

## Article

# Schleiermacher's *Speeches* and the Modern Critique of Religion

Kevin M. Vander Schel

Department of Religious Studies, Gonzaga University, Spokane, WA 99258, USA; vanderschel@gonzaga.edu

**Abstract:** Friedrich Schleiermacher is often credited with playing a foundational role in the development of the modern concept of religion. His epoch-making *Speeches* on religion, published in 1799 amidst the widespread social and intellectual upheaval of the *Sattelzeit*, present a novel description of religious feeling and religious communication, which mark a turning away from the rationalistic treatments of religion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and which served as both inspiration and foil for scholars of religion throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This essay suggests a reading of Schleiermacher's *Speeches* that is organized around two interrelated claims. First, the text does not proceed as speculative philosophical treatise aiming to establish an overarching theory of religion but as a critical dialogue that inquires into the distinctive particularity of religion and religious expression. Second, religious piety, as depicted in the *Speeches*, is not found in the isolated inwardness of individual experience but in coordinated tension with sociality, in communications of religious feeling that are bound together with a living apprehension of the world. On this account, religion for Schleiermacher, though rooted in feeling and self-consciousness, is nonetheless no private affair; it is realized within the developing complex of social and historical living.

**Keywords:** Schleiermacher; German Romanticism; critique; characterization; feeling; intuition; particularity; religious communication



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## 1. Introduction

Questions of the origin and limits of modern understandings of religion have drawn growing interest in recent years. Scholars of both theology and religious studies have produced detailed studies of the gradual rise of the concept of “religion” in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, as it emerged together with evolving notions of the nation, the state, and race. Where the term *religio* was used frequently in ancient Rome to refer to a wide variety of social obligations, and in the medieval period to indicate the virtuous disposition accompanying the proper observance of practices of worship and ritual, the category of “religion” indicates a distinctly modern sensibility, which signals a shared and essential dimension of human existence and interiority, establishing a universal genus of human living to be filled out by particular individual religions (cf. Cavanaugh 2009, pp. 60–82; Nongbri 2013, pp. 16–34; Vial 2016, pp. 2–9).

Within these narratives of the provenance of modern “religion”, Schleiermacher's *Speeches* often play a central role. The text's evocative descriptions of religious feeling and intuition mark a turning point, away from the generalized and rationalistic treatments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which tended toward depictions of natural and universal religion more conducive to morality and ordered civil society. Instead, the text highlights the individual character of religious experience and its various manifestations and expressions in history. As Leora Batnitzky, for example, argues: “no single thinker did more to define the modern concept of religion than Schleiermacher” (Batnitzky 2011, p. 25; cf. Vial 2016, pp. 55–56).<sup>1</sup>

Yet Schleiermacher's *Speeches* is also among the more contested and criticized texts in the modern academic study of religion. Treatments of the work, among scholars of both theology and religious studies, have tended towards a clear pattern, with Schleiermacher's thought upheld as a representative example of German Romanticism or Idealism, or some

mixture of the two, and serving as a foil for later historical and critical advances in the academic study of religion and theology. In his descriptions of pious self-consciousness and feeling, for example, Schleiermacher is often interpreted as pioneering a naïvely Romantic emphasis on inward subjectivity or religious experience. In the context of theology, this interpretation was initially spotlighted by Emil Brunner, Karl Barth, and other dialectical theologians critical of attempts to tether Christian revelation to philosophical analyses of anthropology or human experience (cf. Jones 2023, pp. 541–48). It has, however, endured as an almost canonical reading of Schleiermacher, which recurred in methodological debates of the late twentieth century and still finds frequent expression in standard surveys of modern theology.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, scholars of religious studies such as Wayne Proudfoot and Russell T. McCutcheon have characterized Schleiermacher’s position as centering on the “immediacy of religious experience” or “a deep feeling” that is independent of particular beliefs, practices, or rational argumentation (Proudfoot 1985, p. 3; McCutcheon 2001, p. 4). This interpretation, too, is frequently echoed in methodological surveys of the field. As one account in a recent textbook in religious studies reads: “Schleiermacher . . . focused his attention on rehabilitating the emotive, nonrational element within religion” (Herling 2007, p. 62). In the eyes of many later interpreters, then, Schleiermacher’s *Speeches* mark the paradigmatic example of the modern turn to a private, internalized notion of religion that is shielded from historical criticism and rational debate.<sup>3</sup>

This reductive interpretative tendency among Anglophone scholars has proven stubbornly persistent, even in the face of a growing number of critical treatments of Schleiermacher’s writings that have repeatedly demonstrated the complexity of his analysis of religion and the lack of evidence for this one-sided view in Schleiermacher’s own texts.<sup>4</sup> The difficulty of dislodging these long-standing misinterpretations of Schleiermacher’s *Speeches* in part reflects their connection with the founding narratives of both modern religious studies and modern theology, and the continuing usefulness of such a “caricatured Schleiermacher” in polemics against privatized conceptions of piety or faith (Dole 2023, p. 629). However, set within its own context, in the original and creative understandings of religion developing within German Idealism and Romanticism, Schleiermacher’s *Speeches* advances a subtler approach, which outlines an inquiry that centers not on an essentialist account of individual religious piety but on the historical particularity of religion and on the communication of religious insights and experience.

