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**Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom:  
Divine Providence in the  
Theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher**

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Introduction .....	2
A. Creation and Providence in <i>Christian Faith</i> .....	3
B. Absolute Dependence and Human Freedom .....	7
C. Divine Causality and Human Agency .....	14
D. Implications of Schleiermacher’s Doctrine of Providence .....	17
1. Miracles and Prayer .....	18
2. Religion and Science .....	22
3. Good and Evil .....	23
E. Evaluation of Schleiermacher’s Doctrine of Preservation .....	24
Bibliography .....	30

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## Introduction

The German Reformed theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), often described as the father of modern theology, not only made ground-breaking contributions to theology, but he also had a significant impact in the areas of philosophy of religion, hermeneutics and Plato translation. He was one of the first to anticipate the modern conflict between science and religion, and to argue for their compatibility. He adhered neither to supra-naturalism nor to rationalism, and although he considered himself a true follower of John Calvin and agreed with the emphasis which the Reformed tradition placed on universal divine sovereignty, Schleiermacher dispensed with several of the concepts and insights of traditional Calvinism. He significantly reinterpreted a number of doctrines in his *magnum opus*, *Christian Faith*. First published in 1821/22, this seminal work appeared in a second, revised edition in 1830/31, which is now considered the definitive edition. References in this article are to the second edition.

The cultural context in which Schleiermacher developed his system of doctrine, *Christian Faith*, was characterised by “the rising power of a reactionary pietism whose cultural and political influence threatened to polarize the existing social order, with dire consequences for both religion and intellectual freedom.”<sup>2</sup> In *Christian Faith* Schleiermacher resolutely opposed the efforts of his theological contemporaries to replace the lost authority of the church by the supranaturalists’ authority deriving from their literal interpretation of Scripture, or by the rationalists’ insistence on the authority of human reason, or by the speculative theologians’ authority deriving from the very idea of God. Insisting that all reflection, including scriptural reflection, is historical and that God as God cannot be known by finite beings,<sup>3</sup> Schleiermacher offered a completely new approach: he based his *Christian Faith* on the principle that dogmatics is a positive, historical science, and that it has to give an account of the religious or pious self-consciousness of the Christian community at the time of writing.

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Dole, *Schleiermacher on Religion and the Natural Order* (2010), 174.

<sup>3</sup> Schleiermacher fully agreed with the Reformers’ insight that there can be no knowledge of God *a se*, only of God *pro me*. See Robert Sherman, *The Shift to Modernity* (2005), 4.

This essay explores divine providence in the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher with particular attention to the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom. It broadly follows Schleiermacher's account of the doctrine of preservation in *Christian Faith*. This examination includes, first, an exposition of the location, shape, and content of Schleiermacher's doctrine of providence. It next provides a discussion of the relationship between absolute dependence and freedom. This is followed by an exploration of Schleiermacher's concept of divine causality and human agency. The essay continues with a consideration of such topics as miracles and prayer, good and evil, and science and religion that form part of Schleiermacher's doctrine of providence in *Christian Faith*. A critical assessment of his understanding of divine sovereignty and its implications concludes this study.

#### **A. Creation and Providence in *Christian Faith***

The central part of *Christian Faith* is preceded by a philosophical introduction that takes the place of the traditional introductory *prolegomena* in dogmatics. Part I of the material section discusses the development of religious self-consciousness as an integral part of human nature. Part II deals with the specifically Christian topics of sin and grace. It is subdivided into a first section, II a, which explicates the pious self-consciousness as determined by sin, and a second section II b, which discusses the pious self-consciousness as determined by grace. Part I, the exploration of religious self-consciousness without regard to sin or grace, forms the logical condition for the possibility of Part II b, the consciousness of grace. Part II a, the consciousness of sin, provides the temporal condition for II b. As Robert Sherman states aptly, *Christian Faith* is “one of the greatest works of dogmatic systematizing in Christian theology.”<sup>4</sup>

Each part considers religious self-consciousness from the perspective of humanity, of the world, and of God. Unlike traditional doctrinal works, however, *Christian Faith* has no separate doctrine of God. Instead, different divine attributes are explicated in each part. As Schleiermacher already states at the end of the Introduction to *Christian Faith*, “the doctrine of God, as set forth in the totality of the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 17.

divine attributes, can only be completed simultaneously with the whole system.”<sup>5</sup> The motive for devising this innovative structure without a separate doctrine of God is that according to Schleiermacher, piety is constituted by the feeling of absolute dependence. While this feeling of absolute dependence is never undetermined, it is not constituted by any particular concept of God. Rather, the notion of God is introduced formally, without regard to any actual content, as the source of every human being’s feeling of absolute dependence, or the “uniform absolute causal ground of all that is and occurs.”<sup>6</sup> This feeling of absolute dependence is “part of the ontological structure of human existence”<sup>7</sup>, whether individual human beings become conscious of it or not. Divine attributes, which constitute the doctrine of God, need to be related to the feeling of absolute dependence, the source of which is defined as God. Such attributes are therefore discussed from the perspective of the pious self-consciousness in general, in relation to sin, and in relation to grace.

Even though Schleiermacher’s identification of absolute dependence with humanity’s relation to the “Whence of our receptive and active existence ... designated by the word ‘God’”<sup>8</sup> is purely formal, and though his doctrine of creation and preservation appears in Part I, which deals with the more general God-consciousness, he does have the person and work of the Redeemer in mind all along: even before he reaches the doctrine of Christ in Part II, the inner logic of his system is informed by his Christology. In order to fully understand each part, it is crucial to consider the complete system of his dogmatics. Only by interpreting his doctrine of creation and preservation with a view to the ultimate goal of redemption is it possible to avoid the quandary which a not specifically Christian exposition of the doctrine would face. Such an interpretation could only understand divine sovereignty and human freedom within the parameters of the world as it is, but it cannot reach the redemption

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<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §31.2, 128.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Root, “Schleiermacher as Innovator and Inheritor,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43 (1990): 94.

<sup>7</sup> Matthias Gockel, *Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election* (2006), 43.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §4.4, 16.

accomplished by Christ, which underpins Schleiermacher's whole dogmatic system.

The doctrine of providence traditionally appears in the early part of works on Christian doctrines, and Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith* is no different in that respect. He positions providence within the narrower context of the doctrine of creation, which in turn is embedded within the overarching doctrine of cosmology.<sup>9</sup> Part I of *Christian Faith*, the description of religious self-consciousness in general, deals with creation, some divine attributes and the original perfection of the world. In detail, the doctrine of creation explores the development of religious self-consciousness from the point of view of human beings as the (only implicitly Christian) interpretation of the world as divine creation. It is subdivided into five sections, the last of which constitutes the doctrine of providence or, as Schleiermacher prefers, preservation. The divine attributes discussed within the context of cosmology relate to creation and preservation. The doctrine of original perfection, finally, explores creation and preservation from the perspective of the world.

