

## The Theological Faculty and the Founding of the University of Berlin

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### *Introduction*

Few universities have been more celebrated in modern times than the Prussian University of Berlin founded in 1810. Widely recognized as among the most influential of modern European universities, it became the template for many Western (and non-Western) institutions of higher learning founded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As scholars committed to academic freedom, original research, and the extension of knowledge, we today are Berlin's descendants and bear witness to the enduring legacy of ideals formulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and others, and practiced by a host of formidable nineteenth-century German professors.

Founded in the wake of the Enlightenment, in the midst of the Prussian reform era, and at the apex German idealism, the University of Berlin was supposed to be a new type of institution. Unlike the antiquated, premodern university--"ossified in a [medieval] guild mentality," as its critics charged<sup>1</sup>--the new university was to promote grand, new ideals: *Bildung*, *Freiheit*, and especially *Wissenschaft*. Importantly, in the new university, theology would be deposed from her traditional (though increasingly nominal) position as "queen of the science.," and the "philosophical faculty" (arts and sciences) would be installed in her place. This point was insisted on by Wilhelm von Humboldt, then Minister of Education, who followed Immanuel Kant's argument in *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, which held that modern times necessitated that theological training take a back-seat to philosophy. In Kant's view, the latter, though traditionally considered the "lower," ancillary faculty, was free from narrow religious prejudice and from the utilitarian-professional functions of the traditional "higher" faculties of law, theology, and medicine. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge, in short, should define the ethos of the university--not clerical or other professional training and not the defense of religious truth.<sup>2</sup>

Yet theology, though deposed as queen, was not eliminated in the new university. It was transformed from the outmoded and often obscurantist discipline it had been to join the ranks of the *Wissenschaften* and thus retained a niche in the university. The renowned liberal theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, a key figure on the government-appointed commission that founded the new university,<sup>3</sup> saw to it that theology held this niche. Practically, Schleiermacher achieved this aim as a Prussian academic bureaucrat and later as dean of Berlin's first theology faculty.<sup>4</sup> Theoretically, he achieved it in two important treatises (ones often overlooked today by theologians and ignored by historians): *Gelegentliche Gedanken über Universitäten im Deutschen Sinne* (1808) and *Kurze Darstellung der theologischen Studiums* (1811). I would like to comment briefly on these works, placing them in the historical context of the Prussian reform era (c. 1807-13) and the ascendancy of the ideal of *Wissenschaft* during this time. I shall argue that in order to understand these texts properly we must see Schleiermacher as simultaneously *expressing and resisting* powerful intellectual and political currents in early nineteenth-century Prussia. His texts *express* the near-religious status conferred on *Wissenschaft* by many German idealists, while they *resist* the encroachments of the Prussian state into church life and theological education. On the first count, Schleiermacher's efforts proved influential: his model of theology established conditions that made possible the scientization of theology in the course of the nineteenth century<sup>5</sup>--though this process often undermined traditional theology and provoked numerous reactions among those less sanguine about the marriage of theology and science.<sup>6</sup> His efforts to resist the state were less effective: theological education came increasingly under the influence of the state, a trend which predates the nineteenth century but which was greatly intensified during this period.

### ***The Historical Context***

The founding of the University of Berlin and the place of theology therein must be understood in the context of the Prussian reform period, which witnessed an upsurge in liberalism greatly mitigated by a vastly increased government reach over society.<sup>7</sup> The reforms that define the period began shortly after Prussia's disastrous loss to Napoleon at Jena (1806). Humiliated by the loss and shorn of its major university at Halle, King Friedrich Wilhelm III and his ministers

decided that reform necessitated the establishment of a new, prestigious university in Prussia's capital. When ministers first approached him with this idea, the king *allegedly* responded: "Das ist Recht . . . Der Staat muss durch geistige Kräfte ersetzen, was er an materiellen verloren hat."<sup>8</sup> Shortly afterwards, efforts were underway to found not just another university, but an altogether different type of university. In fact, many ministers involved in its founding refused to call their new creation a university at all and opted for novel terms like "allgemeine Lehranstalt" or "höhere wissenschaftliche Anstalt" to distinguish their idea from older (passé) notions of the university.