This essay offers a reading of Schleiermacher’s *Speeches* that is organized around two interrelated claims, each of which runs contrary to lingering interpretations of Schleiermacher’s *Speeches* as foregrounding an essentialized account of privatized religious experience. The first of these is that Schleiermacher’s *Speeches* does not primarily aim to establish an overarching theory of religion itself, and still less a theoretical treatment of religious interiority, but instead outlines an unfolding critical inquiry into the distinctive particularity of religion and religious expression. The text does not proceed as a speculative philosophical treatise but as a critical dialogue that seeks to engage a specific audience and elicit a particular response. The second claim is that religious piety, as Schleiermacher describes it, has its place not in the isolated inwardness of individual experience but in coordinated tension with sociality, in communications of religious piety that are bound together with a living apprehension of the world. Religion for Schleiermacher, though inherently personal, is nonetheless no private affair; it is realized within the developing complex of social and historical living.

The success of the *Speeches*, on such an account, lies not in creating a specific school of followers or a particular theory of religion but in generating an ongoing critical inquiry that continues even many generations later: “what is religion?” (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 18), and how can it be responsibly studied as a phenomenon of human social and cultural life? In this respect, the many advances in theology and religious studies trained on overcoming or moving beyond Schleiermacher still bear important traces of his influence.

## 2. Early German Romanticism and the Art of Criticism

“Religion never appears pure” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 160)

The publication of Schleiermacher’s *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* in 1799 introduced a number of important innovations into modern understandings of the nature of religion.<sup>5</sup> The title of the work itself, which centers on the category of religion, marks an important shift from the focus of earlier philosophical and theological treatments, which typically began with the concept of God.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the text situates the discussion of the nature of religion within broader discussions of the education or “cultivation” (*Bildung*) of humanity, both as this relates to the self-cultivation of individuals and to the cultivation of society and the “progress of humanity” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 203). The work was moreover influential in highlighting the subtle connections of art and religion, and was the first to formulate the concept of “religion of art” (*Kunstreligion*) (cf. Kelm 2023, p. 204; cf. Busch 2023). And the text presents a sharp rebuke of the “meager and lean” conceptions of a universal “natural religion” (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 109), arguing instead that religion can only be “seen” or perceived amidst the “multiplicity of religions”, the seemingly unending series of specific manifestations of religions existing in history (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 97).

Among these various contributions, however, it is Schleiermacher’s emphasis on the relation of religion to “feeling” (*Gefühl*), particularly as outlined in the second speech, that has most captured the attention of later interpreters. In his descriptions of pious self-consciousness and feeling, for example, Schleiermacher is often interpreted as pioneering an emphasis on inward subjectivity or experience, expressing a naïve Romantic preoccupation with individuality, interiority, and emotion that stands in counterpoint to the cold rationalism of the Enlightenment (cf. Lindbeck 1984, p. 16; Otto 1970, pp. 9–10, 145–50).

A number of passages in Schleiermacher’s *Speeches*, at a quick glance, might seem to lend support to this reading. Piety, Schleiermacher writes, “has its essence in feeling” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 183). Furthermore, he notes that the understanding of religion does not first follow from the contemplation of the outward natural world but from contemplation and “comparative reflection” on religious feelings: “the heart for us is as much the seat of religion as it is its nearest world” (Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 212, 197). In this regard, religion is distinguished from both speculative knowing and morality. Knowledge, as it pertains to religion, is in this respect “a knowledge about feeling” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 187).

Notably, however, for Schleiermacher’s contemporaries, the most striking feature of the *Speeches* concerned the work’s dialogical and critical approach. As Daniel Whistler has argued, the publication of Schleiermacher’s *Speeches* in June 1799 was set within the context of broader attempts by early German Romantics to reconceive or recover a sense of the individuality and “positivity” of religion over against a generalized conception of rational or natural religion, insofar as living historical religions are “posited” above generic considerations of such a universalized concept of religion (Whistler 2023, pp. 239–43).<sup>7</sup> The *Speeches* marked the first of a series of texts written by German Romantics at the turn of the nineteenth century, followed by Novalis’s *Christianity or Europe* (1799) and F. W. J. Schelling’s *Heinz Widerporst’s Epicurean Confession of Faith* (1799). And it proceeds by engaging in a particular Romantic mode of critique that centered on the concept of “the characteristic” (Whistler 2023, p. 240).

