

Theo L. Hetteema
Heleen Zorgdrager

Schleiermacher and the Reshaping of Protestantism. Credits for the 21st Century
Paper presented at the jubilee congress of the Theological University Kampen, Aug. 2004

§ 1 Introduction: Protestantism and the question of identity

There seem to be all kinds of reasons to criticize the identity of Protestantism. Such criticism comes from outside, from the society. As for the Netherlands, Calvinism, Holland's most prominent Protestant denomination, has become a synonym for narrow-mindedness, frugality, and outmodedness. It is not in favour of someone to declare oneself a Protestant in cultural debate. Moreover, Protestantism is losing its position in the field of ecumenism. In this field, Protestantism is enduring the most severe criticism: the criticism of neglect. Protestantism in its classical form is simply not interesting for the global church, nowadays. The attention is turned to the relation between Roman-Catholic and Eastern-Orthodox churches. This tendency has been internalised by someone like Alister MacGrath, who has recently proclaimed that Protestantism in its classical form will not survive, and that the future is granted to Evangelicalism.

In our opinion, this triple criticism, external, inter-ecclesiastical, and internal, is inevitable. The verbal orientation of Protestantism, its orientation towards actualisation in society, its translation into common life as a vocation, its position as a historical novelty: all these factors contribute to an explanation of the criticism that falls to Protestantism. However, what counts at most is an internal trait of Protestantism. In its positive form, it has been labelled as the 'Protestant principle', a basic trait of prophetic criticism. In fact, the very word Protestantism comes from the sixteenth century, where in a German diet (*Reichstag*) representatives of the Reformation claimed the right to pronounce their individual belief on account of fundamental matters. This persistent emphasis upon freedom over against oppressive powers is the positive side of the Protestant principle. Its negative side is given in a permanent state of self-criticism and a continuous suspicion about superimposed assertions.

Viewed from the standpoint of a double manifestation of the Protestant principle, the subject matter of this congress is an expression of the two sides of the Protestant principle itself. The congress poses the question to a Protestant identity at the beginning of the 21st century. This question has a positive side. The fact that this question can be posed, supposes a certain freedom – not only a political or social freedom to deliberate upon this question, but also a freedom of mind. It also has a negative side. Posing the question implies that the Protestant identity is contested and that there are serious reasons to restate the Protestant identity. However, such a restatement is an impossible task for Protestants. Given our self-criticism, it can only end up either in a row, or in a careful reformulation, with a strategic compromise of incorporating different views and opinions.

Such a position lines up with a post-modern trait that can widely be observed in Western society. Post-modernism has made its listeners attentive to constant processes of difference, non-identification, and deferment of identity. For post-modernism, there is no stable fundament of identity beneath the surface of entanglement. The intricate web of a continuous referentiality without referent is the only stage upon which our human lives and meanings are unfolded. The merits of this post-modern hermeneutics may not be discussed at this place. We only observe that, together with the negative side of a continuous self-criticism in Protestantism, it may easily lead to an easygoing relativism, or even an intellectual void. Political and social circumstances, theological needs, and a global urge prevent us from

submitting to such relativism. In our view, post-modernism contains huge challenges for Protestant theology, but also an imminent danger.

Now, how should we proceed in dealing with the question of Protestant identity in the 21st century, given this set of considerations? We think that one should abandon the ideal of a unison view on Protestant identity. Both cultural circumstances and the feature of self-criticism hinder such unanimity. On the other hand does the Protestant principle urge us to obstruct against relativism or resignation in matters of identity. How do we as Protestant theologians deal with the question of identity between unity and plurality?

§ 2 Schleiermacher and the question of identity in German Protestantism

Having this question before us, we turn to the German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher. We search for a stimulus for our question to Protestant identity in his theology. Why should we search this in Schleiermacher? There seem to be all kind of reasons not to turn to his theology. Schleiermacher has developed his thoughts in a period some two hundred years ago, in the age of Romanticism. The most important criticism that can be brought against a revival of his theology is, that his thinking has not crossed the path of critical thinkers like Marx, Nietzsche, Feuerbach, and Freud, who have set the course of nineteenth and twentieth century thinking. Schleiermacher has not set out his thought over against the modern horizon of the critique of the human subject.¹ This is an important aspect why we cannot simply copy his thought to a theology for present times.

