension and penetration of those who move in this course, then after every flight of their spirit to the infinite they must set down in pictures or words the impression it made on them as an object so as to enjoy it themselves afresh, transformed into another form on a finite scale. They must also instinctively and, as it were, enrapturedly – for they would do it even if no one were there – represent for others what they have encountered as poets and seers, as orators or as artists.⁹ Such people are true priests of the Most High,¹⁰ for they bring deity closer to those who normally grasp only the finite and the trivial; they place the heavenly and the eternal before them as an object of enjoyment and unification, as the sole inexhaustible source of that toward which their creative endeavors are directed. Thus they strive to awaken the slumbering seed of a better humanity, to ignite love to the Most High, to transform the common life into something higher, to reconcile the children of earth with the heaven that belongs to them, and to counter the ponderous attachment of the age to baser things. This is the higher priesthood that proclaims the inner meaning of all spiritual secrets and speaks down from the kingdom of God; this is the source of all visions and prophecies, of all holy works of art and inspired speeches that are

⁸ An explicit allusion to the philosophy of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), whose major work, *The Science of Knowledge* (Cambridge, 1982) had appeared in 1794. Schleiermacher's early encounter with Fichte, mediated through Friedrich Schlegel after Fichte's dismissal from his Jena professorship, is reflected in his notebooks ("Gedanken I," p. 10), letters (*Br. I*, pp. 222, 229, 230); cf. the review of Fichte's *The Vocation of Man* in *Ath.* III, pp. 283–97.

⁹ "Gedanken I" (no. 154), *KGA* I.2, p. 36: "To what extent can the priest be compared with the writer?" This and subsequent translations of cross-references from the new critical edition to Schleiermacher's early notebooks (1796–9) are my own.

¹⁰ Genesis 14:18; cf. Hebrews 7:1.

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scattered abroad on the chance that a receptive mind might find them and let them bring forth fruit in itself.

May it yet happen that this office of mediator should cease and the priesthood of humanity receive lovelier definition! May the time come that an ancient prophecy describes when no one will need a teacher because all will be taught by God!¹¹ If the holy fire burned everywhere, fiery prayers would not be needed to beseech it from heaven, but only the gentle quiet of holy virgins to tend it; thus it probably would not break out in dreaded flames, but its sole striving would be to put the inner and hidden glow into balance among everyone.

Individuals would then silently light the way for themselves and for others, and the communication of holy thoughts and feelings would consist only in the easy game of now unifying the different beams of this light and then again breaking them up, now scattering it and then again concentrating here and there on individual objects. The softest word would be understood, whereas now the clearest expressions do not escape misinterpretation. One could jointly penetrate into the interior of the sanctuary, whereas now one must be occupied only with the rudiments in the forecourts. How much more delightful it is to exchange completed ideas with friends and participants than to have to burst into an empty space with barely sketched outlines. But how far removed from one another are those people now between whom such communication could take place. They are distributed among humanity with such wise economy as are the hidden points in space from which supple primal matter expands in all directions;¹² namely, only just the outermost limits of their spheres of influence are contiguous – so that nothing is, after all, completely empty – but one point probably never meets the other. A wise arrangement indeed: For the whole longing for communication and sociability is all the more directed only toward those who need it most; it works all the more unceasingly toward obtaining the companions it lacks.

To this very power I submit. This very nature is my calling. Permit me to speak of myself: You know that what bids religion to speak can never be proud, for it is always full of humility. Religion was the maternal womb in whose holy darkness my young life was nourished and prepared for the world still closed to it. In it my spirit breathed before it had discovered the world of external objects, experience, and scholarship. Religion helped me when I began to examine the ancestral faith and to purify my heart of the rubble of primitive times. It remained with me when God and immortality disappeared before my doubting eyes. It guided me into the active life. It taught me, with my virtues and defects, to keep myself holy in my undivided

¹¹ Jeremiah 31:34: "I will put my law within them, and write it upon their hearts"; cf. Hebrews 8:11, John 6:45, and 1 Corinthians 13:12.