This “art of criticism” aimed to determine the inner character or the distinctive particularity of a given work, movement, or phenomenon. It is the critical enterprise of uncovering the distinguishing features or individuality of a particular field or subject matter. For Friedrich Schlegel, this “philosophy of the characteristic” itself signaled a distinguishing aspect of the new forms of thinking emerging among thinkers of the Berlin circle of Romantics contributing to the journal *Athenaeum*. The proper task of critique, as he notes in *On the Essence of Critique*, is “to understand a work or a spirit”, a practice “we call ‘to characterize’” (Whistler 2023, pp. 242, 250–51). Schleiermacher describes the function of critique in similar terms. The aim of criticism is to distill or identify the “distinct character” or “individual

character” of a given work or movement. Such a critical approach operates, then, as a labor of characterization (Whistler 2023, p. 252).

The form and organization of Schleiermacher’s *Speeches* exemplifies this critical enterprise. Even in its stated role as a work of apologetics, it offers a particular critique of religion that aims at characterizing the distinguishing features of religious piety and religious communication. The work thus outlines a gradually unfolding methodical inquiry into religion that seeks not to isolate or abstract religion in its universality but to reclaim what is individual, distinctive, or singular in positive religion.

Descriptions of what is “characteristic” of religion, of the “character” and “tone” of genuine religious life, and of what is “distinctive” and “peculiar” in positive religions recur frequently throughout the *Speeches*, particularly in the first edition.<sup>8</sup> Instead of presenting “only a general concept of religion”, the text aims toward “considering religion in its determinate forms” (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 111), seeking “to understand it in its reality and in its manifestations” (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 97). It looks not to what is general and abstract in religion but returns to the historical particularity of religious traditions, seeking to distinguish the unique “character of a particular religion” in its “peculiar life force” (Schleiermacher 1996, pp. 101–2). In this respect, Schleiermacher argues, “religion never appears pure” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 160). It can only be perceived “in an infinite succession” of changing forms (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 104). The text thus encourages readers not to seek religion in what is general and universal but in historical particularity: “in the religions, you are to discover religion” (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 96; cf. Schleiermacher 1994, p. 211).

The work’s critical procedure is further apparent in Schleiermacher’s pointed rejection of the idea of rational and “natural religion” so preferred by earlier Enlightenment theorists. “The essence of natural religion”, he writes, “actually consists wholly in the negation of everything positive and characteristic in religion and in the most violent polemic against it”. The idea of natural religion itself, moreover, is a “contentless, formless thing” that exists only as “indefinite ambiguity” (Schleiermacher 1996, pp. 109–10). In contrast to the “strong features” and “very marked physiognomy” of the positive religions, this “so-called natural religion” is a mere amalgamation of philosophy and morality that “allows little of the unique character of religion to shine through” (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 98). “It is as if religion had no pulse of its own . . . no character” (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 108).

Schleiermacher similarly argues against the notion of a fundamental uniformity in religion and the “fanciful idea . . . of a universality of one religion and of a single form to which all others ought conform, as the false to the true” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 180). In contrast, he maintains that religion is “infinite on all sides” and virtually unlimited in expression: “Religion does not seek, not even once, to bring those who believe and feel under one belief and one feeling”; it “flies with aversion from the bleak uniformity that would again destroy this divine superabundance” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 181; cf. Schleiermacher 1994, p. 212). The “universe presents itself as totality”, but it does so as “unity in multiplicity” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 220). Properly conceived, religion “is the sworn enemy of all pedantry and all one-sidedness” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 183).

The characterization of religion offered in the *Speeches* seeks to distance itself from earlier approaches of “rigid systematizers or superficial indifferentists”. “Religion can only be understood through itself”, Schleiermacher maintains, as “its special manner of construction and its characteristic distinction” only become clear through critical consideration of existing religions (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 113). Accordingly, where Schleiermacher does offer his own “definitions” of religion in the text, as in his oft-cited formula of religion as the “intuition of the universe” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 222), these do not seek to supply a generalized, universal concept for religion but to locate or clarify its distinguishing or individuating principles.<sup>9</sup>