Meanwhile, we cannot pass his theology, either, because there are so many elements that appeal to our present situation. I mention some elements. First, Schleiermacher appears in an intellectual environment that looks down on Christian belief and the life of the church. We owe his beautiful *Speeches on Religion* (1799) to the ‘cultured despisers’ among his friends. – The negative and even mocking reactions to the publication of these *Speeches* have made clear how Schleiermacher’s intention to reach his friends has appeared to be an impossible task.² This ‘mission impossible’ connects his theology to the present situation of theology and Christian belief in society.

Second, we should not forget that Schleiermacher developed his thinking in a period of war and recovery. His age was the time of the French revolution, the Napoleonic wars, and the formation of a modern German state after those wars. We may conceive what impact the advance of the French troops under Napoleon has made in German life. What is more, we should imagine what affects this advance had for German national feelings. Even more than the shame of having hostile troops on one’s own ground, it was shocking to the Germans that *French* troops were invading Germany. To the neatly, well-ordered German mind, it was inconceivable that the messy French troops, stumbling with their logistics, and conducted by some lieutenant Bonaparte, were able to conquer the German states. After Napoleon had been defeated, the Germans needed a new impulse to recapture their identity. Aided by the current of Romanticism, a new national feeling arose, surpassing former feelings of separate German states. It was a creative period in Germany, between the Vienna congress that shaped a new political Europe and the Restoration of the thirties. Exactly this creative period, which also gave rise to the new Berlin University in which Schleiermacher became involved, has been the formative period of Schleiermacher’s theological orientation. One should consider the

¹ Cf. Craig C. Stein, *Schleiermacher’s Construction of the Subject in the Introduction of the Christian Faith in Light of M. Foucault’s Critique of Modern Knowledge* (Schleiermacher Studies and Translations 19; Lewiston NY: Mellen, 2001).

² Cf. Nico F.M. Schreurs (ed.), ‘*Welche unendliche Fülle offenbart sich da...*’ *Die Wirkungsgeschichte von Schleiermachers ‘Reden über die Religion’* (STAR 7; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2003).

parallel to our present situation. War and terror question the identities of established powers. Meanwhile, a new potential for thinking and believing arises.

A third factor may be added. The early nineteenth century became a period in which former polemical attitudes within the churches disappeared for a large part. In Germany, this irenic period led to a unification of the Lutheran and Calvinist churches. We should not forget that this unification process was imposed by the Prussian king, who needed a unified church politics, and we should not imagine that the unification had a large impact on the level of local churches. Still, the church union implied a new situation and a theological impetus, to which Schleiermacher's theology was a reaction.³ Again, being a Dutch theologian, it is so tempting to compare this church union to the recent unification process between Calvinists and Lutherans in the Netherlands, which has led to fusion into the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.

Fourth, we can interpret Schleiermacher's thinking as the formulation of a response to the challenges of Kant's philosophy.⁴ As such, it is the first and major attempt to respond to modernity, a response to which our theology, in a (post) modern condition, is still oriented.

§ 3 Schleiermacher on church and spirit

We now turn to Schleiermacher's view on the church, as set out in the ecclesiology of his *Christian Faith*. However, before doing so, we need to characterize Schleiermacher's thinking. We do this by proposing the term dialectical thinking. Schleiermacher is, in all respects, a dialectical thinker. As for the word dialectic, we should interpret Schleiermacher's college notes of philosophical dialectic as a general pattern for his entire philosophy and theology.⁵ His dialectic is different from that of Hegel's. Schleiermacher does not work with the category of subsumption, and does not propose encompassing processes in history. His dialectic is based upon the assumption of an original distinctive identity (*Eigentümlichkeit*), which unfolds itself in different and even opposite realisations. It is important for Schleiermacher that the distinctiveness of a phenomenon cannot be captured apart from its realisations. Knowing and meaning have to be conquered through individual occurrences and only receive their sense through individual occurrences.