The modernizing and state-aggrandizing impulses characteristic of the Prussian reform period gave rise to changes in the upper levels of government administration. Of particular importance were the Stein reforms of 1808 that created five highly centralized departmental ministries. In one of them, the Ministry of the Interior, a section was devoted to Ecclesiastical Affairs and Public Education (*die Sektion des Kultus und des öffentlichen Unterricht*). This subdepartment--which became self-standing as the *Kultusministerium* in 1817--came to exercise an unprecedented supervisory and regulatory role over the church. As John Groh has written, the reforms of 1808 entailed "a state-imposed revolution in church polity" whereby "the church practically ceased to be an independent organism."<sup>9</sup> Fritz Fischer described the process as "the absorption of the church by the state" (*Verstaatlichung des Kirchenwesens*).<sup>10</sup> Within a decade after 1808, this ministry had virtually eliminated traditional confessional consistories and church patrons, secularized church lands, assumed primary responsibility for clerical salaries and the upkeep of parishes, and established a rigorous new, state-administered examination system for theology students who desired parishes. What is more, in the aftermath of the Prussian Church Union of 1817 and the Karlsbad Decrees of 1819, the state even sought to control minute details of worship and regulate the content of theological education in universities. As Thomas Nipperdey has written, the post-1817 church-state configuration represents "the culmination of . . . the authority of the state over the church."<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, state encroachments into church life and theological matters disturbed many, including Schleiermacher. While he generally supported the practice of state hiring of faculty members, including theologians, he still voiced reservations about the growing Erastian relationship between church and state.<sup>12</sup> In 1808 at the request of Minister Karl Baron von Stein,

Schleiermacher had penned a short proposal for a new church polity. Entitled “Vorschlag zu einer neuen Verfassung der protestantischen Kirchen in Preussischen Staat,” the document advocated a synodical church structure which granted the church relative autonomy from the state. His ideas were largely ignored, however, and Schleiermacher became embittered. Yet he continued to maintain that the church must be granted “independent development” in relation to the state.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, his subsequent insistence that theology, in its university setting, remain an “ecclesial” concern, and not a government one, must be understood in this context.

Leery of state interference in church matters, Schleiermacher promoted the potential salutary affects of *Wissenschaft* in theology. Following his idealist contemporaries, he venerated the ideal and practice of *Wissenschaft*. By this widely used term, Schleiermacher, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and others meant that the professorate could no longer be thought of as erudite caste of polymaths or *Gelehrten* in the eighteenth-century sense, those who diligently mastered inherited wisdom and transmitted it faithfully to students. Rather, in the new dispensation, one must be a *Wissenschaftler*, someone who finds or creates new knowledge in their field and publishes their findings in scientific journals. Increasing “new and better” knowledge is the professor’s primary duty; teaching and concern with tradition are secondary.<sup>14</sup> In a memorandum written in 1809, Humboldt, referring to the new university, put it this way: “everything depends upon holding to the principle of considering *Wissenschaft* as something not yet found, never completely to be discovered, and searching relentlessly for it.”<sup>15</sup>

To be sure, the revolution in *Wissenschaft* that occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century is well-documented; and I would refer one to the works of R. Steven Turner, Charles McClelland, and others. But one caveat should be mentioned: we should not understand *Wissenschaft*, as the term was employed by Schleiermacher and others, as “science” or “natural science,” as we understand these terms today. In fact, modern natural science did not take root in the German universities until the vapors of idealism and Romanticism began to give way to positivism in the 1830s.<sup>16</sup> The revolution in *Wissenschaft* occurred thus prior to the advent of positivism and it took place primarily in humanistic fields like history and philology (in short, in the philosophical faculty).

