



Reformation and Modernity

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REDEEMING THE NATURAL IN LIBERAL REFORMED THEOLOGY.

THE PANENTHERISM OF FR. SCHLEIERMACHER

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At the beginning of the XIX-th century, Fr. Schleiermacher was the first thinker who attempted both to maintain the validity of Christian doctrine and to keep the pace with the modern outlook of the world, as it was shaped by the Enlightenment. He engaged in this task by re-interpreting most of the major doctrines and concepts of Christianity, so that they may preserve, at least partly, their implications for human life, but without conflicting the scientific and rationalistic view of the Universe.

Traditionally, Christianity based its spirituality on a theistic and transcendental „God“; this assumption was highly problematic for the naturalistic and rationalist outlook of Modernity. In order to preserve the foundation of spirituality, Schleiermacher reinterpreted the concept of divinity, as the Organic Whole, as the interconnected and harmonious Totality. Hence, he succeeded both in discarding the non-natural repellent elements of the concept of „Divine“ and in preserving some key imports of this concept, such as unity, universality, harmony, sense. As Totality, immanence becomes the new divine; it is a natural divine but still preserving a degree of concealment, as a result of its magnanimity. In spite of this immanentization of the divine, spiritual endeavors are still justified by the need to cover the gap between the „sinful“ limited perspective of a human and the Holistic perspective which reveals the „spiritual“ meaning of the Universe.

The old ontological dualism between the „fallen“ immanence and the „sacred“ transcendence is abolished; the identification of the divine within immanence means the predicament of the ultimate divinity of the Universe. „Sinfulness“ becomes only a matter of how humans see and experience the natural. Thus, Schleiermacher succeeds in „redeeming“ the natural, making it the ultimate foundation of everything, including spirituality.

The traditional attributes of God are reinterpreted so that they may not mean anymore personal traits but natural aspects of the Universe. Hence, love, as the ultimate reason for all divine actions, is interpreted as the natural causality that maintains the harmony and the order of the Universe. God's almightiness would mean nothing else that the universality of causal regulation. Creation ceases to be a particular event and is interpreted as an ontological condition of the Universe, namely that of being imbued with the „divine“ harmony and unity.

Some traditional theological elements, which couldn't be adapted in any way to the Modern outlook, were utterly discarded, the most important of these being the doctrine of the Trinity.

Religion becomes a natural issue namely the way an individual being relates to the Whole. The traditional opposition between godly and ungodly is replaced by the opposition between the holist view and the individual limited view.

In spiritual life, the divine is present not as a particular entity but rather as the infinite possibility of expanding one's perspective until reaching the universal level. The divine is minimally described as the indefinite universality, on which the individual being feels absolutely dependent.