This basis of thinking has severe consequences for the systematic theology that Schleiermacher unfolds in his *Christian Faith*. Schleiermacher devotes much attention to expound the distinctiveness of religion (defined as a feeling of absolute dependence). The consequence of this approach is, that the systematic treatment of any dogmatic *locus* has to relate the dogmatic object (e.g., God, salvation) to the feeling, to the consciousness of this object in the believer. Another consequence is, that such a religious feeling necessarily receives a concrete shape in distinctive beliefs, and, especially, in historically distinctive communities.⁶ Therefore, any dogmatic treatment has to relate its exposition to the community in which a belief gets shape. For Schleiermacher, 'dogmatics' is given in an

³ Cf. Albrecht Geck, *Schleiermacher als Kirchenpolitiker. Die Auseinandersetzungen um die Reform der Kirchenfassung in Preussen (1799-1823)* (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 1997).

⁴ Cf. Hendrikus Berkhof, *200 Jahre Theologie. Ein Reisebericht* (Neukirchen-Vluyn; Neukirchener Verlag, 1985) 46-63.

⁵ Cf. Christine Helmer e.a., *Schleiermachers Dialektik. Die Liebe zum Wissen in Philosophie und Theologie* (Religion in Philosophy and Theology 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); Maciej Potepa, *Schleiermachers hermeneutische Dialektik* (Studies in Philosophical Theology 15; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996); Falk Wagner, *Schleiermachers Dialektik. Eine kritische Interpretation* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1974).

⁶ This consequence is already elaborated in Schleiermacher's early publication of the *Speeches on Religion*. It is exactly on the point of the realization of religious feeling in social connections (*Geselligkeit*) that Schleiermacher received the criticism of his intellectual friends.

exposition of the Christian faith (*Glaubenslehre*). Even that is perhaps too broad, and Schleiermacher, therefore, does not hesitate to present a distinctively *protestant* exposition of faith.

So we are, in Schleiermacher's monograph on the *Christian Faith* (1822¹; 1830-1831²) confronted with a systematic theology that renders a clear difference between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism right from the start: the difference is presented in the methodological prolegomena to the work. The famous section § 24 of the *Christian Faith* says that the Reformation was not only a matter of correction of historical abuses, but that it embodies a genuine, distinctive expression of the Christian community. Schleiermacher conceives of the difference between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism as a matter of relationship.⁷ For Protestantism, the relation of the individual to the Church is secondary to and dependent of her or his relation to Christ. For Roman Catholicism, the relation of the Church towards the individual qualifies the individual relation of the believer towards Christ. In short: individual freedom of belief is essential for the Protestant. The Church is the main point of identification for Roman Catholicism.

We should remark that the exposition of this genuine aspect of identity (*Eigentümlichkeit*) does not belong to Schleiermacher's proper exposition of the Christian faith, but to its methodological suppositions. Schleiermacher does not betray his own points of departure. Therefore, the theological meaning of Protestant identity has to be sought in the material exposition of the book. Now we may find many places in which Protestant and Catholic doctrines are specified over against each other, but nowhere do we encounter the sharp difference between the two church forms as it is made in the Prolegomena. It must be clear that Schleiermacher does not intend to develop a polemical attitude towards the Roman Catholic Church, though he makes severe distinctions.⁸ What the actual Protestant identity implies, should not be sought in the paragraphs that expand on dogmatic differences over against Roman Catholicism, but in the exposition of his systematic theology as a whole, and, more distinctively, in Schleiermacher's ecclesiology. For Schleiermacher strictly applies his own starting point: a general ecclesiology cannot be given. His dogmatic exposition on the church is related to the Protestant perception or consciousness of what the Church is.