What is more, early nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft* bore the clear stamp of idealist and Romantic sensibilities. One sees this most clearly in the pedagogical works of Friedrich

Schelling. In his *Vorlesung über die Methode des akademischen Studiums* (1802), for instance, he argued that true *Wissenschaft* always represents an “essential unity of the ideal and the real.” Knowledge of this essential unity gives one insight into “the Absolute,” Schelling’s substitute for God. While Schleiermacher’s notion of *Wissenschaft* carries the mundane meaning of diligent research and critical reasoning, it too reflects the idealist *zeitgeist*, which Schelling, more paradigmatically, embodied.

### ***Schleiermacher’s Texts***

Keeping in mind the Prussian reform era and the triumph of what R. Steven Turner calls *Wissenschaftsideologie* during this time, let me turn to Schleiermacher’s ideas on university organization and theological education. How did he attempt to reconcile the hitherto “queen of the sciences” with the new imperative of *Wissenschaft*? And where do Prussian church-state relations fit into his reflections?

Although Schleiermacher does not refer directly to Immanuel Kant in his *Gelegentliche Gedanken* (1808), the influence of the Königsberg philosopher is clear in the primary roles that Schleiermacher assigns to the philosophical faculty and *Wissenschaft*. With the imminent establishment of the University of Berlin in mind, Schleiermacher argued that “if a university ever arises through a free uniting of scholars, then what is now conjoined in the philosophical faculty will naturally find first place, and the institutions that state and church will wish to join to the philosophical faculty [law, medicine, theology] will take places subordinate to it.”<sup>17</sup> The philosophical faculty, he elaborated, “is the first and in fact the lord (*Herrin*) of all the others because all members of the university must be rooted in it, no matter to which faculty they belong.”<sup>18</sup>

For Schleiermacher, the aim of the new university should differ substantially from the practical and professional aims of the premodern university. In articulating his vision of reform, Schleiermacher focused more on the students’ experience than did Humboldt and other university theorists. Schleiermacher’s university would be a place that sought to awaken and nurture “the idea of *Wissenschaft* in the more noble youths.” When this is accomplished, “nothing less than a wholly new intellectual (*geistiger*) process of life” begins in the student. “Herein lies the essence of the university,” he amplifies: to exhibit for students the “mature

power and abundance of scientific life,” so that later they too can “inquire on their own so as to expand and improve the domain of knowledge.”

Notice the emphasis placed on innovation and discovery, which, for Schleiermacher and others, implied specialized research in particular fields of study. Yet importantly, Schleiermacher also believed that university students (and their professors) should not lose sight of “the idea of the whole.” He even asserts that although students should be trained to expand the frontiers of knowledge, the “most necessary thing” they should acquire in their university years is what he calls the “encyclopedic perspective,” “the general overview of the scope and cohesive structure of each area [of knowledge].” This should be the “foundation of all instruction” for through it students come to grasp “the unity and interconnectedness of all knowledge.” Thus, while Schleiermacher suggests that *Wissenschaft* will continually and inexorably expand specialized areas of knowledge, he retains the belief--a profoundly metaphysical-idealist belief, I would argue--that there exists a grand internal coherence to all knowledge. Truth is one, and ultimately everything hangs together. Students should come to know and appreciate this.

Where does theology fit in Schleiermacher’s university? Unlike more radical voices who wanted to exclude theology, Schleiermacher successfully defended its existence, though he recognized that under the new conditions of modernity its character would be altered. In a section entitled “On the Faculties,” Schleiermacher suggests that the prevailing (eighteenth-century) ordering of the faculties gave the university an irrational and “grotesque appearance” that must be changed. Of the traditional place of theology, he writes,

The theological faculty has been formed in the church in order to maintain the wisdom of the fathers, to separate truth from error in what has gone before so that earlier truths are not lost for the future, and to provide an historical basis, a definite, secure direction and common spirit, for further development of doctrine and of the church. Further, as the state came to be bound more and more closely with the church, it had also to sanction these institutions and place them under its care.<sup>19</sup>

Schleiermacher recognizes that this traditional definition will no longer hold; the ascendancy of the philosophical faculty and the imperatives of *Wissenschaft* will transform theology's character. In order to "modernize" (as we might say), theology must shift its orientation from tradition and the church to "the spirit of *Wissenschaft*." Importantly though, he does not suggest that theology divorce itself from the church; rather theology must combine ecclesial concerns and scientific ones. An enlightened church would welcome *Wissenschaft*, and only a theology informed by *Wissenschaft* could adequately lead the church.

