

Religion and Politics

The Contribution of Schleiermacher's "Speeches on Religion" in an ongoing Debate

A Discussion of Ted Vial's Paper

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Introduction

In recent years one of the most interesting features of the field of religious studies has been the resurgence of the focus on the role of religion within the political world. Many scholars now recognize that earlier assumptions, at least in Western academic circles, that religion would largely fade from political life have not been borne out. On the contrary, instead of a gradual marginalization and privatization of religion, in many parts of the world the opposite has occurred. Even in the West, religion has retained or even reasserted its presence in public debate.

The result has been a substantial reassessment of the relationship of religion and politics in the modern world. A great number of studies have appeared examining the way in which religious phenomena – ideas, symbols, individuals, institutions – influence systems of governance at local, national and international levels. Equal attention is now being given to the way in which the political system – leaders and institutions – responds to these claims. In short, the issue of the relationship between religion and politics is now a matter of serious academic attention. There is a growing recognition that religion and politics are not now, and in fact never have been, separate, hermetically-sealed spheres of human thought and action. In the modern world, albeit in different ways from earlier times, religion and politics continue to interlink in important ways in order to shape the public arena in which the many issues about the human predicament are debated and acted upon.

But in which sense and to what end are religion and politics connected with each other? We know different stories, e.g., in the history of Christianity, about this connection, and different models are discussed in the stud-

ies of religion. For example, there is the story of modernity with its connection to democracy or to a certain kind of arrangement between the state and religious organizations within a society. Of course, it makes a difference whether the question is about the relationship of religion and politics in general or about the constellation of relationships between a certain religion and the political sphere in a certain country during a specific historical period.

Now, what can Schleiermacher contribute to this issue with his *Speeches on Religion*? It is often said that Schleiermacher's concept of religion had a strong influence on the narrative of the privatization of religion, its disappearing from the public sphere and the secularization of society. In the fourth speech, Schleiermacher emphasized indeed that church and state should be separate. In his understanding, Church and state have different functions within a society. The purpose of the Church as a religious community is religious communication, which should not have direct impact on state issues. The state, too, should not intervene in the inner affairs of the church. And this seems to match up with Schleiermacher's notion of religion as something which is neither acting nor knowing.

Nevertheless, Schleiermacher held the view that there are always specific tensions between religion and politics, using both of these terms in a broader sense. Schleiermacher also stated that the general term 'religion' is always contaminated by normative standpoints and specific religious and political interests. For him, therefore, it would not be surprising to find that our understanding of religion is always impacted by the power of religious and political institutions. On Schleiermacher's view, the general concept of religion has to be read from the perspective of the Christian religion and its history.

However scholars of theology and – I suppose – also of religious studies cannot abandon the general usage of 'religion'. On the contrary, they have to reflect on their usage of the term hermeneutically. Only then can we recognize the specific profile of Schleiermacher's theory of religion as developed in the *Speeches* regarding the relationship between religion and politics.

It is obvious that we have to read the *Speeches* from the perspective of the fourth and fifth speeches. The focus of the *Speeches* in general is the Christian religion, its self-understanding and its community within the Christian Church. The development of the general understanding of religion in the second speech, therefore, must be read in light of what is said in the later speeches. There, Schleiermacher argued that there is no "religion-in-general", rather there are only positive religions. Each definition of the term 'religion' thus stands under the presupposition of a specific religion and its tradition. Thus it should also become clear that each definition of religion has a normative implication, which cannot be conceived of

without looking at the status of this religion within the society and its interaction with the political power. We know that in Schleiermacher's time the Christian religion was the religion of the overwhelming majority in the Prussian state. Furthermore, for Schleiermacher the Christian religion from a theological perspective represented the fulfillment not only of the history of religions but also of the creation of humankind.