¹² Like his contemporaries, Fichte, Schelling, Novalis, and Friedrich Schlegel, Schleiermacher's early work reflects a preoccupation with natural philosophy and physical speculation in the wake of the teaching of Leibniz (1646–1716) and Kant (1724–1804). See the early notebooks in this regard, "Gedanken I" (1796–9) and "Leibniz I, II", in *KGA* 1.2, pp. 1–49, 75–103. By 1799 Schleiermacher had read the earliest nonsystematic, natural philosophical works of Schelling (1775–1854).

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existence, and only through it have I learned friendship and love. As regards the other advantages and attributes of humanity, I well know that it proves little before your judgment seat, you wise and prudent ones of the people, if a person can say how he possesses those qualities; for he can know them from the descriptions and observations of others, or as all virtues are known, from the common ancient tradition of their existence. But the matter of religion is so arranged and so rare that a person who expresses something about it must necessarily have had it, for he has not heard about it anywhere. Of all that I praise and feel as its work there stands precious little in holy books, and to whom would it not seem scandal or folly¹³ who did not experience it himself?

If I am so permeated by religion that I must finally speak and bear witness to it, to whom shall I turn with this matter other than to you? Where else would there be listeners for my speech? It is not blind partiality for my native soil or for my companions in disposition and language that makes me speak thus, but the deep conviction that you are the only ones capable, and thus also worthy, of having the sense for holy and divine things aroused in you.¹⁴ Those proud islanders, whom many among you venerate so unduly, know no other watchword than to profit and enjoy. Their zeal for the sciences, for the wisdom of life, and for holy freedom, is merely an empty sham battle. Just as the most inspired champions of freedom among them do nothing but defend the national orthodoxy with rage and delude the people with miracles so that superstitious devotion to old customs might not vanish, so they are no more serious with all the rest that goes beyond the sensual and nearest immediate use. Thus they seek knowledge; their wisdom is only directed toward a lamentable empiricism, and thus religion can be nothing else for them than a dead letter,¹⁵ a holy article in the constitution in which nothing is real.

For other reasons I turn away from the French, whose sight a lover of religion can hardly bear, for in every act, in every word, they all but trample on its most holy laws. The frivolous indifference with which millions of the people, the witty levity with which brilliant individual spirits look upon the most sublime act of the universe, which not only occurs before their eyes but takes hold of them all and determines every movement of their lives, sufficiently demonstrates how little they

¹³ 1 Corinthians 1:23: "We preach Christ crucified, a scandal to the Jews and folly to the Greeks."

¹⁴ The passage appeals to the resurgence of Prussian patriotism in the Napoleonic era and hopes for the new monarchy of Friedrich Wilhelm III (1797–1840). A sense of the special mission of Germany to save Europe is seen in Novalis's hope for a new golden age, in Hölderlin's, "Song of the Germans" (1801), and after the rout of Prussia at the battles of Jena and Auerstadt in 1806, in Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808; New York, 1968). By contrast Schleiermacher perceived movements in England (mercantilism and industrialism, empirical philosophy, and the union of throne and altar) and in France (the *philosophes*' ridicule of religion and the violent secularizing of the French revolution) as inimical to his view of religion.

¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:6: "For the letter kills, but the spirit gives life" (RSV, modified), the most often cited biblical allusion in the speeches, expresses Schleiermacher's view of hermeneutics as consisting of the continuous interplay between the assumptions and conditions of a text and those of its interpreter.

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are capable of holy awe and true adoration.¹⁶ And what does religion abhor more than the unbridled arrogance with which the rulers of people defy the eternal laws of the world? What does religion inculcate more than the circumspect and humble moderation of which not even the slightest feeling seems to reach them? What is more holy to it than the lofty Nemesis whose most dreadful acts they, in the intoxication of blindness, do not even understand? Where successive decrees of judgment, which formerly were allowed to strike only individual families in order to fill whole peoples with awe before the heavenly being and to dedicate the works of poets for centuries to eternal fate – where these repeat themselves a thousandfold in vain, how one solitary voice would fade away there, unheard and unnoticed to the point of ridiculousness! Here in my ancestral land is the fortunate climate that denies no fruit completely; here you find everything scattered that adorns humanity, and everything that prospers fashions itself somewhere, at least individually, in its most beautiful form; here neither wise moderation nor quiet contemplation is lacking. Here, therefore, it must find a refuge from the coarse barbarism and the cold earthly sense of the age.