The structure of Part I of *Christian Faith* can be represented as follows:

- §32-61: Cosmology
  - §32-35: Introduction
  - §36-49: Creation (human perspective)
    - §36-39 Introduction
    - §40-41 Creation
    - §42-43 Angels
    - §44-45 Devil
    - §46-49 Preservation
      - §46 – actual proposition
      - §47 – relation of natural and miraculous to the natural order
      - §48 – the pleasant and the unpleasant
      - §49 – free and natural causes
  - §50-56: Divine attributes (God's perspective)

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<sup>9</sup> Schleiermacher himself does not use the term 'cosmology.' Traditionally this heading includes the doctrines of creation and providence. The term is employed here in order to relate the structure of *Christian Faith* to traditional dogmatic works. Schleiermacher himself entitles Part I, which is congruent with 'cosmology' in the traditional doctrinal sense, "The development of that religious self-consciousness which is always both presupposed by and contained in every Christian religious affection."

§50-51 Introduction  
§52 Eternity  
§53 Omnipresence  
§54 Omnipotence  
§55 Omniscience  
§56 Other attributes  
§57-61: Original perfection (world’s perspective)  
§57-58 Introduction  
§59 Original perfection of the world  
§69-61 Original perfection of human beings

The doctrine of creation proper (§40-41) is relatively short, and the “bulk of constructive assertions about the world” appears in the doctrine of preservation.<sup>10</sup> The doctrine of creation merely intends to exclude any elements which cannot be traced back to God and would thus undermine our fundamental religious self-consciousness: elements from mythology and legend. Accordingly, angels and the devil are dealt with in an appendix. Schleiermacher also dismisses the Mosaic account of creation as something that “must not be treated as historical in our sense of the word.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, unlike traditional versions of the doctrine of creation, which typically begin with a scriptural account, Schleiermacher starts his exposition in the present, basing it on the human God-consciousness in the shape of the feeling of absolute dependence. In doing so, but without explicitly stating it, he “posits a specifically christological experience in the present as the prerequisite necessary to expound a doctrine of creation and preservation.”<sup>12</sup> The more general God-consciousness that informs Part I is in fact an abstraction of the specifically Christian God-consciousness elaborated in Part II. In the same vein, although the doctrine of creation is discussed before the doctrine of Christ, the latter is really the source of the former. As Brian Gerrish observes, “the actual foundation of the Christian’s confidence in the divinely governed world-order is faith in Christ.”<sup>13</sup>

Schleiermacher preferred and consistently used the term preservation instead of providence; he considered a doctrine of

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Sherman, *The Shift to Modernity* (2005), 6.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §40.2, 151.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Sherman, *The Shift to Modernity* (2005), 15.

<sup>13</sup> Brian Gerrish, “Nature and the Theatre of Redemption,” *Ex Auditu* 3 (1987): 132.

providence as unproductive in his systematic account of pious self-consciousness. Indeed, the term providence only appears in *Christian Faith* in two places: in §58.3 in the context of the perfection of the world, and in §164.3 in relation to the Christian Church as the object of divine governance. Here, Schleiermacher explains that the term providence “is of foreign origin and was ... adopted later by Church teachers, not without many disadvantages for the clear exposition of the authentic Christian faith, a circumstance which would have been avoided by the use of the scriptural terms ‘predestination’, ‘foreordination’.”<sup>14</sup> Preservation, in contrast, “is a concept abstracted from the Christian consciousness of the divine world-governance that is forming the world into the kingdom of God.”<sup>15</sup>

The doctrine of preservation discusses the relation between finite beings and the world as it is founded on our perception of the continuity of our existence in absolute dependence on God. §46 states Schleiermacher’s position, §47 augments it with his understanding of miracles, §48 deals with good and evil, or theodicy, and §49 with the free will.

The doctrines of creation and preservation in *Christian Faith* do not attempt to describe specifically how the world began, or the mechanics of its continuing existence. Instead, they offer “a preliminary understanding of the world as the catalyst for the emergence and continuity of the fundamental feeling of absolute dependence as it is perceived by Christians.”<sup>16</sup>

## **B. Absolute Dependence and Human Freedom**<sup>17</sup>

Since the doctrine of preservation deals with God’s governance of the world, it has to explain the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom. In Schleiermacher’s theology, divine

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<sup>14</sup> Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, § 164.3, 725.

<sup>15</sup> Dawn De Vries and Brian Gerrish, “Providence and Grace,” *Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher* (2005), 191.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Sherman, *The Shift to Modernity* (2005), 118.

<sup>17</sup> The question of human freedom already occupied Schleiermacher when he was a tutor in the household of Count Alexander von Dohna in Schlobitten, East Prussia, between 1790 and 1792. His early writings on the topic were only published as part of the critical edition nearly two centuries later (see Friedrich Schleiermacher: *Jugendschriften 1787-1796. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* I/1, 1984). Here, he deals with freedom from an ethical rather than a theological point of view, considering it in the context of duty and the highest good. When he was working on *Christian Faith* nearly thirty years later, his perspective on human freedom had not changed significantly.



sovereignty is experienced by human beings as the feeling of absolute dependence. The notion of the feeling of absolute dependence takes us to the heart of the question of divine sovereignty and human freedom. This section, then, explores the relationship between the feeling of absolute dependence and freedom that human beings experience as part of the system of nature created and sustained by God.

For Schleiermacher, the feeling of absolute dependence is not only “a universal element of life,” but it takes the place of all so-called proofs of the existence of God.<sup>18</sup> The feeling of absolute dependence as part of humanity’s ontological structure points to the source of its excitation, which Schleiermacher identifies formally as God in the Introduction to his *Christian Faith*. The immediate pious self-consciousness, which is identical with the disposition towards God-consciousness, depends on the stimulation of the sensory consciousness from outside the individual person concerned. Conversely, godlessness is simply identified with a “defective or arrested development” of the God-consciousness.<sup>19</sup> With regard to content, the feeling of absolute dependence is identical in each finite being, but it is always found determined or modified in some way, and never isolated or on its own. As Schleiermacher explains in his first *Open Letter* to Friedrich Lücke, the feeling of absolute dependence is identical whether it relates to the consciousness of our freedom of the will, or to our consciousness of the nature system, or to historical development.<sup>20</sup>

All finite being is contained in the system of nature, and to find oneself in this system of nature is the same as being conscious of oneself as part of the world. Two dogmatic conclusions can be drawn from the fact that this world exists only in absolute dependence on God: the world was created by God, and the world is sustained by God. However, God’s creating and sustaining activities cannot mutually limit each other. Schleiermacher rejects the notion that creation and preservation are two successive divine acts; this would

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<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §33, 133.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, §33.2, 134.