Nevertheless, the great achievement of Schleiermacher's *Speeches* was that he responded to the new challenge of theology initiated by the deconstruction of the dogmas of the Christian faith in the enlightenment era. Schleiermacher recognized that in the new intellectual situation it was necessary to explain not only what the Christian faith believes but also what it means for human beings to become a believer in the first place and to become part of a religious community. In such an intellectual atmosphere, theologians and religious scholars have to develop a rational theory of religion. They have to explain the rational grounds for a religious position and worldview. They have to determine the function of religious communities within a society and for the individual human being. And they have to do that from the perspective of an outsider, although they may at the same time be included in the particular religious traditions and communities of that society.

This is the post-enlightenment situation in which theologians are confronted with the critique of religion and in which they have to find a rational ground of religion. To do so, they need a general definition of religion and an understanding of its anthropological and societal function apart from its application to any particular religious tradition or community. In the *Speeches* Schleiermacher was one of the first theologians to meet these requirements. Although he realized that his understanding of religion was influenced by his Christian perspective, he developed a general theory of religion explaining what it means for human beings to be religious.

In terms of the debate about the interrelationship of religion and politics, the approach that Schleiermacher takes in his *Speeches* is still important today. Not only does he describe the complicated development of this relationship, but he also helps us understand the specific religious dimension in political affairs. For this, of course he must give us the clarification of the term 'religion' and an overarching general theory of religion with insights about its rational grounds and its human and societal functions.

With this in mind, we should look more in detail at Schleiermacher's arguments regarding the relationship of religion and politics in modern societies by discussing Ted Vial's paper on religion and politics in this volume.

Vial first refers to the discourse about the use of the term 'religion' within the discipline of religious studies. He indicates that important representatives of religious studies like Talal Asad and Robert Orsi are critical

about José Casanova's thesis concerning the openness of the public sphere in modern societies to the political statements of religious communities. Inspired by Foucault's discourse-theory, they argue that in certain societies not all religions are publicly accepted. On the contrary, this openness is connected to the claim that public discourse accepts the valid political norms in a certain society. A religion with access to the public sphere has to be a generally accepted religion. Moreover, even in the theoretical and theological discourse one could claim that the application of the term 'religion' to a community is always influenced by these normative political criteria. Therefore, Asad and Orsi put forward a highly critical approach in dealing with the general term 'religion' within the field of religious studies.

The openness of modern societies to the impact of a certain religion is connected to its cultural and, ultimately, theological standards. A religion with access to the public sphere has to be compatible with the major religion and its theology – and theology is always normative, as Asad and Orsi understand it. Already in this theoretical context, one might observe that the application of the term 'religion' to a community is influenced by normative theological and political interests. So they ask, e.g., for which purposes a community is considered to be religious or non-religious. Vial refers to the hesitation of religious studies scholars to accept and to use the modern term 'religion' as a descriptive category. He mentions that Asad and Orsi are skeptics about the general term 'religion'. In their opinion, which seems to be common in the field of religious studies, there is no such thing as "religion". There are only different religions, i.e., those people who identify themselves as members of a religious group, like Christians, Muslims, and so on. Asad and Orsi express the suspicion that there is a great danger of the ideological misuse of the general term 'religion' to further political interests. Given the thesis of Casanova and others that in modern liberal democracies religions are once again welcome to enter the public sphere, Asad and Orsi indicate that however accurate this claim is, it is not true for all religions in a certain society. Political interests are always involved, and every society incorporates more or less publicly accepted and established religions and therefore religions with more or less access to the public sphere. Consequently, following Asad and Orsi, one can say that only those religions can become public religions which conform to the political mainstream and something like the ideological grounding of the political power. Religions range on different levels, but in order to be present in the public sphere of modern societies they have to fulfill specific political criteria.

It seems to me that it is the intention of the first part of Vial's paper to point out this critical and deconstructive discussion of the modern category of religion in the discipline of religious studies and furthermore to find

some helpful suggestions about the interpretation of Schleiermacher's *Speeches*. If I understand Vial correctly, then, in the later parts of his paper he is affirming the critical deconstruction of modern theories of religion, using Schleiermacher's *Speeches* as a tool. He agrees with the dominant trend in religious studies by attempting to show that the modern term 'religion' does not refer to a constitutive dimension of human nature. For this reason, he emphasizes that the interpretation of Schleiermacher's *Speeches* fails if we link his theory of religion primarily to the second speech.