Recognition of this critical approach thus suggests an important corrective to the still widespread depictions of Schleiermacher’s Romantic treatment of religion as a “protective strategy” that withdraws from history to “privatized experience” and a domain of religious



interiority that is “invulnerable to rational and moral criticism” (Proudfoot 1985, pp. xv–xvi; cf. Lamm 2021, pp. 210–12). The Romantic critique pursued in the *Speeches* does not mark a retreat from historical inquiry in the study of religion but expresses a particular approach to it, an exercise in grasping the distinctive and individual elements that characterize existing historical religions. This manner of proceeding also signals an important dimension of the logic of the work as a whole. The universal aspects of the “essence” of religion, the focus of the first and second speeches, are only fully grasped together with the individual aspects of positive religion outlined in later speeches. As within the human person religion emerges in the continuing oscillation between feeling and intuition, so too in human history religion is expressed in the reciprocal tension between what is universal and what is singular (Whistler 2023, p. 253). The work’s distinctive emphasis on feeling and intuition, as well as its unique form and rhetorical strategy, find their place within this context.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Feeling and Intuition: A Sense for the World

*“Religion certainly begins and ends with history”* (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 205)

The language of feeling (*Gefühl*) and of intuition (*Anschauung*) lies at the center of Schleiermacher’s characterization of religion in the *Speeches*. As he writes in the 1806 edition: “This is indeed the one and all of religion: to feel everything moving us in feeling in its highest unity as one and all, and to feel everything individual and particular as imparted through this, and therefore to feel our existence and life as an existence and life in and through God” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 176). All subsequent reflection on religion, in attempts to establish specific religious principles, formulas, or concepts emerge from these “living intuitions and feelings from which they were originally derived” (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 81).

Feeling unites the “I” with the “world”. It reflects the original unity of consciousness that underlies each conscious act, the “original being-one” of subject and object and of individual and whole that exists in each moment of life, prior to their inevitable separation or “divorce” in individual acts of thought and action (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 169). Though “only traces” of this “first beginning” of consciousness remain,<sup>11</sup> it is through the determinations of feeling and intuition that one arrives at a sense of “humanity’s existence in the whole”, and of the “great unity” and the “harmony of the universe”, which is disclosed not in uniformity but in infinite variety, appearing “in the most manifold ways” (Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 169, 198–99). Feeling, in this regard, is distinct from the operations of knowing and acting, even while remaining inseparable from them (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 169).

This focus on feeling, as later interpreters have noted, serves to distinguish Schleiermacher’s treatment from a theoretical treatment of piety or a system of religion. Schleiermacher signals resistance to such a theory or system of religion throughout his *Speeches*. “A system of perceptions and feelings—are you able to imagine anything more fantastical?” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 178). These “concepts and precepts”, he writes, “. . . are foreign to religion in itself” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 172). Such attempts at systematization would subject the characteristic features of religion—“what is individual in religion”—to something seen as higher or more universal, seeking a fixed religious principle (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 179). The “scientific treatment of religion” resulting from such an approach may offer knowledge about religion but it would do so at the cost of losing living religion itself, which cannot be directly grasped. Such treatments cling instead to aspects that are only a “decomposition of the religious sense” (Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 173–74). What is left in the wake of this “miserable obsession with system” is only a “bleak uniformity”, inundated with a “host of concepts” and precepts (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 181).

The role of feeling, and its close relation to intuition, is also a point that Schleiermacher sought to clarify substantially in subsequent editions of his *Speeches*.<sup>12</sup> In the original 1799 edition, he referred to the “intuition of the universe” as the “highest and most universal formula of religion”, and as the “hinge” or touchstone of his second speech on the essence of religion (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 24). And, fittingly, references to the “intuition of

the universe”, “intuition of the world”, or “intuition of the infinite” appear frequently throughout the text.<sup>13</sup> In his revised edition of 1806, however, he omitted this definition of religion as the “intuition of the universe”, referring instead to “the original relation of feeling and intuition” as the touchstone of his argument (Lamm 2021, pp. 154, 210; Schleiermacher 2014, p. 168).<sup>14</sup> Notably, from this point forward, he also used the language of “intuition” with significantly less frequency, and where he continued to employ the term he did so in a more precise and disciplined fashion.