From that perception, Schleiermacher creates his view of the church. He makes a classical distinction between the everlasting *notae ecclesiae* and the temporary features of the actual churches. In speaking of the actual churches, he expresses a great confidence in the surpassing of church schisms: all separations are only transitory (§ 152), and there is a continuing force of truth that outdoes every error in faith (§ 155). Thus, a fully expanded ecclesiology is unfolded, even leading into an eschatology, which is conceived as that part of the ecclesiology that deals with the completion of the church. Meanwhile, we should not think that Schleiermacher presents an inner-ecclesiastical view. All parts of his dogmatics are unfolded in a structure that covers the metaphysical tripartition of man, world, and God. Schleiermacher places the dogmatic part on ecclesiology in the part of soteriology that deals with the world. So in describing the doctrine of the church, Schleiermacher wants to express the condition of the world relating to God's salvation.⁹

So far, we meet the plurality of the actual churches, and the unity of the everlasting *ecclesia*. Now there is a part in Schleiermacher's ecclesiology that precedes these sections. In

⁷ The Eastern Orthodox Church remains out of scope for Schleiermacher. We may suppose that he would share its characteristics under Roman Catholicism.

⁸ Schleiermacher ascribes an important function to theological polemics, as a fundamental discipline in theology, while, at the same time, he avoids the practice of actual ecclesiastical polemic. Cf. Theo L. Hetteema, 'The Noble Art of Self-Defence: Schleiermacher and Clausewitz on Theological Polemics and the Theory of Warfare,' in: T.L. Hetteema, A. v.d. Kooij, (eds.), *Religious Polemics In Context* (STAR Series 11; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2004) 21-31.

⁹ The term 'condition' (*Beschaffenheit*) replaces the notion of (individual) consciousness.

the very first part of the ecclesiology, Schleiermacher deals with the spirit of the church. He describes this spirit as a communal spirit (*Gemeingeist*). This spirit is necessary to form a real community (*Gemeinschaft*). However, this spirit is more than a common sphere. It is a spirit that Schleiermacher identifies with the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ For Schleiermacher, the notion of communication (*Mitteilung*) is essential. Christ communicates God's salvation to us. However, when Christ has gone from the earth the Holy Spirit is communicated to the people in order to represent Christ. Now, this representation of Christ is realized in the communal spirit of the church.¹¹ Christ is present in the spirit of the church, and the spirit of the church is realized as the communal spirit. This is really an audacious ecclesiology! It is an ecclesiology that totally encompasses pneumatology. Whatever we can say about the Holy Spirit, has to be related to the religious consciousness of the Spirit. This consciousness is embodied in the communal spirit of the church. It is a rigorous conception: pneumatology necessarily leads to ecclesiology, and: ecclesiology necessarily leads to pneumatology. There is another audacious consequence: the pneumatology stretches from the one, everlasting *ecclesia* to the actual churches. The pneumatological representation of Christ is not restricted to the ideal of a Church, but stretches until the concrete realization in the churches. It is this community creating spirit that endows the historical churches with the power to overcome their errors and schisms and grow unto one, single community of the church.

Thus, we come to a provisional conclusion. We are convinced that the question to the identity of the Protestant church is a vital question, which cannot be neglected. In Schleiermacher's theology, we find a model for expressing the weight of the question for systematic theology. We need a theology that reckons with the concrete experiences of people in their religious consciousness. Using a consequent dialectical approach, Schleiermacher can avoid the pitfalls of both essentialism and relativism. We then arrive at a sketch of an ecclesiology, which intertwines with pneumatology. This ecclesiology realizes to embody the actual historical appearances of churches, accepting their plurality and differences, while still maintaining a single notion of community. The identity of the church may be a matter of deferment and even diffusion, while still a firm and even hopeful conception of the church remains possible.

Having stated this provisional conclusion, I expect at least one objection. For Schleiermacher has stated, that the characteristic of Protestantism is its primary relation of the individual to Christ, with the believer's relation to the church as a derived aspect. It is easy to speak of openness, plurality, growing community, and recognition of differences in such a derived sense. Indeed, it is easy to build a fluid, plural conception of the church upon a pneumatology. (Cf. John 3,8.) But how can such a conception be maintained over against Christology? Should we not say that the question of Protestant identity is *not* what matters? Should we not say that the principal diversity and plurality, of which the Protestant spirit of Schleiermacher testifies, is only a matter of derivation? Do the aspects of the recognition of plurality fade away once that Christology, the core matter of belief, has come into view? I leave the answer to this delicate question to my co-lecturer.