In the second speech, we find indeed something like an anthropological concept of religion. There, the essence of religion is described as "sensibility and taste for the infinite" or as "intuition of the universe", definitions of the general term religion which seem only to refer to individual human subjectivity and not to the religious community as a whole. Looking to the second speech, it also seems obvious, that for Schleiermacher religion is a dimension of human subjectivity *per se* apart from its political aspects or influence from the social sphere. Looking ahead, however, to the fourth and fifth speeches, Vial argues, we can see that Schleiermacher applies the term 'religion' (in the singular) to the different religions (in the plural). And in this respect, Vial is right: In the fourth and fifth speeches Schleiermacher is indeed talking about the Church and how the Christian community can become a Church, and also about the difference between Christianity and Judaism. He thus develops a concept which helps differentiate religions on a structural level.

In so doing, Vial argues, we can see that Schleiermacher is using the term 'religion' in a normative sense. Vial seems to want to emphasize the idea that the explanation for Schleiermacher's "ranking" of the various religions must have something to do with their particular relationship to the politics of the contemporary state and society.

Using other Schleiermacher texts written around 1800, Vial demonstrates how Schleiermacher uses normative political criteria to answer the question of whether indigenous religions in the colonies or Judaism in the Germany of his time are compatible with the rules of the contemporary society and the laws of the state. Thus in the end, Vial is able to underline the main argument of the critical approach of the field of religious studies that the term 'religion' in the singular is an ideological category masking political interests and is, in the end, an instrument for political power and force.

However, it seems to me that Vial confirms the position of Asad and Orsi in terms of their critical deconstruction of the general term of religion a little too much – and in a way that is not actually compatible with Schleiermacher's approach. My first critical question is whether we have to accept that the general term 'religion' is *only* an ideological category, as claimed in the field of religious studies. It is true that the term 'religion' has its historical, cultural and social contexts. One need only look at the

modern history of European Christianity to see this. However, I think that this modern history reflects a transformation of the Christian religion itself in which both modern Christian theology and the philosophy of religion has been involved. I would like to suggest that it is important to understand the recent development of the general term 'religion' in theology and philosophy in order to understand what this term means and to which phenomena it was originally applied. Then we can see that the transformation of the Christian religion reflected in the rise of the general term 'religion' can also be understood as a social reality. Religious motives and symbols are not only used for political purposes. It is also possible to read the modern European history of Christian religion as a process of freeing religion from its social, moral and especially political usage – a historical process of freeing religion to be itself.

I agree with Vial that the critical approach of religious studies can be helpful for approaching Schleiermacher's theory of religion in the *Speeches* critically. However, Vial ought also to put the question the other way around. I think we can also ask whether Schleiermacher's theory of religion in the *Speeches* can serve as an impetus for a better understanding of the development of the modern term 'religion' and its application to social phenomena and developments in modern societies. So my question to Vial is whether he is looking strongly enough at the interdependency of the evolution of religion as a dimension of human subjectivity and the development of modern liberal and democratic societies. I think that he is overlooking the fact that in the *Speeches* Schleiermacher develops a modern theory of religion.¹ Schleiermacher is trying to create an understanding of the general term 'religion' that is flexible and broad enough to cover such phenomena like individual religions, which are primarily personal and private and in a specific sense also influence the public sphere. Schleiermacher's intention in the *Speeches* was to disclose the transformed modern understanding of religion – that there is something like religious experience that forms the basis for a religious community but refers at the same time to subjectivity. The individual religious person articulates his or her religious experience. In this respect, each religious individual is related to the symbolic tradition of a specific religion and thus to a religious community. Here, Schleiermacher is developing an idealistic concept of a true religious community. But at the same time, his religious ideal was intended to represent the political possibility of realizing the lessons of the French revolution. Never again should the state and the political sphere of society become the decisive factor in the Church's access to the public sphere. On