As Julia Lamm has argued, this effort to clarify the relationship between feeling and intuition largely follows from Schleiermacher’s careful study of Plato, and his use of “intuition” in the *Speeches* from the second edition onwards aligns with his descriptions of intuition in the introductions to his Plato translations, which he began preparing shortly after the publication of the first edition of his *Speeches* (Lamm 2021, pp. 187–226, especially 207–215). Here, the distinction between feeling and intuition does not refer to a difference in cause or origin. Both terms signal a foundational receptivity and responsiveness to reality or the infinite, to the universe as a whole. Yet in this relation, intuition represents the more “outward-moving vector” that tends toward cognition or objectification, a living grasp or apprehension of reality that shapes one’s perspective of the world (Lamm 2021, pp. 215–16). Feeling, by contrast, represents a more “inward-moving vector” that shapes one’s entire being and so shapes “one’s way of being in the world” (Lamm 2021, pp. 215–16). Feeling and intuition, in this sense, exist in an active tension and reciprocity, as “closely bound together yet distinct” (Lamm 2021, p. 216; cf. Korsch 2023, p. 448). The revised language of the second and subsequent editions of the *Speeches* reflects this more precise terminology (Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 168–70; Schleiermacher 1994, pp. 42–44).

These modifications, in more closely specifying the connection of feeling and intuition, also serve to clarify the inherently relational character of feeling. Feeling is nowhere found in separation or isolation, and it cannot be grasped in its pure immediacy. It is instead always paired with a “sense for the world” and an “instinct for the universe” (Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 197, 211). To the inwardness of feeling, then, always corresponds a certain apprehension of the world and one’s place within it: religious awe is “that magnificent feeling of our relation to the whole” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 193). And “true religion is sensation and taste for the infinite” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 165).

In this sense, Schleiermacher writes of “the world entering people through intuition and feeling” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 214). Feeling oscillates “between two points” of the “I” and “the universe”; it “hovers . . . between the world and the individual” (Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 209, 205). Feeling yearns for the world and makes possible “that universal linking with the world” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 216). Although the heart is the “seat” of religion, it is also marked by “the yearning for the world”, and “if it is to generate and nourish religion, the human heart must also operate on us as world and as in a world” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 197). Religious piety is not concerned with solitary inwardness, then, but “with our entire being”, with a sense of “how we confront the world and are at the same time in it” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 217). Accordingly, the “feeling of the universe” brings to clarity “a person’s overall relationship to the world”, and to religion always belongs a living apprehension of reality, some “intuition of the universe” (Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 219, 209).

This yearning for the world precludes any true isolation of individual religious feeling. This feeling “clings nowhere to the individual” alone (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 222). Reflecting on the biblical creation story of Genesis 2, “one of the most ancient sources of poetry and religion”, Schleiermacher notes the significance of the textual detail that the sense for the world arises not with the initial, solitary human being but only first with the creation of a partner. “Everything is in vain for those who place themselves alone”. It was only in and through exchange with another that the individual discovered humanity, “and in humanity he found the world” (Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 197–98).

Taken in this sense, feeling and intuition invariably entail a principle of sociability, an interpersonal dimension of religious living that is reflected both in “human nature”

and in the “nature of religion”. Religious persons exist with one another in a “continuous reciprocity” and seek from childhood on to “to communicate these intuitions and feelings” to one another (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 73). In this “free sociability of religion”, each “steps forth to present [their] own intuition as object for the rest” and “to implant [their] holy feelings in them”. And each in turn, in mutual communication, “expresses the universe” (Schleiermacher 1996, pp. 75–76). In Schleiermacher’s own succinct formulation: “Once there is religion, it must necessarily also be social” (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 73).

Already in the first edition of his *Speeches*, then, Schleiermacher develops the emphasis on “free sociability” that will characterize his later mature philosophical and theological writings (cf. Moxter 2023). With this “principle of religious sociability”, religious piety is not “merely a private affair of the individual”, but religious feeling and intuitions unfailingly give rise to communication (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 77). In consequence, religion has a necessarily “social drive”, and each community forms its own “social institutions” that aim at shaping and mediating the mutual “communication of religion” (Schleiermacher 1996, pp. 92, 72). “The more each person approaches the universe”, Schleiermacher writes, “the more he communicates himself to others”, with each “going out beyond themselves” (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 94).

In this respect, the open and pious heart that reflects the interior and affective dimension of faith has its place in a fully social life (cf. Schleiermacher 2014, p. 57). It is endowed with an “effusive and accomplished . . . sociability” that “realizes itself in the whole” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 154). This “wholly different form of sociability” (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 79), in turn, highlights both the diverse forms of individuality and the interdependency of human living. As Schleiermacher writes in the 1806 edition, “all humanity is interwoven with one another and made dependent on one another” and “every individual is . . . a necessary supplement to the perfect intuition of humanity” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 201).<sup>15</sup> Such a view offers a clear contrast not only with notions of privatized individual piety but also with universalized conceptions of individual persons as being “really all the same” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 201), the “old desire” of the enlightened, “to have humanity everywhere cut out of one, ever recurring piece” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 211).