Only do not relegate me without a hearing to those whom you look down upon as common and uncultivated as if the sense for the holy, like an old folk-costume, had passed over to the lower class of people to whom alone it is still seemly to be gripped by awe and belief in the unseen. You are very well disposed to these our brothers and might like it if they were also addressed on other higher subjects, on morality and law and freedom, and so at least for individual moments their inner striving would be raised to better things and an impression of the dignity of humanity awakened in them. Accordingly, one would speak with them concerning religion; one might occasionally cut through their whole being until that point is struck where this holy instinct lies concealed; one might captivate them through particular flashes one elicits from it, open a way from the innermost center of their narrow confines to a glimpse of the infinite and, for a moment, elevate their animal sensuality to the high consciousness of a human will and existence; a great deal will always be gained. But, I ask you, do you then turn to them when you want to disclose the innermost connection and the highest ground of those holy sanctuaries of humanity? Do you turn to them when concept and feeling, law and deed are to be traced to their mutual source, and the real is to be exhibited as eternal and necessarily grounded in the essence of humanity?

Would it not really suffice if your wise men were only understood by the best among you? But even that is my final goal with religion. I do not wish to arouse particular feelings that perhaps belong in its realm, nor to justify or dispute particular ideas. I wish to lead you to the innermost depths from which religion first addresses the mind. I wish to show you from what capacity of humanity

¹⁶ An allusion to the wry, ironic, and detached view of religion of the *philosophes* of which Voltaire's (1694–1778), *Candide* (1759; New York, n.d.) and *Philosophical dictionary* 1–II (1764; New York, 1962) serve as representative works.

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religion proceeds, and how it belongs to what is for you the highest and dearest. I wish to lead you to the pinnacles of the temple¹⁷ that you might survey the whole sanctuary and discover its innermost secrets. Can you seriously expect me to believe that those who daily torment themselves most tiresomely with earthly things are most preeminently suited to become intimate with heaven? That those who brood anxiously over the next moment and are firmly chained to the nearest objects can raise their eyes the furthest to the universe? And that persons who have not yet found themselves in the uniform succession of a dead industriousness will most clearly discover the living deity? Therefore, I can call only you to me, you who are capable of raising yourselves above the common standpoint of humanity, you who do not shrink from the burdensome way into the depths of human nature in order to find the ground of its action and thought.

Ever since I admitted this to myself I have long found myself in the fearful mood of one who, missing a beloved jewel,¹⁸ does not yet want to search thoroughly the last place where it could be hidden. There were times when you considered it a mark of special courage to free yourselves partially from religion, and happily read and heard about some particular subjects if it resulted in the eradication of a traditional concept; when it pleased you to see a refined religion go about adorned in eloquence, because you wished to preserve a certain feeling for the holy at least in the gracious sex. All that is no more. Religion is not supposed to be spoken of any longer, and even the Graces themselves, with unfeminine severity, are supposed to spoil the most delicate blossoms of human imagination. I can thus relate the interest I demand of you to nothing else than to your contempt itself; I wish only to call upon you to be properly informed and thoroughgoing in that contempt.

Let us, then, I beg you, examine whence your contempt properly originates, from the individual or from the whole? Does it start with differing types and sects of religion as they have been in the world or from the concept itself?¹⁹ Some will without a doubt profess the latter view, and this always includes the unjustly vigorous despisers of religion, who extract their speculation from themselves and have not taken the pains to acquire a precise knowledge of the matter as it actually is. Fear of an eternal being and reliance on another world seem to you to be the hinges of all religion and that is, on principle, contrary to you. Tell me, then, dear friends, whence have you derived these concepts of religion that are the object of your contempt? Every expression, every product of the human spirit can be viewed

¹⁷ In contrast to the New Testament allusion to Matthew 4:5, where the devil leads Christ to the pinnacle of the temple to tempt him to evil, Schleiermacher here “tempts” his audience to take an objective view of religion.

¹⁸ Possible allusion to the “pearl of great price” (Matthew 13:45).

¹⁹ Schleiermacher chides his readers for having proceeded abstractly to deduce concepts of religion (fear of a deity, longing for eternal life) without having taken the trouble to justify this understanding inductively through knowledge of particular instances of actual religion. The theme recurs in the Fifth Speech, pp. 96–102.