<sup>20</sup> See Friedrich Schleiermacher, “Sendschreiben an Lücke,” *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* V/10, (1990): 333.



imply that the sustaining activity would work on something already created.<sup>21</sup>

No point in time or space is exempt from divine sovereignty: God is the sole determinant of finite being. In this sense, “the doctrine of creation is completely absorbed in the doctrine of preservation.”<sup>22</sup> By the same token, “the concept of creation if taken in its whole range makes the concept of preservation superfluous.”<sup>23</sup> Creation as a single divine act that encompasses the system of nature, and preservation as the continuous divine activity on the order and course of the world, including the first beginning, are both complete expressions in their own right of the absolute dependence of all creation on God. Nevertheless, in *Christian Faith* Schleiermacher retains the established subdivision into creation and preservation for clarity of presentation. This allows him to deal first with creation as the God-world relationship by placing God outside the web of reciprocity that characterises the world, and then with preservation as the God-world relationship as it appears in the pious self-consciousness. However, neither the doctrine of creation nor the doctrine of preservation commit the reader to a particular account of the beginning of the world; instead, they “define the relationship between the world and God that is presupposed by Christian faith.”<sup>24</sup> This interpretation of creation is symbolic of the confidence that each individual and finite being is equally rooted in the divine vision of humanity.<sup>25</sup>

The feeling of absolute dependence can only refer to the universal condition of finite beings if nothing in the system of nature is independent of God. The divine activity that brought about the origin of the world, and which continues to condition all subsequent developments, is the one free universal divine decree to create, sustain and redeem. God’s activity and God’s causality are in absolute unity: God is the sole determinant of all finite being in the world.<sup>26</sup> Within

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<sup>21</sup> See Jacqueline Mariña, “Schleiermacher’s Christology Revisited,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49 (1996): 188.

<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §38.1, 146.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, §38.1, 147.

<sup>24</sup> Dawn De Vries and Brian Gerrish, “Providence and Grace,” *Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher* (2005), 191.

<sup>25</sup> See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion* (1964), 245.

<sup>26</sup> See Robert Sherman, *The Shift to Modernity* (2005), 122.

the system of nature thus created, all events, causes and effects are mutually conditioned and conditioning. The causal nexus representing the world is determined by the interdependence of all of its elements acting and reacting in relative freedom from and relative dependence on each other. Another way of expressing this relationship is to say that the religious self-consciousness places everything affecting finite being in absolute dependence on God.

Schleiermacher argues that human beings feel absolutely dependent on God exactly as they conceive everything as completely conditioned by the nature system. This claim is diametrically opposed to the commonly held view that the more we perceive something as conditioned by the system of nature, the less likely we are to ascribe it to a divine origin, and therefore the less we feel absolute dependence on God. Schleiermacher's conception of religious self-consciousness entails that, as an essential element of human nature, it cannot diminish with the growing scientific knowledge of the world and the natural laws that underpin the system of nature. On the contrary, the very "observation of creation leads to the consciousness of God."<sup>27</sup> At the same time, human nature aspires to gain an ever increasing knowledge of the world through scientific exploration. But scientific explanations of phenomena in the world do not annul religious feelings; rather, natural phenomena arouse religious feelings precisely because of the immensity of their operations, in which human beings recognize the interrelatedness of the elements of the system of nature. Perceiving the order of nature and that all occurrences, including incomprehensible, awe-inspiring events, arise out of the nature system, results in excitations of the God-consciousness.

By grounding all events in the nature system, God sustains the cosmos in existence. Schleiermacher thus insists that "nothing, no point of space and no point of time, should be exempted from the Divine All-Sovereignty."<sup>28</sup> In this sense, the totality of events, the complete, interdependent nature system understood historically, is identical with the one all-encompassing act of God.<sup>29</sup> Within the finite realm, events and activities are results of and, in turn, causes for other

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<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §46.1, 171.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, §37.1, 144.

<sup>29</sup> See Michael Root, "Schleiermacher as Innovator and Inheritor," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43 (1990): 92.

events and activities within the causal nexus. Schleiermacher rejects any atomistic interpretation that isolates single events as causes for other, greater events. There is no causal, and specifically no productive relation between God and a particular finite effect.<sup>30</sup> Isolated activities cannot be ascribed to God since God is equally immediate to all events and activities within the system of nature. The observation that all things are mutually conditioned and interdependent in the nature system arouses the feeling of absolute dependence. In other words, the interdependence of nature is always already posited where a pious feeling is being excited. Conversely, eternal divine preservation before all actual experience is only conceivable if an exact connection exists between that which is already determined and that which will be determined in the future by the causal nexus.<sup>31</sup>

Divine preservation and natural causation are two sides of the same coin. Schleiermacher therefore rejects the Calvinist division into general, special and very special preservation as superfluous: since universal preservation subsumes everything there is no need for any differentiation of different levels of divine preservation. He similarly abolishes the traditional distinction between preserving and co-operating divine activities, and between helpful and unhelpful divine co-operation. Any kind of co-operation would imply that something within the nature system was independent of God so that it could co-operate with God, and thus that something would have to be posited outside the relation of absolute dependence. Instead, Schleiermacher argues, “everything can happen and has happened only as God originally willed and always wills, by means of the powers distributed and preserved in the world.”<sup>32</sup> Given that divine causality governs all of creation, and that divine activity is considered a single, uninterrupted act, the consummation of the world has always been part of the single universal decree to create, sustain and redeem, even though from the human perspective this decree unfolds progressively in the course of history.<sup>33</sup> This understanding is reflected in the

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<sup>30</sup> See Bruce L. Boyer, “Schleiermacher on the Divine Causality,” *Religious Studies* 22 (1986): 121.

<sup>31</sup> See Günter Meckenstock, *Deterministische Ethik und kritische Theologie* (1988), 110.

<sup>32</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §46, Postscript, 177.

<sup>33</sup> See Robert Sherman, *The Shift to Modernity* (2005), 123.

structure of *Christian Faith*: the divine attributes presented in Part I in the context of the doctrine of creation and preservation describe characteristics of divine causality without offering any explanation as to its ultimate purpose. They describe how, but not why God relates to the world. The purpose of divine causality unfolds in the course of the dogmatic work, and the divine attributes are only completed in Part II b. As a result, God *pro me* can only be fully understood at the end of *Christian Faith*.

Schleiermacher explains the relation between human beings' absolute dependence on God and their relative freedom from as well as relative dependence on agents in the world in his "Introduction" to *Christian Faith*.<sup>34</sup> because of the co-existence of human beings with the world, neither an absolute feeling of dependence nor an absolute feeling of freedom can be found within creation. There is always a degree of reciprocity between human beings and the nature system; they are both receptive to it, and subject it to their activity. In the relation between God and finite beings, however, there cannot be any reciprocity: God is not part of the nature system, and as "the inexhaustible source of all finite existence, [God] is in no way dependent upon it."<sup>35</sup> God as the ultimate cause of the nature system is absolutely independent of anything going on in this system; God cannot be influenced by any of its agents. God does not directly or immediately react to or interact with individual finite beings or natural forces. Since the nature system in its entirety is the object of divine preservation, individuals relate to God only as constituent parts of the system.