One way for theologians to acquire the skills and outlook of *Wissenschaft*, in Schleiermacher's view, would be for them to spend time actually teaching in the philosophical faculty (which Schleiermacher did). In fact, Schleiermacher thought it advisable that all professors teach occasionally in the philosophical faculty. This would give them a "vital linkage" to "the doctrines of true science." He deemed such cross-pollination especially necessary for theologians, whose outlooks otherwise might "gradually and increasingly approach a mechanical tradition or perish in an entirely unscientific superficiality." Going a step farther, he suggests that any teacher of theology "surely deserves to be derided and excluded from the university who would feel no inner power and desire to accomplish something of one's own in the sphere of *Wissenschaft*."<sup>20</sup> At some level, a theologian must be a *Wissenschaftler*.

Schleiermacher elaborated and systematized his conception of theology in *Kurze Darstellung der theologischen Studiums* (1811). He maintains in this treatise that the rationale of theology is preparing leaders for the church. Without this practical goal, he argues, the content of theology "ceases to be theological and devolves to those sciences to which it belongs to its varied content." For this reason, he places great emphasis on "practical theology," which is one division of theology in his tripartite scheme which includes "philosophical theology" and "historical theology." Schleiermacher even calls "practical theology" the "crown"<sup>21</sup> of theological study. Yet it must first meet the standards of philosophical and historical theology--that is, it cannot violate established canons of rationality and historical criticism.

In short, Schleiermacher desired to reconcile ecclesial and scientific interests. He defines what he calls "the prince of the church" (i.e. the ideal theology student) as one who "joined religious interest and a scientific spirit in the highest degree and with the finest balance for the

purpose of theoretical and practical activity.”<sup>22</sup> While he does not want theologians to become mere *Wissenschaftler*, he makes it clear that they cannot be “indifferent to scientific progress.”

Schleiermacher recognized how difficult this task might prove. At several points, he expresses concern that the interests of church and *Wissenschaft* were in constant danger of “fall[ing] into a contradiction.”<sup>23</sup> Moreover, he worries that the introduction of scientific methodology to pious young students might damage their faith. “Since the academic instructor has to bring the theological aspect of the scientific spirit to [the] awareness [of his students] for the first time, the method is thus to be specified by which this spirit may be quickened in them without weakening their religious interest.” He adds: “how little we are as yet in possession of a such a method may be learned from experience.” Thus, even Schleiermacher, the great joiner of faith and modernity, had his doubts.

### ***Conclusion***

How does one evaluate Schleiermacher’s efforts at locating and legitimizing theology in the new university? I would suggest a couple of points.

First, his efforts to “scientize” theology bespeak a success, if an ambiguous one. Few would deny that the academic theology that developed in Prussian and other German universities in the course of the nineteenth-century represents a staggering intellectual achievement. Albert Schweitzer proclaimed in 1906 that nineteenth-century German theology would “stand out as a great, unique phenomenon in the mental and spiritual life of our time.”<sup>24</sup> The institutional norms that governed this achievement, are traceable to Schleiermacher and the Prussian reform period.<sup>25</sup> But we must guard against Schweitzer’s excessive adulation. In many respects, the attempted marriage of theology and science was a mixed blessing for theology. Theology professors did not always do very well at quickening the scientific spirit while safeguarding the religious interest; there are numerous nineteenth-century cases of theology professors unseating the faith of pious students. And many found Schleiermacher’s project simply absurd. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, delighted himself immensely punning on Schleiermacher’s name--a “veil maker.” In his *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, the young Nietzsche castigated liberal theologians for “resolving it [Christianity] into pure knowledge about Christianity, [which] . . . ceases to live when it is dissected completely, and lives a painful and moribund life

when one begins to practice historical dissection upon it."<sup>26</sup> What is more, theology enrollments plummeted in the course of the nineteenth century and theology students often met ridicule from peers whose fields of study gave them more *wissenschaftlich* credibility.