¹⁰ Well-known is *CG* § 121, but one should not forget the earlier section § 116.3.

¹¹ We may assume that Schleiermacher adopted the notion of a *Gemeingeist* from the Herrnhut leader N. von Zinzendorf, though the notion was also used in Enlightenment circles. Cf. Dorothee Schlenke, '*Geist und Gemeinschaft*'. *Die systematische Bedeutung der Pneumatologie für Friedrich Schleiermachers Theorie der christlichen Frömmigkeit* (Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann 86; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999); Martin Diederich, *Schleiermachers Geistverständnis. Eine systematisch-theologische Untersuchung seiner philosophischen und theologischen Rede vom Geist* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

§ 4 Christology and the identity of the church

What is the position of Christology amidst the hazards of essentialism and relativism, unity and diversity?

Classical dogmatic systems usually conceptualise Christology prior to pneumatology and ecclesiology. Christology has to provide the main labour in theology. The Christological definitions of person and work of Jesus Christ function as the formal and material standards for what, after that, is unfolded in the contents of Christian spirituality and Christian community. In Christology we can find the “essence” in which the identity of Christianity is enclosed. This is not the case for Schleiermacher. The originality of his dogmatic project lies in the way he is developing Christology and pneumatology in a mutual, dynamical relationship. Both should be seen as equivalent and simultaneous perspectives on Christian spirituality. Both have their starting point in living religious experience, and try to explain it, each in a distinct way. Therefore, the actual multitude of religious expressions in the church, forms the material basis as much for his pneumatology as for his Christology. This approach gives an unprecedented openness to his Christology.

Schleiermacher fundamentally revises the methods of Christology. He is fully acknowledging the plurality of Christian religious experience without giving up the perspective of unity and community. To get a look on how this works out, we turn to one of his early works, *Christmas Eve* (1806). The poetical and dialogical style of it seems to be most appropriate to the new creative and dynamic Christology he envisions. *Christmas Eve* depicts a religious dialogue in which concrete differences receive their place. The scene is set by a German, bourgeois family at the beginning of the 19th century, which comes together on Christmas Eve. They are people from different genders, life situations, and generations, all having their own characters, level of education, and interests. Concrete differences receive a place in the plurality of narrative characters. Embodied subjects articulate their visions on theological topics. Their conversation circles around some questions: What does the event of Christ’s incarnation mean? What is salvation and what is a new life? We hear a wide diversity of opinions. Some talk in stories (the women), others reason in arguments. Not everything can be caught in words; symbols, gestures, music, and silence play a large role, as well.

My question is how the different views and expressions relate to each other. The women tell about constitutive moments of their spiritual lives. They tell imaginative narratives, in which the interaction between mother and child is highlighted. They name the ambiguity of their life experiences, their joy and sorrow, their experiences of love, of leaving, of desire, and of inner conflict. In their biographical stories, the women articulate experiences of continuity and relationship; they also express a fluid transition between ‘common life’ and the new life in Christ. Soteriology has a character of relationship and mutuality. Christ is not to be experienced without Mary. In their religious imagination, the women surpass isolated images of Christology. From their childhood on, the women have a relational stance towards the other. Their spiritual development testifies of a gradual deepening and intensification of insight.

The discourses of the men do not express such a smooth transition from childhood to maturity, from common life to spiritual life. One man is a sceptic, with a focus upon rituals, which brings him near to the female positions in the story. The two other male characters are formed by frictions and discontinuity. Sin and conversion are their basic notions. For them, a sense of community is formed through an experience of crisis. They need the Christ as a Saviour who comes from another side. They do not display a sense of reciprocity between human being and God; they have no sense of participation in salvation, like the female stories express. In this way, Schleiermacher presents two very different theological visions of Christ, grace, and salvation. The ‘male’ vision and the ‘female’ vision stand in a strained relation to

each other. Especially in the female stories, Schleiermacher offers some soteriological contents that cannot easily be assimilated in common Protestant contexts.