Schleiermacher develops this concept of divine government further in Part II, where he introduces its goal: the realisation of the kingdom of God. Part I is merely concerned with the fact that all finite being is absolutely dependent of God, and with the description of that feeling of absolute dependence. Since Part I already assumes Part II, however, the relation of the world to God must be implicitly understood in light of Christ's redemption, even in the discussion of the more general God-consciousness discussed in Part I.

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<sup>34</sup> See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart., §4.2-3, 14-16.

<sup>35</sup> Dawn De Vries, "Schleiermacher," *Blackwell Companion to the Modern Theologians* (2002), 320.

Unlimited human freedom and unconditional willing is irreconcilable with the created nature of finite beings. Schleiermacher's understanding of human freedom chimes with David Fergusson's observation that human freedom viewed from the perspective of God's governance represents "a release both from the grip of an impersonal fate and the hazards of random fortune."<sup>36</sup> For Schleiermacher, human freedom is grounded in divine causality and will thus always exhibit larger or smaller traces of bondage. The more predominant a person's God-consciousness, the greater their freedom from bondage. The feeling of relative freedom and the feeling of absolute dependence pervade each other, so that the "results of free activity take place in virtue of absolute dependence."<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the free activity of human beings must be affirmed in order to avoid endangering morality and responsibility. This free activity is spontaneous in so far as it is not determined by material or social causes. For Schleiermacher, divine causality delineates this spontaneity, but it does not determine it.

Free agents and the nature system they inhabit form the object of God's preservation, and only as freely acting agents are human beings capable of the feeling of absolute dependence. The consciousness of a free will is not in opposition to the feeling of absolute dependence, on the contrary. "God invests human beings with the ability to act as free agents" and they act freely as they choose.<sup>38</sup> Their activities are determined from within themselves without any prejudice to absolute dependence. But the range of options available to them is ordained by God, and they are not free to create new parameters. Only in this sense, then, is their freedom "no more than a freedom of spontaneity" or of choice.<sup>39</sup> Schleiermacher's interpretation makes human freedom compatible with divine determination because of God's creative agency, which is a necessary precondition for all activity in the created universe.

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<sup>36</sup> David Fergusson, "Predestination: a Scottish Perspective," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993): 457.

<sup>37</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §49.1, 190.

<sup>38</sup> Christoph Schwöbel, "Divine Agency and Providence," *Modern Theology* 3:3 (1987): 230.

<sup>39</sup> Eric van Driel, "Schleiermacher's Supralapsarian Christology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60 (2007): 257.

In this way, all finite being is subjected to the necessity inherent in the conditions established by divine ordination. As Eilert Herms points out poignantly, it is necessary and not contingent that human beings willingly act as they do.<sup>40</sup> Even though everything happens necessarily, no coercion or compulsion is implied. The opposite of necessity is contingency, not coercion. Necessity does not rule out freedom. All human actions and decisions are free within the nature system. Because of the interdependence of its agents and causes, every element of human experience “is the product of the operation of chains of cause and effect that extend throughout the whole of the natural order.”<sup>41</sup> There is a “functional equivalence” between natural causality and divine preservation.<sup>42</sup>

### C. Divine Causality and Human Agency

The concepts of divine sovereignty and human freedom are closely related to those of divine causality and human agency. Divine causality is absolute in the sense that it is not determined by anything outside it, whereas the free agency of human beings is relative in the sense that it always relates to the divine causality which ultimately delineates it. This section gives an exposition of Schleiermacher’s understanding of divine causality and its relation to finite causality and human agency.

Divine causality entails that both the nature mechanism and the range of activities of free causes are ultimately ordained by God.<sup>43</sup> Free causes are part of the causal nexus of the nature system, and therefore partly conditioned by, and partly conditioning, its agents. This in turn entails that they too are subsumed under the absolute dependence on God, so that the effects of activities of free agents are already encompassed within divine preservation. Natural causes are just as much dependent on God as free causes, but “God’s primary causality does not exclude the secondary causality.”<sup>44</sup> Secondary

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<sup>40</sup> See Eilert Herms, “Gewißheit in Martin Luthers *De Servo Arbitrio*,” *Lutherjahrbuch* 67 (2000): 23-50.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Dole, *Schleiermacher on Religion and the Natural Order* (2010): 141.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>43</sup> See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, proposition §49, 189.

<sup>44</sup> B.L. Hebblethwaite, “Some Reflections on Predestination, Providence and Divine Foreknowledge,” *Religious Studies* 15 (1979): 442.

causes involve all causes within the natural order, including human agency. In this, Schleiermacher actually follows Augustine, who argues that voluntary action is to be explained by the necessity of internal rather than external factors when he asserts that causal necessity is compatible with voluntary actions by human beings.<sup>45</sup> The notion of free causes makes a distinction between freedom and cause, implying that there are some causes which are not free. Within the interdependent nature mechanism, there is indeed relative freedom and relative dependence, but all activity and all events, the results of all causes whether free or not, “take place in virtue of absolute dependence.”<sup>46</sup> The causality of finite beings is always particular and only ever partial because of their interconnectedness with other finite beings and agents “in the web of natural causation,”<sup>47</sup> God works through finite agents in ways that are appropriate to the nature of the active agent, but according to God’s own causality. The resulting absence of anything random in the world from the perspective of divine preservation enables God’s decree “to be perfectly executed by voluntary and contingent secondary causes.”<sup>48</sup>

In the section on divine attributes in Part I of *Christian Faith* (§50-56), Schleiermacher discusses divine causality in more detail. From the perspective of pious self-consciousness, no relevant dogmatic statements can be made about what God might be or have been outside and before creation. In order to discuss divine attributes at all in his dogmatic system, Schleiermacher has to proceed from the concept of divine causality because this is responsible for the existence of the world and the nature mechanism in which we find ourselves, and which stimulates excitations of the pious self-consciousness. No demands that extend beyond the natural order can be made on the divine causality.<sup>49</sup> The sum-total of all finite activity

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<sup>45</sup> See David Fergusson, “Predestination: a Scottish Perspective,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993): 460.

<sup>46</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §49.1, 190.

<sup>47</sup> Dawn de Vries and Brian Gerrish, “Providence and Grace,” *Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher* (2005): 193.

<sup>48</sup> David Fergusson, “Predestination: a Scottish Perspective,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993): 475.

<sup>49</sup> See Van A. Harvey, “A Word in Defense of Schleiermacher’s Theological Method,” *Journal of Religion* 42 (1962): 164.



and passivity is identical in content with the system of nature.<sup>50</sup> Divine causality is different in kind from the nature system, but crucially, they are equal in scope. From the perspective of finite beings, divine and finite causality are co-extensive. The question therefore is, what distinguishes divine causality from particular causes set in motion by finite beings?<sup>51</sup> Divine causality is all-encompassing, not occasional or arbitrary. Divine governance means that, working through the agents and powers in the world, God is the ultimate cause of everything that happens, but not the direct cause of specific events. Divine causality does not replace or annul the causality of free agents; rather, God's preservation ensures that the will, choices and power given to free agents within the divinely ordained nature system are continually sustained, and that their separate causes act in concert towards the ultimate realization of the kingdom of God. Schleiermacher's doctrine of preservation entails that God upholds free causes, but not that God ordains or determines single actions.