Still, Schleiermacher gave theology a footing in the new university.

He was less successful at joining academic theology to the church and keeping the state at bay. The reforms of 1808 began an unprecedented extension of the powers of the state over both church and university. Because of the state's tight grip on both church and university, educated religious thought in Prussia was set on a course that tied its development closely to the state--far too closely many argued.<sup>27</sup> The apolitical attitudes and intellectual quiescence of many theologians and clergymen to Prussian-German illiberalism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries is firmly established.<sup>28</sup> I would suggest, in closing, that the institutional arrangements that nursed this development are to be sought in the university and church reforms of the Prussian reform period. Indeed, these developments proved fateful for German church and society--and Schleiermacher--Prussian patriot though he was--almost certainly would have deplored them.

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<sup>1</sup>Daniel Fallon, *The German University* (Boulder: The Colorado Associated University Press, 1980), 6.

<sup>2</sup>See the first and longest section, "Der Streit der philosophischen Facultät mit der theologischen," in Immanuel Kant, *Der Streit der Facultäten*, ed. Rolf Toman (Cologne, 1995), 21-92. For historical background to this conflict, see Reinhard Wittram, *Die Universität und ihre Fakultät* (Göttingen, 1962).

<sup>3</sup>Martin Redeker, *Schleiermacher*, 92

<sup>4</sup>Redeker, *Schleiermacher*, 98.

<sup>5</sup>Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 73ff.

<sup>6</sup>See my *Religion and the Rise of Historicism* (Cambridge, 2000) for examples of this.

<sup>7</sup>David Blackbourn, *The Long Century*, 83.

<sup>8</sup>"Let the state make up in intellectual strength what it has lost in physical strength."

<sup>9</sup>John Groh, *Nineteenth-Century German Protestantism* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982), 2, 16-17.

<sup>10</sup>Fritz Fischer, "Die Deutsche Protestantismus und die Politik im 19. Jahrhundert," *Historische Zeitschrift* 171 (1951): 473-518.

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- <sup>11</sup>Thomas Nipperdey, *Germany from Napoleon to Bismarck, 1800-1866*, trans. Daniel Nolan (Princeton, 1996), 356ff.
- <sup>12</sup>See relevant sections in Erich Foerster, *Die Entstehung der Preussischen Landeskirche*, 2 vols (Tübingen, 1905)...
- <sup>13</sup>Schleiermacher, *Kurze Darstellung der theologischen Studiums*, 34.
- <sup>14</sup>Charles McClelland, *State, University and Society in Germany, 1700-1914* (Cambridge, 1980), 34.
- <sup>15</sup>Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin," in Wilhelm Weischedel, *Idee und Wirklichkeit einer Universität: Dokumente zur Geschichte der Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1960), 193-194.
- <sup>16</sup>See Frederick Gregory, "Kant, Schelling, and the Administration of Science in the Romantic Era," *Osiris* 5 (1989): 17-35.
- <sup>17</sup>Schleiermacher, *Gelegentliche Gedanken*, 36.
- <sup>18</sup>Schleiermacher, *Gelegentliche Gedanken*, 36-37.
- <sup>19</sup>Schleiermacher, *Gelegentliche Gedanken*, 34.
- <sup>20</sup>Schleiermacher, *Gelegentliche Gedanken*, 37-38.
- <sup>21</sup>Schleiermacher, *Kurze Darstellung*, 125.
- <sup>22</sup>Schleiermacher, *Kurze Darstellung*, 21.
- <sup>23</sup>Schleiermacher, *Kurze Darstellung*, 70.
- <sup>24</sup>Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (London, 1910), 1.
- <sup>25</sup>See relevant sections in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, trans. Francis McDonagh (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).
- <sup>26</sup>See Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, 1983).
- <sup>27</sup>See Philip Schaff, *Germany; its Universities, Theology, and Religion* (Edinburgh, 1857).
- <sup>28</sup>See Groh, *German Protestantism*.