Through aiming to depict what is particular in religion, then, in his descriptions of the character of religious feeling and intuition, Schleiermacher does not establish religion as a timeless or ahistorical principle but emphasizes the seemingly endless and infinite variety of its historical expressions and manifestations. In this respect, he maintains, “religious people are thoroughly historical” (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 112). Where Hegel related religion only to the prior inwardness of subjectivity, arguing that “what is historical is not religion” (Hegel 2019, p. 480), Schleiermacher contends that “religion begins and ends with history” and that history is “the highest object of religion in the most proper sense” (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 205).

#### 4. The Dialogical Form of the *Speeches*

“Communication of religion cannot be other than rhetorical” (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 26).

These considerations of the critical approach in the *Speeches*, and of the associated social and historical dimensions of feeling and intuition, serve in turn to illuminate the distinctive features of work’s unique style. The text’s rhetorical form, conversational addresses to an audience of educated peers, closely matches its conceptual content. It serves as a performative example of religious communication, an ordered expression of religious feelings and intuitions. In such an approach, it differs sharply from the mode of an academic lecture or from speculative or theoretical treatises that would begin with a fixed definition of religion or establish a set of foundational concepts or principles. Yet it also contrasts with other creative forms of writing, such as Schleiermacher’s *Monologen*, or *Soliloquies*, which were written one year later in 1800 and present the extended self-reflection of a mind’s conversation with itself.<sup>16</sup> The *Speeches* takes up an unmistakably dialogical and interrogative form that proceeds by addressing the perceived assumptions and questions

of its audience of “cultured despisers”, providing examples and illustrations that challenge their preconceptions and invite them to deepened reflection and contemplation, circling back to respond to potential objections or criticisms, and gradually narrowing towards a consideration of the “essence”, or the distinguishing characteristic, of religion and the unceasing variety of its historical expressions (Korsch 2023, pp. 446–48).<sup>17</sup>

In this fashion, the *Speeches* does not seek to impart knowledge about religion or convince its audience by means of a philosophical argument but to stimulate a critical response: “all communication of religion cannot be other than rhetorical” (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 22). The text aims to lead the reader to the practice of “contemplation”, to recognize in their own person the “stirring of religion” or “quiet longing”, a sense of how “our own self is universally surrounded by the infinite” (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 63; cf. Lamm 2021, pp. 210–12). This interpersonal and rhetorical character of the *Speeches*, and its orientation to the specific concerns of its immediate audience, is difficult to overlook.<sup>18</sup> It reflects a clear oral and communicative dimension that intends to engage and elicit a particular response from its readers, communicating Schleiermacher’s understanding of his own piety, and in so doing stimulating reflection on religious piety, freedom, and social living. The work contours the “flow” and “movement” of religion within a fully human life, which itself is always dialogical and social (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 55; cf. Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 39–40). The form and style of the *Speeches*, therefore, as engaged in the actual process of communication, bears a fundamental relation to the substance of its argument (Korsch 2023, p. 444).

This oscillating movement of religion is, for Schleiermacher, a central feature of any well-formed human life. “A person is born with the religious capacity as with any other”, he writes, “and if only his sense . . . is not blocked or barricaded, then religion would have to develop unerringly in each person” (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 59; cf. Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 38–41). Each person has a basic capability for religious communication, and the expressions and utterances of religious sensibilities provoke or arouse others to articulate and disclose their own accompanying feelings and intuitions of the world. At the same time, religion also remains always and everywhere a historical phenomenon, and its expressions vary widely according to historical context and circumstance.

Underlying the presentation of the *Speeches*, in this sense, is not a foundationalist theory of religion as such but an understanding of religion as fundamentally oriented towards the practice of communication, thematized and brought to consciousness in the lively exchange of discourse and language. The peculiar status of religious communication serves to mediate between the individuality and sociality of human living, bringing to language the various ways in which a person meaningfully grasps and expresses their relation to the whole. The seemingly infinite variety of expressions of existing historical religions, and the developing social institutions that struggle to bind and stabilize them, serve then to indicate particular fields of ongoing religious communication. In this sense, as more recent interpreters have suggested, the *Speeches* sketch an account of religious communication that in important respects anticipates the later treatments of religion developed by Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann (Korsch 2023, p. 446; Gräb 2023, p. 673; cf. Habermas 2022, pp. 428–67). Notably, Habermas, in his 2022 *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, highlights Schleiermacher’s significance on just this point, as a language theorist whose thought is foundationally important for understanding the influence of religion in shaping modern public discourse. Habermas objects, however, to the transcendental analysis of subjectivity that Schleiermacher develops in his philosophical and theological writings (Habermas 2022, pp. 428–67).<sup>19</sup>