Schleiermacher identifies God's causality with divine omnipotence. God's eternity is identified with absolutely timeless divine causality as opposed to finite causality in time. It conditions everything temporal and time itself, and everything spatial and space itself. As a result, all finite activity is measurable in time and space, whereas divine causality is timeless and non-spatial.<sup>52</sup> "Everything which happens in time and space has its determinations in the totality of that which is outside it in terms of space and before it in terms of time, however much they may be hidden."<sup>53</sup> Finite causality is temporal, local and multifarious, whereas divine causality is eternal, omnipresent and simple.<sup>54</sup>

Divine causality is completely presented in the framework of mutually conditioned and conditioning finite beings. In that sense, "everything for which there is a causality in God happens and

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<sup>50</sup> See Bruce L. Boyer, "Schleiermacher on the Divine Causality," *Religious Studies* 22 (1980): 116.

<sup>51</sup> See Dawn de Vries and Brian Gerrish, "Providence and Grace," *Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher* (2005): 193.

<sup>52</sup> See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §53 Postscript, 211.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, §54.4, 215.

<sup>54</sup> See Andrew Dole, *Schleiermacher on Religion and the Natural Order* (2010), 155.

becomes real.”<sup>55</sup> As a corollary, nothing exists or happens which is not delineated by divine causality. Within the order of nature, each finite action, will or power affects everything it can affect by virtue of the free causality inherent in it. Every effect in the nature system is the result of all finite causation within the world; every separate act is both a cause for something that follows from it and the effect of a preceding cause. Divine omnipotence thus entails that “everything is and becomes altogether by means of the natural order, so that each takes place through all and all wholly through the divine omnipotence, so that all indivisibly exists through One.”<sup>56</sup>

As Robert Sherman poignantly observes, Schleiermacher’s conception of causality replaces a linear model with a concentric one: traditionally, events are either traced back to God as the first mover, or up to God as the providential governor.<sup>57</sup> Schleiermacher, in contrast, conceptualises causality as two concentric circles, with the inner circle representing finite causality with real, if bounded and delineated, freedom of various agents, and the outer circle representing divine causality enclosing and sustaining the inner circle.

#### **D. Implications of Schleiermacher’s Doctrine of Providence**

§47 of Schleiermacher’s exposition of the doctrine of preservation discusses the relation between divine causality and the natural order,<sup>58</sup> and between divine causality and expressions of the “advancement” and the “repression” of life.<sup>59</sup> In other words, it deals with punctiliar, extra-ordinary divine activity in the form of miracles, the question of prayer as a human plea for divine intervention, and the relation between science and religion more generally. §48 deals with theodicy, or good and evil. This section explores these issues as implications of Schleiermacher’s understanding of divine preservation.

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<sup>55</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §54 proposition, 211.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, §54.1, 212.

<sup>57</sup> For the following, see Robert Sherman, *The Shift to Modernity* (2005), 174.

<sup>58</sup> See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §47.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, §48.

## 1. Miracles and Prayer

Schleiermacher's claim that divine omnipotence and the nature system are equal in scope, though not in kind, raises questions about the interpretation of scriptural miracles and of prayer. Schleiermacher was not a supranaturalist and thus not inclined to interpret miracles literally in the first place. At the same time, he refused to be categorized as a rationalist and to simply deny the very concept of miracles as supernatural events. However, he denied absolute miracles because they appear to undermine the feeling of absolute dependence. In the system of nature as created and sustained by God there is no room for direct divine intervention. William Dembski refers to Schleiermacher's denial of absolute miracles as his "metaphysical critique of miracles," arguing that this critique is neither ultimately theological nor borne out of the science of his day.<sup>60</sup> Schleiermacher's systematic argument against miracles is that the notion is incoherent: the interdependent system of nature is constituted in such a way that miracles cannot be meaningfully affirmed or denied.<sup>61</sup>

In common opinion, Schleiermacher claims, miracles as supernatural events are considered a sign of God's omnipotence; some even represent them as "essential to the perfect manifestation of the divine omnipotence."<sup>62</sup> He does not accept that a suspension of the interdependent nature system by direct divine intervention should suggest greater divine omnipotence than the original, immutable, divinely ordained order of nature. Rather, "the most perfect representation of omnipotence would be a view of the world which made no use of such an idea."<sup>63</sup> Indeed, he argues that reverence for God increases proportionally to the growth and spread of scientific knowledge about natural phenomena. Any distinction between natural and supernatural events should be abolished because the course of the nature system is never redirected by anything outside this nexus:

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<sup>60</sup> William Dembski, "Schleiermacher's Metaphysical Critique of Miracles," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49 (1996): 443.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 455.

<sup>62</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §47.1, 179.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

“from the divine perspective, everything occurs ‘according to plan’ and by natural means.”<sup>64</sup>

Schleiermacher likewise rejects interpretations which understand miracles as a compensation for the adverse effects of the actions of free agents. The world is not a purely mechanical system, but a system of interaction and interdependence of nature and free agents sustained by God. In this comprehensively determined system there are no effects of free agents that are not already part of God’s decree. In the world divinely preserved, supernatural events are not scientifically conceivable, and there is no theological need for them. Scriptural accounts of miracles are so scarce and isolated in his opinion that no sound theory could possibly be based on them.

There is one exception, though: the one great miracle Schleiermacher admits is the mission of Jesus Christ. He refers to this very briefly in his discussion of his doctrine of preservation, even though this doctrine appears in Part I, which deals with religious self-consciousness in a general, not in a specifically Christian way. The reference comes out of the blue: having argued that biblical miracles cannot be assigned “the function of restoring in the nature-mechanism what free agents have altered,”<sup>65</sup> he concedes that Christ’s mission does have the aim of restoration, namely “the restoration of what free causes have altered in their own province, not in that of the nature-mechanism or in the course of things originally ordained by God.”<sup>66</sup> First of all, it is important to note that the English translation does not render the German original correctly. A literal translation would be ‘to restore what the free causes have altered, albeit in their own province, not in that of the nature-mechanism and not *against* the course originally ordained by God.’ What exactly the free causes’ “own province” should comprise remains obscure if it is separate from the nature-mechanism. However, in contrast to the English translation, the German original states that the incarnation was in fact part of “the course originally ordained by God,” and that free causes have not altered anything against the originally ordained course. According to the original, then, Schleiermacher’s argument that there

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<sup>64</sup> Robert Sherman, *The Shift to Modernity* (2005), 147.