It is not Schleiermacher's intention to harmonize the different vision into a higher synthesis. There are even limits to searching for a kind of correlation and correspondence between female stories and male discourses. Such correlation would make the female voices subordinate to the conceptual framework of the male discourse.¹² The women are represented here as subjects of their own stories. When women speak out on the theological stage, things start to shift. Schleiermacher seems to be well aware of that. Moreover, he welcomes it. Schleiermacher leaves the differences such as they are. Thus, he creates a floor for an open, homely conversation in a benevolent sphere, in which each participant is curious about the other's perspective. This acts as an image of an open conversation in the ecclesiastical community. There is a communal spirit of joyfulness, which connects all.

The conversation of the *Christmas Eve* has an open ending, in which the enigmatic character Josef appears. He expresses a 'joy without words' ("sprachlose Freude"), which exceeds the ambivalences of the word. This joy without words seems to express an eschatological reservation, under which all our linguistic interpretations fall. Josef can only 'laugh and shout for joy like a child'.¹³ The character of Josef expresses a form of spiritual trust in the goodness of life and the power of community, which could form the heart of a Protestant vision on belief and Church.

The *Christmas Eve* gives to us a blueprint for a theology of dialogue and differences. Religious experience is so rich, that it cannot be captured in a rational system, nor can it be delimited by any concept of identity. That would extinguish the living nucleus of religion. Primacy is given to the plurality, the concrete, the difference, the individual, and the particular. The experience of the divine is very personal matter. The identity of a community of faith can only provisionally be the result of a conversation between people who give a different shape to Christian spirituality. We have to leave open the possibility that the Christian spirituality will appear in other forms, in future. I recognize the Protestant spirit in this, free and unbound, revitalized in a modern way. The individual thinking of early Romanticism and the adage of the Reformation about the freedom of consciousness before God enter into a fruitful coalition.

§ 5 Prototype and image in Christology and church

May systematic theology guarantee such openness to the future? Does Schleiermacher elaborate the model of a plural, open, and dynamic Christological community, as given in the *Christmas Eve*, in his exposition of the *Christian Faith*? In turning to the *Christian Faith*, we observe how Schleiermacher makes use of the notions of prototype (*Urbild*) and image (*Abbild*), in order to describe the relation between Christology and pneumatology. Schleiermacher derives the notions of prototype and image from his *Aesthetics*. For him, the prototype is an ideally shaped integration of reason and nature. An artist does not find the prototype anywhere in reality. He activates the prototype in his mind, by means of fantasy and stimulated by the mood of his feelings. The inner prototype correlates with an offer of possibilities in the world. The prototype refers to possibilities in human life that are not yet realized. It entails a potency and a promise of the good life. The artist transforms the pure, inner prototype into the outer shape of an actual work of art, bringing together organic elements from the world. The work of art is an image (*Abbild*) of the prototype (*Urbild*), yet this image never exhausts the prototype. There remains a free margin to play between

¹² The reception history of the *Christmas Eve* has shown that this subordination happens, as a matter of fact.

¹³ "wie ein Kind nur lächeln und jauchzen". . . .

prototype and image. This free space creates the possibility of a productive reception of the work of art by others. Through the concrete expression of the prototype in the work of art, the prototype is also awakened in the soul of the spectator. Analogous to the artistic process of creation, the spectator will awaken a process of active representation (*Nachbildung*). From the individuality of the spectator, the prototype receives another, new symbolic representation. The spectator re-creates the work of art in his reception, in her or his own way.

We can recognize this model of prototype and image in Schleiermacher's presentation how Christ is actually present in the consciousness of the believers. The believers have in common that they lead back their experience of salvation and the participation in a new life to Christ as the origin. They find in Christ the prototype of a new and perfect quality of life. The community creating love of God permeated his entire existence and gave to all moments in his life a decisive impulse. This prototype, which appeared in history as a real, embodied human being, gave the vital impulse to a new quality of living together. As a prototype of humanity, Christ became a principle of living for a new community. The community carries this image of humanity further into the world. As Schleiermacher says: the image of the Saviour is carried on in every Christian spiritual feeling. However, it is carried on in the way of a prototype that awakens a process of free, individual imagining in the believers. Each in his or her own way, according to her or his personal habit, the believers receive the image of Christ as the Saviour and interpret it in symbolic representations of their own.