Accordingly, and in spite of repeated language of “essence” and “nature”, the *Speeches* do not present an essentialist account of religion but fashion a framework for critical inquiry into religion that presumes change and development over time, one that continually refines its categories and corrects conceptual tools and assumptions. The first edition of the text itself reflects the shifting role of religion within a specific historical situation, shaped both by the rapid social and political transitions that followed the French Revolutionary Wars



and by the emerging “public sphere” of reasoned debate and critique that found concrete expression in the bourgeois salon culture of Berlin (cf. [Aaslestad and Hagemann 2006](#); [Junker-Kenny 2022b](#)). However, in its subsequent editions Schleiermacher noted that if he were to begin such a work again, he would need to take up a notably different set of questions and assumptions and address the work to a new audience.<sup>20</sup> In the preface to the 1821 edition, for example, written in the wake of the Wars of Liberation and amidst the German Religious Awakening (*Erweckungsbewegung*) and the Restoration movement, he noted that religion’s educated and “cultured despisers” were increasingly hard to find, with superstitious “slaves to biblical literalism” taking their place ([Schleiermacher 1821](#), p. xiv; cf. [Kloes 2019](#), p. 80; [Vander Schel 2023](#)).

## 5. Conclusions

This short description of the novel critical inquiry into religion pursued in the *Speeches* signals several important implications for situating Schleiermacher’s work within the developing discourse on religion in German Idealism and German Romanticism. It first of all indicates that the modern category of religion was both firmly established and frequently contested at the time of the text’s publication. The structure and enterprise of the *Speeches* itself presumes the modern discussion of the concept of religion, so much so that the topic has become tiresome for educated contemporaries. As Friedrich Schlegel notes in his anonymous review of the *Speeches*, published in the journal *Athenaeum* in 1799, “Religion . . . [is] one of those things of which our age has lost the concept” ([Schlegel 1967](#), p. 275; quoted in [Whistler 2023](#), p. 242). The epoch-making significance of the *Speeches*, then, lies not in fashioning or constructing a new modern concept of religion but in reinvigorating the debate—already well underway—about the character of religion and its role in emerging social and public discourse.

Viewed in this perspective, the *Speeches* find its place in the context of the emerging Romantic debates concerning religion, which had grown critical of Enlightenment conceptions of universal or natural religion tethered to the dictates of reason and postulates of morality, and which sought to recover the characteristic individuality and particularity of historical religious traditions. Insofar as the text marked a revolution in modern understandings of religion, in its exploration of religious self-consciousness and expression, this is not oriented to purely inward and privatized understandings of religious faith but towards the positive and specific communication and expressions of religion. Contrary to later interpretations of the text as a retreat from historical or rational reflection, the *Speeches* illustrates a posture of ongoing critical and comparative inquiry into existing religious traditions and the dynamics of religious reflection in human communication. And, at least in this respect, later developments in the academic study of religion that have moved towards greater critical and historical research have not advanced beyond Schleiermacher’s legacy but lie yet within it.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As Michael J. Lesley has argued, however, it was first Johann Salomo Semler, rather than Schleiermacher, who played the foundational role in establishing the modern concept of religion in modern German theology (cf. [Lesley 2023](#)).

<sup>2</sup> The interpretation of Schleiermacher as originating a theology of subjective feeling resurfaced, for example, in the Chicago-Yale debate of the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in the works of David Tracy and George Lindbeck (see [Jeanrond 1994](#)). Alister McGrath’s *Christian Theology: An Introduction* offers a contemporary “textbook” example of Schleiermacher’s position: “Schleiermacher argued that religion in general . . . was a matter of feeling” ([McGrath 2011](#), p. 70).