<sup>65</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §47.1, 180.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

is one universal divine decree to create, sustain and redeem remains intact since the incarnation is an integral part of that single divine decree. In the English translation, however, the province of the free causes is outside the order originally ordained. This incorrect rendition not only posits an area independent of the world where free causes act, but it also implies wrongly that the incarnation was not part of God's original ordination. This would mean that in some sense at least it constituted a divine reaction, which in turn throws into question the concept of absolute dependence. Schleiermacher does not ultimately understand the incarnation as a suspension of the natural order. At most, Christ's appearance is a suspension of the historical order. It is miraculous only in the sense that, unlike all other events in the world, it is untainted by what preceded it.<sup>67</sup> Christ relates to the nature system in the same way as finite human beings. In this sense, in the appearance of Christ the supernatural actually becomes natural.<sup>68</sup> There is a clear analogy here with Schleiermacher's interpretation that creation as the originating divine activity is supernatural, but that creation then becomes identical with the natural order.<sup>69</sup> In the same vein, Christ's work is not a second creation but "the catalyst by which the capacities inherent to human nature may first attain fulfilment."<sup>70</sup>

Schleiermacher maintains that God does not "override or undercut the system of causes and effects operational in the natural world."<sup>71</sup> Miracles would annul the causal nexus of the universe. A miracle invariably occurs in a particular situation or context, which in turn is related to finite causes that have resulted in the occurrence of this situation, and to other free causes that will arise out of it. An absolute miracle, i.e. an event that occurs without any connection to preceding and resulting causes, would negate what has preceded it and annul all later events as they had originally been ordained as part of the system of nature. In this sense, every miracle "suspends the

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<sup>67</sup> See Robert Sherman, *The Shift to Modernity* (2005), 145.

<sup>68</sup> See Dawn de Vries and Brian Gerrish, "Providence and Grace," *Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher* (2005), 196.

<sup>69</sup> See Friedrich Schleiermacher, "Sendschreiben an Lücke," *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* I/10 (1990): 393.

<sup>70</sup> Robert Sherman, *The Shift to Modernity* (2005), 151.

<sup>71</sup> John P. Crossley, "The Religious Ethics Explicit in Schleiermacher's Doctrine of Creation," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 34 (2006): 601.

entire continuity of the original order.”<sup>72</sup> Moreover, every interruption of the natural order would make piety impossible because there could be no adequate ground for the feeling of absolute dependence. Schleiermacher thus dismisses the idea of punctiliar or miraculous divine intervention in favour of the concept of a nature system in which finite causes are directed towards the same result by the original divine decree. In Schleiermacher’s interpretation, causality and necessity are ultimately collapsed.<sup>73</sup> With regard to piety, Schleiermacher’s exposition of miracles entails that religious self-consciousness has to avoid all anthropomorphic conceptions of divine intervention and take recourse to the divinely ordained system of nature as its stimulant.

Closely related to the question of miracles is that of prayer. As Christoph Schwöbel outlines, in Christian tradition, petitionary prayer presupposes God as a personal agent, prayer of thanksgiving acknowledges God as a free agent who could have acted differently, and prayer of repentance confesses that a person has disrupted the relationship constituted by God’s action.<sup>74</sup> Schleiermacher admits that this traditional understanding of prayer, which presupposes the suspension of the interconnectedness of nature, may appear to be in the interest of religion. However, he places prayer itself under divine preservation and thus makes it part of the natural order created and sustained by God. In this conception, not only the fulfilment and the refusal of prayer, but the very prayer itself are part of the original divine plan. Thus, in order to be fulfilled, prayer can only be a plea for the acceptance of what has been ordained: in prayer we need to approach God as the unchangeable Whence of our feeling of absolute dependence who does not react in a new way, directly or immediately, because such a reaction would constitute a suspension of the order of nature he has ordained.

Prayer is discussed again in part II of *Christian Faith* in the context of the doctrine of the church, first with regard to Christ’s priestly office and the sacraments, and then in the context of the consummation of the church. Here, two propositions are dedicated to

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<sup>72</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §47.1, 182.

<sup>73</sup> See William Dembski, “Schleiermacher’s Metaphysical Critique of Miracles,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49 (1996): 458.

<sup>74</sup> Christoph Schwöbel, “Divine Agency and Providence,” *Modern Theology* 3:3 (1987): 226.

prayer in the name of Christ (§146-147). Schleiermacher defines prayer as “the inner combination with the God-consciousness of a wish for full success,”<sup>75</sup> i.e. for the consummation of the church, from the point of view of its present imperfection. Indeed, not to pray would imply “a disappearance either of our interest in the Kingdom of God ... or of our God-consciousness, which keeps present to our mind the absolute powers of the divine world-government.”<sup>76</sup>

With regard to prayer by individuals, Schleiermacher states that every prayer in the name of Jesus has Christ’s promise of being heard: that is, every prayer “where the petition, whatever it be, is offered with reference to the Kingdom of God.”<sup>77</sup> The specific object of a prayer has to be in agreement with the order of Christ’s rule in the world. In this way, both the common prayer of the church and the personal prayer of the individual are subsumed under God’s governance. Schleiermacher’s exposition of prayer in Part I already presumes the christological statements of Part II, and again demonstrates the cohesiveness of both parts and the christological presuppositions of Part I.

## 2. Religion and Science

Schleiermacher was one of the first theologians to preclude any conflict between science and religion. In his open letter to Lücke he voices his concern that “Christianity becomes identified with barbarism and science with unbelief.”<sup>78</sup> In contrast to this vision, he offers a solution to the perceived conflict that allows for the harmony of piety and science: a view in which religion and science can thrive simultaneously. He foresaw clearly that the ever-increasing knowledge about scientific processes and natural laws would potentially lead to religion being assigned an ever-decreasing space. For many, the advance of science meant that more and more events hitherto ascribed to the power and intervention of God could now be explained in scientific terms; as a corollary, the concept of divine omnipotence would be dealt a blow by every new scientific

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<sup>75</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher: *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §146.1, 619.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, §147.1, 672.

<sup>78</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, “Sendschreiben an Lücke,” *Kritische Gesamtausgabe V/10* (1990): 347.



explanation. Schleiermacher, in contrast, identified the system of nature as the area in which “everything – even the most wonderful thing that happens or has happened – is a [task] for scientific research.”<sup>79</sup> Once full scientific knowledge of the world has been achieved, it will be found to be identical with full knowledge of the interdependent system of nature.

Since everything in this natural order, as well as the order itself, is also potentially a stimulant for pious feelings, piety or religion on the one hand and science on the other can never be in competition. On the contrary, the interests of science and of religion are entirely compatible. Nothing that can excite pious feelings and thus God-consciousness needs to remain unexplained scientifically in order to safeguard the pious feeling it excites. No event or occurrence needs to be prejudiced “by the conceivable possibility of its being understood in the future.”<sup>80</sup>

### 3. Good and Evil

Stimulations of the pious self-consciousness can express either an advancement of life as in joyous, positive experiences, or a repression of and restraint against life as in sad moments. Although both kinds of excitation are grounded in the absolute dependence on God, since all excitations of the self-consciousness can potentially evoke God-consciousness, Schleiermacher observes that incomplete piety, or an imperfect God-consciousness, finds it difficult to reconcile negative experiences with the feeling of absolute dependence. He identifies those conditions “which bring a persistent and regularly renewed consciousness of life’s obstacles” as evil.<sup>81</sup> He distinguishes natural and social evil, and identifies moral evil as a state rather than an activity that affects the self-consciousness.