It is the Spirit, the communal spirit, who awakens this prototype of Christ in the believers, and the Spirit stimulates us to reproduce it actively in our own interpretations. For Schleiermacher, the medium for this reproduction is (in a very Protestant mode) the lively, free proclamation of the Gospel, not restricted to official ministries. The Spirit works in everybody as a living and fruitful representation (*Vergegenwärtigung*) of Christ. This conception is a revitalization of the old idea of the priesthood of all believers. So the prototype of Christ comes to appearance in a principally unlimited diversity of original interpretations. The believers present animated representations, which are always provisional, open to clarification and correction. Schleiermacher views the church as a continuous circulation of religious communication, activated by the communal spirit. Within the free ecclesiastical conversation grows the actual image of Christ. No one may be excluded from this conversation. How strange and heterogeneous imaginations may appear, every religious individual who is affected by Christ has to be welcomed as an integrative part of the whole of religious communication. Every natural, social, and cultural difference between people can and should be included in this polyphone circulation of religious communication.

This dynamic model of prototype and image enables Schleiermacher to transcend the opposition between unity and plurality, fixed identity of belief and unlimited relativity. Unity and diversity, identity and relativity all receive their importance and are put into a fruitful interaction. The individual needs the community, and the community needs the individual, in order to vitalize Christian spirituality. Christian spirituality is vital for personal and for social life. Christian spirituality endorses the fullness of life. It seeks community at all levels, stretching to the entire world. As a Protestant theologian, Schleiermacher wants to guard its freedom, particularity, and distance. This guarding is not because of fear for the world, but in order to let its freedom, proceeding from openness for the living Word, be fruitful in the transformation of society.

We may say that Schleiermacher's Christology entails a principal recognition of both the plurality of religious, constitutive experiences, and the plurality of interpretations. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental intuition that permeates all these moments and grants them the predicate 'Christian'. This common, fundamental intuition is given in the dialectic of sin and salvation. A sinful aspect is laid down in the human opposition against an encompassing cohesion of all being. Salvation is experienced in God's communicative,

liberating confrontation of this opposition, particularly and paradigmatically in the mediation of Christ. Christ has communicated the intuition of grace, salvation and divine love so clearly and abundantly, that this communication has created an endless variety of expressions in the later community of the church. Christ did not posit himself as the definitive imagination. Through his absolute self-communication, he is the vital source of an endless diversity of imaginations.

Schleiermacher situates the starting point of Christian spirituality in the person of Jesus. At the same time, he says that the truth and identity of spirituality are not swallowed up in this starting point. The communal spirit from which Jesus lived shall appear in ever changing historical contexts, and in ever original and personal ways. The spirit of Christianity cannot be settled in any shape that would be normative for future shapes of belief. For the believer, everything in the world can become a mediative form of grace and salvation. ‘The principle is truly Christian as long as it is free.’¹⁴

§ 6 Conclusion

With our interpretation of Schleiermacher, we arrive at some conclusions. I will formulate these as short propositions, which we leave open for discussion.

- 1) In a truly Protestant view, the identity of the church is open towards the future. No canon, tradition, Christology, and theological formula establish this identity and its limits. The community of faith is a dynamic community, because her prototype, Christ, always reaches beyond her.
- 2) Protestant identity has a relational orientation. Within the church, it creates a free conversation on belief. Also between churches (or even between religions, though Schleiermacher does not make that conclusion) it establishes relations. It is also relational towards culture, to which it shows open borders.
- 3) Protestant identity should not fear its appearance as piecemeal work. This appearance is given with her respect for freedom of interpretation. Diversity constitutes her identity.¹⁵ Therefore, we even do not need to presume a single Protestant principle.
- 4) Protestantism may embody a hopeful belief in the power of resolution that is laid down in the historical life of the actual churches.

¹⁴ “Das Princip ist ächt christlich solange es frei ist”. ...

¹⁵ Cf. Kathryn Tanner: “Diversity is a salutary reminder, moreover, that Christians cannot control the movements of the God they hope to serve.” (Theology of Cultures. A New Agenda for Theology, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1997).