¹ Cf. ULRICH BARTH, Die Religionstheorie der *Reden*. Schleiermachers theologisches Modernisierungsprogramm, in: ULRICH BARTH, Aufgeklärter Protestantismus, Tübingen 2004, 259–290.

the contrary, Schleiermacher was fighting for a transformation of the Protestant Church through which the Church would exercise a significant influence on the genesis of the modern democratic society. For this reason, I would like to stress the fact not only that political forces have the power to regulate the presence of a religion in the public sphere but also that religion can transform the public sphere and thereby have a deep political impact.

My second question to Vial is whether it really is wise to concentrate on the fourth and fifth speeches discussing Schleiermacher's ideas about the contemporary relationship of religion and politics. In the second speech Schleiermacher gives his description of the essence of religion and develops his central argumentation concerning the independence and autonomy of religion as a sphere of human life in its own right. The justification of religion as a constitutive element of human nature, an argument which connects the theory of religion with an anthropological background, is on my view the most important contribution of Schleiermacher's *Speeches* – even in terms of the relationship between religion and politics.² Perhaps it will be helpful to remember in this regard that in his *Philosophische Ethik* – which is truly a theory of culture – Schleiermacher was mainly interested to show how the social world is functionally differentiated. Religion, economics and politics represent different social systems. They are autonomous on the one hand and connected with each other in processes of interpenetration on the other. Thus, the ideological understanding of the general term 'religion' is not apt for a critique of Schleiermacher's concept. On the contrary, Schleiermacher was one of the first religious thinkers who understood the interrelatedness of religion and politics within the society. But his concept is also able to show that as religion has an impact on the political sphere.

There is another reason why the second speech is important for understanding Schleiermacher's thinking about the relationship between religion and politics. In the second speech Schleiermacher tries to understand religion as a specifically human experience – as intuition and feeling and therefore as something which is specifically related to human subjectivity, the principal condition for self- and world-contact. In this regard, it is important for our discussion to see that Schleiermacher strongly argues that religion is not merely a derivational and secondary factor in the social word. To understand religion means to refer to religious experiences. Thus,

² Cf. WILHELM GRÄB, Schleiermacher's Conception of Theology and Account of Religion as a Constitutive Element of Human Culture, in: Brent Sockness, Wilhelm Gräb (Ed.) Schleiermacher, the Study of Religion and the Future of Theology. A Transatlantic Dialogue. Berlin/New York 2010, 335–348.

experience provides the *theoretical* background for a *theoretical* justification of being religious.

Because the field of religious studies is not interested in such a theoretical justification of religious experiences, they are unable to deal with religious phenomena in any way other than a critical and deconstructive way. However, denying a constructive hermeneutics of religion makes it difficult to analyze religious self-understanding. And without a religious hermeneutics, it should also be difficult to understand the social importance of religious movements and communities in a constructive way. In order to criticize religion as an ideological instrument in the hand of politicians, we first have to ask what religion is or what makes human beings able to become religious. This is what I would like to discuss not only with Vial but also Asad and Orsi. On my view, it is very important to recognize that in his *Speeches* Schleiermacher argues that religion opens up a specific perspective on the world and its reality. Religion provides the power to cope with specific challenges of way human beings conduct their lives.³

My third and final question refers to Ted Vial's point that in the fourth and fifth speeches Schleiermacher is using the general term 'religion' in a normative sense restricting the public presence of religion to within the borders of the Prussian state. This may be true, but what does it imply?