The world is inconceivable without evil. Evil qualifies good and vice versa; something that enters human life as an evil will eventually become the cause of good in the interdependent system of nature.

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<sup>79</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §47.3, 184. The English translation has ‘problem’ for the German *Aufgabe*, which I have rendered as ‘task.’

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, §47.3, 184.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, §48.1, 185. Schleiermacher distinguishes *Übel* (ills), *das Böse* (evil), *natürliche Übel* (natural ills), and *gesellige Übel* (social ills). However, for the sake of consistency and in order to avoid confusion, I will employ the translations given by MacIntosh and Stewart: evil for *Übel*, moral evil for *das Böse*, natural evil for *natürliche Übel*, and social evil for *gesellige Übel*.

Since there is undeniably evil in the world, “to exempt evil from the divine causality would be to raise the spectre of a cosmic dualism.”<sup>82</sup> Instead, Schleiermacher maintains, “all evil is just as much wholly dependent upon God as that which is in opposition to it, i.e. good.”<sup>83</sup> He is thus one of the very few theologians to concede that God is the author of evil. However, he qualifies this understanding carefully and immediately: while both good and evil “are alike rooted in universal dependence on God,”<sup>84</sup> and are thus equally ordained by God, they qualify and condition each other. Thus, neither good nor evil ever exist in isolation within the system of nature. As Schleiermacher explains, God has not ordained good and evil as such, but only as they relate to each other: “each thing or event is ordained by God that it should be both.”<sup>85</sup> With regard to the doctrine of preservation, Schleiermacher’s understanding of evil entails that stimulations of the pious self-consciousness which express predominantly negative experiences are fully part of God’s preservation.

For Schleiermacher, it would be speculative and thus unnecessary to work back from preservation to creation and perhaps even beyond in order to demonstrate that evil was unavoidable.<sup>86</sup> Rather than concerning itself with etiologically explanations of its unavoidability, or teleological speculations about the effects of evil, the doctrine of preservation has to emphasise “development in history, the dynamism of nature, and through divine governance and human intervention, the gradual amelioration of the world’s evils.”<sup>87</sup>

### **E. Evaluation of Schleiermacher’s Doctrine of Preservation**

The final section of this essay attempts an evaluation of the implications of Schleiermacher’s doctrine of preservation for the interpretation of history, for morality, for divine and human interaction, and for the meaning of suffering. It closes with a summary of the aspects of the traditional doctrine of providence with which Schleiermacher dispenses.

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<sup>82</sup> Dawn de Vries and Brian Gerrish, “Providence and Grace,” *Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher* (2005), 195.

<sup>83</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §48.1, 185.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, §48.2, 187.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, §48.2, 185.

<sup>87</sup> Robert Sherman, *The Shift to Modernity* (2005), 162.

Probably the most striking aspect of Schleiermacher's reworked doctrine is its logical stringency, which encloses all finite agency and freedom within God's ultimate causality. As Eilert Herms points out aptly, "with unequalled consistency Schleiermacher represents the transcendental sense of the doctrine of creation as a theory of the conditions for the possibility of finite freedom."<sup>88</sup> This freedom of finite beings to act and choose is itself grounded in and upheld by divine preservation. The very sense that everything, including our freedom, is received from God, is thought through with a rigor rarely, if ever, matched in the history of theology. To say that the system of nature in its entirety, creation as a whole with its interrelated and interdependent free agents and natural causes, is the object of divine preservation means that the integrity of the divine decree to create, sustain and redeem the world underpins the integrity of this world.

If Part I of *Christian Faith* is read without its christological presuppositions and implications, which only become explicit in Part II, there appears to be no room for human opposition to God, and perhaps not even for contingency. The parameters within which every single act and decision of every individual finite being takes place are predetermined. Nothing that apparently contradicts divine ordination can happen without it being changed through the interaction of different causes into something that will ultimately accord with divine ordination. In this scenario, while human freedom is under the determinative structure of existence as set out by God, it cannot function "as the dialectical process of existential self-actualisation."<sup>89</sup> However, from the perspective of redemption the divine decree does not determine individual acts or causes of finite beings, but the ultimate direction of the world towards redemption. Schleiermacher's system gives full sway to the God-given exercise of free will and to sin as integral parts of the natural world order; at the same time, God holds this interconnected nature system on course toward redemption. Divine determination is therefore teleological rather than specific to individual finite beings and their actions. It defines the structure of human freedom, which functions as a process of self-actualisation.

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<sup>88</sup> Eilert Herms, "Schleiermacher's Eschatologie nach der zweiten Auflage der *Glaubenslehre*," *Menschsein im Werden* (2003): 127.

<sup>89</sup> Robert Lee Vance, *Sin and Self-Consciousness* (1995): 193.

Personal history unfolds within the scope delineated by the divine decree, but it is not determined in particular or specific details.

The doctrine of providence traditionally claims that there is a discernible divine ordering of events both for the world in general and for individuals. In Schleiermacher's system, divine causality itself is providential. History unfolds in accordance with the direction of the divine decree. This does not imply that everything that happens happens necessarily the very way it happens, and that there is no room for alternatives. God effects the redemptive course of the world so that "history in its final entirety is the only possible history,"<sup>90</sup> but not single historical events as they unfold. They are determined by immanent, free causes and agents within the nature system of the world.

There is no gap between divine ability and willing, and between possibility and reality: divine causality exhausts all possibilities, and there is no alternative for reality as it is.<sup>91</sup> While this reality in its entirety is subsumed under God's governance and preservation, it is not determined in detail. Overruling the dimension of the outer circle of divine causality, which encloses the inner circle with its own order, leads to impositions such as Edwin van Driel's conclusion that all finite being depends uniformly on divine causality and that the course of history cannot tell us anything about the divine purpose.<sup>92</sup>

The *telos* of the single decree to create, sustain and redeem is not, or not always, discernible in history and biography. Indeed, agents through whom God works may refuse to play along and thus ostensibly endanger the notion of divine omnipotence and ultimate causality. Nevertheless, the ultimate purpose and direction of the decree is changeless. It may therefore result in giving people of faith confidence "that the divine will for the whole order is also good for the individual."<sup>93</sup> As Reinhold Niebuhr puts it, the good-pleasure of

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<sup>90</sup> Michael Root, "Schleiermacher as Innovator and Inheritor," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43 (1990): 97.