- 3 In the North American context, as Andrew C. Dole notes, this interpretative tendency not only reflects a selective reading of the text itself but also the emerging politics and anxieties surrounding the study of religion in North American universities, specifically in the polemical concern to distance the discipline of religious studies from scholarship in theology (see [Dole 2023, 2008](#)).
- 4 More recent scholarship on Schleiermacher has been united in its rejection of this view, highlighting the originality and complexity of his argument in the *Speeches*, as well as the work's unique structure in uniting an analysis of individual religious piety to the recognition of religion as a social phenomenon (see, for example, [Sockness 2003](#); [Barth 2004](#); [Dole 2008](#); and cf. also Proudfoot's more nuanced discussion of Schleiermacher's position in [Proudfoot 2010](#)). More broadly, a growing number of scholars have highlighted the central role of sociability and the historically and socially mediated character of religious piety in Schleiermacher's thought (see, among others, [Sockness 2003](#); [Gräb 2018](#); [Robinson 2019](#); the essays analysing Schleiermacher's "hermeneutics of culture", in [Sockness and Gräb 2010](#), pp. 273–348). The analysis here has been significantly informed by these works.
- 5 The challenge of interpreting Schleiermacher's *Speeches* is complicated by the differences, at times significant, between the original 1799 text and revised editions published in 1806 and 1821 (cf. [Schleiermacher 2012](#)). Complete English translations are available for the original 1799 text ([Schleiermacher 1996](#)) and the 1821 edition ([Schleiermacher 1994](#)). From the 1806 edition, only the second speech is available in English ([Schleiermacher 2014](#)).
- 6 On this point, Dietrich Korsch notes: "If we retranslated 'On Religion'—a title that was still quite uncommon in German during that period—as *De religione*, we can see the title as an alternative to the more familiar *De Deo*, 'On God'" ([Korsch 2023](#), p. 434).
- 7 I am indebted on this point, and throughout this section, to Whistler's analysis of the significance of this *ars characteristica* in his essay "Early German Romanticism and the Characteristics of Religion", in *The Oxford History of Modern German Theology*, vol. I. As Whistler indicates, the *Speeches* marked a "religious turn" in early German Romanticism, which is apparent in publication history of the journal *Athenaeum*.
- 8 This language of characterization is also retained, however, in revised editions of the *Speeches* (see, for example, [Schleiermacher 1994](#), pp. 90, 109, 128).
- 9 In this sense, the *Speeches* offer a number of "definitions" of religion, yet each of these again seeks to distinguish or characterize what is particular to religion. In the 1806 edition of the second speech, for instance: "The universe exists in uninterrupted activity, revealing itself to us every moment . . . And so to take up into our life all that is individual as a part of the whole, all that is limited as a presentation of the infinite, and let ourselves be moved by this—this is religion" ([Schleiermacher 2014](#), p. 175).
- 10 This organizational logic is also reflected in Schleiermacher's later *Glaubenslehre*, in the reciprocal relationship of the works first and second parts.
- 11 Of this elusive unity, Schleiermacher writes: "it is barely in time, it hurries so; it can barely be described, so little is it actually there for us" ([Schleiermacher 2014](#), p. 169).
- 12 See, for examples, Schleiermacher's accompanying "explanations" in the 1821 revision ([Schleiermacher 1994](#)).
- 13 Such language appears in each speech of the 1799 edition (see, for example, [Schleiermacher 1996](#), pp. 58, 68, 69, 77, 95, 104). This use of the language of "intuition" in early Romanticism also reflects the early Romantics' esteem for Plato and a preference for "intuitive forms of reason over discursive ones" ([Beiser 2014](#), p. 37; quoted in [Lamm 2021](#), p. 11, n. 29).
- 14 Julia Lamm's detailed 2021 study, *Schleiermacher's Plato*, which offers the first careful analysis of the 1806 revision of the *Speeches* in light of Schleiermacher's ongoing work in translating Plato's dialogues, makes an important contribution in this regard, substantially clarifying the subtle distinction and relation of feeling and intuition in Schleiermacher's later works. I am indebted in this section to Lamm's analysis on this point (see [Lamm 2021](#), pp. 187–226).
- 15 On this point, note also the description of Schleiermacher's "highest intuition" in his *Soliloquies* ([Schleiermacher 1988](#), pp. 17–18; cf. [Moxter 2023](#), p. 156).
- 16 The *Speeches* also present a marked contrast with the characteristic didactic form of Schleiermacher's later university writings, which he adopted in his *Grundlinien einer Kritik der bisherigen Sittenlehre*, published in 1803, following his exile to Stolpe.
- 17 On the significance of the uniquely dialogical structure of the *Speeches* and its orientation towards communication, see in particular Korsch's illuminating essay "On Religion" in *The Oxford Handbook of Friedrich Schleiermacher* ([Korsch 2023](#); see also the discussion of dialogical form in [Lamm 2021](#), pp. 227–230; the editor's introduction in [Schleiermacher 2014](#), pp. 38–42).
- 18 In many cases, Schleiermacher addresses this specific audience directly: "Let's deal honestly with one another. You do not like religion" ([Schleiermacher 2014](#), p. 159).
- 19 Maureen Junker-Kenny's instructive 2022 monograph "*The Bold Arcs of Salvation History*": *Faith and Reason in Jürgen Habermas's Reconstruction of the Roots of European Thinking*, offers an extended and critical engagement with Habermas's interpretation of Schleiermacher's contributions to the theory of language and postmetaphysical thinking (see [Junker-Kenny 2022a](#), pp. 202–31, 253–62).
- 20 In his explanations appended to later editions of the text, Schleiermacher sought to contextualize the historical situation of the first edition in significant detail (see [Korsch 2023](#), p. 455).

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