The Protestant Church within the Prussian state was highly connected with the political sphere. The king was at the same time the leader of the Church, not formally in a religious sense but for organizational reasons. This was a difficult relationship, and the danger was always that the king would interfere with the religious dimension of the Church. But Schleiermacher was fighting *against* these interferences. In the fourth speech he emphasizes that Church and state should be *more* separate. His purpose in this regard was that the church should become more religious and the state more political. That was what he was struggling for. And here again we can see his commitment to the autonomy of the different functions of society. With this in mind we can also understand why in the fifth speech Schleiermacher stresses that there are restrictions for religions entering the public political sphere. These restrictions have to do with differences between religion and politics in principle.

Even when we use the term 'politics' in a broader sense, Schleiermacher would say that politics is always a matter of the organization of the life of a community. In his *Philosophische Ethik* he refers to politics under the label of organizational action (*organisierendem Handeln*). Religion, in contrast, belongs to symbolizing action (*symbolisierendem Handeln*). When

³ Cf. WILHELM GRÄß, Practical Theology as Theology of Religion. Schleiermacher's Understanding of Practical Theology as a Discipline, in: International Journal of Practical Theology 9, 2005, 181–196.

religion is religion and nothing else, it is the deepest experience of personal self-transcendence. It is a feeling which brings an individual person in contact with his or her present self-consciousness which can never become an object of knowing and acting.

To understand Schleiermacher's impact on the debate about religion and politics correctly, we have to go back again to the anthropological framework. Religion and politics address different functions of human existence and thus also different functions within a human society. Yet what is principally different might not be differentiated within social reality. Schleiermacher indicates that religious feelings usually accompany human actions. Because religion in its specific sense does not produce knowledge or actions, religious feelings cannot provide objects of knowledge or aims of actions. Nevertheless, religious feelings are fundamental to knowing and acting, because they form the identity of the person who knows or acts. The same is true regarding the religious sphere within a society. Religious or faith-based communities can and should enter the public sphere. But by doing so they become political agents and therefore no longer serve as religious agents. They then must resort to moral and political arguments in order to promote their purposes.

Finally, Schleiermacher emphasizes his claim that religions should become more religious and the state more political. This allows us to understand his critique of Judaism in the fifth speech, which suggests that Judaism – and we can add any other religion here – remains a political and theocratic religion within modern society. In this regard we have to understand the argument that not all religions "fit" within modern societies. Schleiermacher's intention was not to prevent these religions from having access to the public sphere as religions. But he was afraid that they might become dangerous political agents if they were to address political issues, unless they became pure political actors using solely rational political arguments. His point was that a religion which doesn't respect the laws of the state but has theocratic intentions is not compatible with a modern democratic society.

Conclusion

A final word about the dialog between theology and religious studies from the perspective of Schleiermacher's concept of religion as developed in the *Speeches*. I might be wrong here, but it seems to me that the deepest difference between these two disciplines concerns the fact that within religious studies the term 'religion' is always associated with a derivative social phenomenon. It is suspected of masking political interests but at the same

time is not supposed to refer to a human or social reality which has its own and genuine right to be. Theology, on the contrary, is interested to show that religion is a reality which cannot be reduced to merely political or other social purposes.

In order to decide which academic discipline is right we need to foster more discussion between them. Our meeting in Marburg represented a useful contribution to this debate, I suppose. And I want to stress the fact that from a theological perspective Schleiermacher's *Speeches* are very helpful to this debate, especially because they provide arguments for the claim that religion refers in a specific way to a constitutive dimension of the human nature and at the same time of all human cultures. The modern evolution of human culture has made the specific anthropological function of religion evident. We are now in a position to see that religion has to do with the symbolic expression of human self-consciousness. In this function, religion cannot be replaced by other social activities. A critical approach like the one preferred by religious studies does not thereby become dispensable, but we should be aware of a phrase which is very often used there – "Religion is nothing but ...".

This kind of reductionism also misses the point in the debate about religion and politics. It is true that religion often obscures purely political interests, but it can also reveal the basic human needs that sometimes motivate political action. Religious studies, too, need a theoretical justification of religion as a constitutive element of human nature and culture. And in this respect, religious studies scholars might benefit a great deal from Schleiermacher's *Speeches*.