<sup>91</sup> See Edwin van Driel, "Schleiermacher's Supralapsarian Christology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60 (2007): 254.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>93</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion* (1964), 245.

God is not the judgement of history on what history has produced, but a way of characterising the love of God for his creation.<sup>94</sup>

Schleiermacher's doctrine of predestination (§119-120) is an extension of the doctrine of preservation. It carefully advocates universal restoration of all finite being: "we may reasonably persist in holding this single divine fore-ordination to blessedness."<sup>95</sup> Thus, even eschatologically there is no opt-out from redemption. But it is not the case that the notion of eternal blessedness for all means "the annulment of the finality of the individual's historical commitment."<sup>96</sup> Any historical commitments are made freely within the nature system and are honoured and taken seriously within that context. But the divine decree has made the most important choice an individual can make for them, on their behalf, eternally. Agents in the inner circle cannot opt out from within the outer circle.

Some criticism of Schleiermacher's doctrine of preservation is called for, however. His unwavering insistence that any divine supernatural event suspends the entire causal nexus of the nature system and destroys its continuity is questionable. It is difficult to conceive of an order of nature which would be annulled by the occurrence of a single super-natural event, or of an order whose course would be altered for good by even the smallest such event. As J. R. Lucas points out, while it is a necessary condition for effective action that laws of nature are reliable, there are no sound arguments *a priori* against the occurrence of miracles.<sup>97</sup> Schleiermacher's assertion that the world constitutes a closed system of nature is only "one of several distinct and live metaphysical options."<sup>98</sup> Indeed, it is an empirical fact that events in the world can appear random and surprising, and that there are forces that threaten the delicate complexity of the cosmos. As David Fergusson states, "the world is not yet a finished project," and "one feature of the web of life is that we have a system that is neither chaotic nor deterministic."<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>95</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §119.2, 548-9.

<sup>96</sup> Walter Moore, "Schleiermacher as a Calvinist," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 24 (1971): 183.

<sup>97</sup> See J. R. Lucas, "Foreknowledge," in G. Vesey (ed.), *Philosophy in Christianity* (1989), 128.

<sup>98</sup> William Dembski, "Schleiermacher's Metaphysical Critique of Miracles," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49 (1996): 464.

<sup>99</sup> David Fergusson, "The Theology of Providence," *Theology Today* 67 (2010): 273.

Schleiermacher's understanding of God as non-reciprocal in the sense of changeless "fails adequately to register scriptural notions of the differentiated action of the triune God."<sup>100</sup> Scripture portrays God's relationship with other conscious beings as communicative.<sup>101</sup> While this relationship is asymmetrical, it is not necessarily non-reciprocal. The concept of divine co-dependence rather than absolute independence does not need to result in synergism, as Schleiermacher feared.

Most disconcerting perhaps is his understanding of sin. Psychological effects of sin as an instance of opposition to God, such as fear, hopelessness or desperation, are considered to be evils not directly related to an individual sinful act, thought, or desire. They become mere abstractions. The moral dimension of the human condition is neglected in Schleiermacher's "subjectivistic reduction of the reality of evil to a phenomenon of consciousness,"<sup>102</sup> although morality is, of course, present in the free agents who have the capacity for choosing one course of action over another. Schleiermacher's contention that "the Christian consciousness could never give rise to a moment of activity specially directed towards the cessation of suffering as such"<sup>103</sup> has problematic and troubling implications for Christian praxis and pastoral care. By explaining sin as a logically and theologically necessary element in the nature system, Schleiermacher fails to take suffering seriously.<sup>104</sup> The "dysteleological nature" or purposelessness of suffering is not addressed, and decay and disease as effects of sinful actions are glossed over.<sup>105</sup> Gerhard Ford dismisses altogether the idea that God rules through all suffering by absolute necessity as being offensive.<sup>106</sup>

Dawn De Vries and Brian Gerrish argue that it is easy to overestimate the extent to which Schleiermacher's understanding of the doctrine of providence departs from the traditional form of the

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>102</sup> Walter Wyman, "Sin and Redemption," *Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher* (2005): 138.

<sup>103</sup> Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, tr. MacIntosh and Stewart, §78.2, 324.

<sup>104</sup> See Christoph Schwöbel, "Divine Agency and Providence," *Modern Theology* 3:3 (1987): 242.

<sup>105</sup> David Fergusson, "The Theology of Providence," *Theology Today* 67 (2010): 267.

<sup>106</sup> See Gerhard Forde, *The Captivation of the Will* (2005): 51.

doctrine, since he appropriated suitable language from the symbolic texts while excluding misleading concepts.<sup>107</sup> This verdict is true as far as it goes. However, his reworking of the traditional doctrine does go further than the appropriation of suitable concepts and the exclusion of unsuitable ones. Schleiermacher collapses the divine activities specified in the symbolic books into one single decree, “a *telos* of nature and history.”<sup>108</sup> He also dispenses with a number of important aspects of the traditional understanding of providence which cannot simply be subsumed under the term ‘misleading concepts’. He dismisses the distinction between general, particular and very particular providence, and hence with the idea that preservation concerns human beings individually. He abandons the understanding of God as a particular cause of specific acts. The system of nature, the causal nexus created and sustained by God, takes over the role of a personal caring God whose activities both in the world and in the lives of individuals can be discernible. Unlike the God of scripture, who is an agent in interaction with human agents, the God Schleiermacher posits is non-reciprocal: God does not directly interact with, react to or indeed listen to individuals, but remains entirely transcendent, outside the time and space of the world he created and sustains according to his single, eternal, universal decree. In Schleiermacher’s system, there is no obvious need for atonement as reconciliation between God and fallen humanity. Instead, human beings are created with the potential to have Christ’s perfect God-consciousness imparted to them. In this sense, Schleiermacher’s doctrine entails “an impoverishment of the primary language of faith,”<sup>109</sup> and perhaps of soteriology.

In effect, Schleiermacher revised the traditional doctrine of providence. In his attempt to avoid mechanistic deism through the “funneling of all theological statements about the world through the human experience of absolute dependence” he invariably came close to a determinist system. Rather ironically, a determinist understanding is fostered by the structure of *Christian Faith*, in which the doctrine of

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<sup>107</sup> Dawn de Vries and Brian Gerrish, Providence and Grace,” *Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher* (2005): 190.

<sup>108</sup> Brian Gerrish, *Tradition and the Modern World* (1978), 112.

<sup>109</sup> Michael Root, “Schleiermacher as Innovator and Inheritor,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43 (1990): 101.



creation and preservation can only implicitly presume the christological *telos* of the divine causality explicated in Part II.<sup>110</sup>

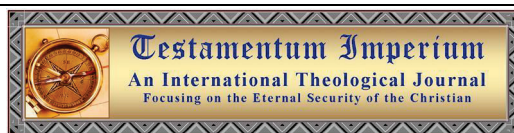
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<sup>110</sup> Colin Gunton, "The Doctrine of Creation," *Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (1997), 153.

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