The historical foundation of Christianity as built by rationalistic, by liberal, and by modern theology no longer exists; but this does not mean that Christianity has lost its historical foundation. . . . We modern theologians are too proud of our historical method, too proud of our historical Jesus, too confident in our belief in the spiritual gains which our historical theology can bring to the world.

ALBERT SCHWEITZER

The nineteenth century posed great intellectual challenges for Christianity. While the response of Catholic authorities and theologians was usually to condemn and reject modern ideas, many Protestants sought ways to interpret their ancient faith in terms of the new frame of mind. Therefore, although the challenges were common to both branches of western Christianity, we shall deal with the Protestant response in the present chapter, and with Catholic reactions in the next.

New Currents of Thought

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the industrial revolution had reached most of Europe—and even some areas of the New World. Its impact went far beyond economic matters, extending to the whole of life. There were mass movements of people seeking employment in industrial centers, or simply leaving lands now devoted to crops to be used for industrial purposes. The traditional extended family—parents, uncles, aunts, cousins—was weakened by these movements, and the nuclear family had to bear a greater burden of responsibility in the transmission of values and traditions. More people came to see their lives as their private responsibility, and therefore individualism and preoccupation with the "I" became a common theme in both philosophy and literature.

The industrial revolution also contributed to the idea of progress. Throughout most of history, people had thought that the old and tried ideas and practices were better than most innovations. Even at the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation, when many new ideas were introduced, people sought to return to the ancient sources of religion, art, and knowledge. But now people were no longer looking to the past, but to the future. Applied science had proven able to produce wealth and comfort that did not exist previously. Future possibilities seemed to have no limit. The leading classes of society saw the problems created by the industrial revolution as passing clouds. Applied technology would soon solve them, and then all in society would benefit from the new order. Since most intellectuals belonged to those leading classes, these ideas found echo in their teachings and writings. In a sense, even Darwin's theory of evolution was an expression of faith in progress, applied in this case to the natural sciences. Not only humankind, but all of nature, is progressing. Progress is part of the structure of the universe. As is also the case with social progress, this is not an easy advance, but a harsh struggle in which the fittest survive and, in the very act of surviving, contribute to the progress of the entire species. This is expressed in the title of Darwin's book, published in 1859, On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life.

Since progress is such an important element in human life, and even in the entire universe, the same must be true of history, for what is history but the progress of the past? The nineteenth century became intensely aware of the radical changes that had taken place in society through the centuries—an awareness that was further prodded by increased contact with other cultures, especially in Africa and the Pacific. Thus, the conclusion was reached that humans had not always been as they are now, for their intellectual and religious views have also evolved. We have already mentioned Auguste Comte's theory of a progressive movement from "theology" to "metaphysics," and finally to "science." Such ideas were typical of the nineteenth century. The result was a series of historical studies that cast doubt on much of the traditional view of the past. These studies, applied to Scripture and to early Christianity, produced results that many found incompatible with faith.

Others saw the high social price of the progress brought about by the industrial revolution. Many Christians sought to respond to the needs of particular groups. The Sunday School movement was an attempt to reach those who no longer had much connection with the traditional means of
religious instruction. The Salvation Army, the YMCA, and many similar movements sought to reach the urban masses and alleviate their misery. But the problems and their solutions went far beyond the level of what any charitable institution could do for the dispossessed, and many began considering the need for a radical change in the social order. If it was true that there was progress, and that the structure of society had changed through the centuries, why not try to produce further changes in that structure? Comte, often considered one of the founders of modern sociology, proposed precisely such a change—one that placed society in the hands of capitalists and merchants. Such projects were frequently put forth in the nineteenth century. Socialism, in its varying hues, became a common theme of those preoccupied with existing social conditions, including vast numbers of Christians. The failed revolutions of 1848 were partly the result of such ideas and projects.

The socialist author who would eventually become most influential was Karl Marx, whose *Communist Manifesto* was published in 1848. His system went beyond the socialist utopias of the time, for it included an analysis of history and society on the basis of what he called “dialectical materialism.” A basic element of that analysis was the notion that ideas, no matter how purely intellectual they might appear, have social and political functions. The dominant class develops an ideology that passes for a purely rational construct, but whose true function is to bolster the existing order. Religion itself is part of that structure of support for the powerful—hence, the oft-quoted dictum that religion is the “opiate of the people.” But, Marx continued, history moves on, and its next step will be a vast revolution that will lead first to the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” and eventually to a classless society in which even the state will be superfluous—the true Communist society. In any case, although Marx’s views would pose a serious challenge to Christians in the twentieth century, during the nineteenth they made relatively little impact.

Later in the nineteenth century, the work of Sigmund Freud posed new challenges. After many years of study in various disciplines, Freud became interested in the manner in which the human mind functions, especially at the subconscious level. On the basis of years of observation, he came to the conclusion that the psyche is moved, not only by that which it consciously knows, but also by other factors that never emerge from the level of the subconscious. This is particularly true of experiences and instincts that the mind suppresses due to social pressure or for some other reason, but never destroys. The instincts of sex and aggression, for instance, remain active no matter how deeply we repress them. This opened new horizons for psychology, but also for theology, which did not always know how to deal with Freud’s insights.

Although they lived in the nineteenth century, both Marx and Freud made their greatest impact on the twentieth. But both serve as examples of what was taking place during their time, when scientific reasoning began to be applied beyond the natural sciences in an effort to understand both society and the human mind. It is for this reason that the nineteenth century gave birth to such disciplines as sociology, economics, anthropology, and psychology. It was in the context of those developing disciplines that theologians had to do their work.

**Schleiermacher’s Theology**

We have already seen that Kant’s work put an end to the facile rationalism of the eighteenth century. If it is true that “pure reason” reaches an impasse when applied to questions such as the existence of God or life after death, what route can theology follow in dealing with these and other questions of similar importance for religion? If it is true that the structures of thought are in the mind, and do not necessarily correspond to reality, how are we to speak of ultimate realities? There were three possible ways to respond to such questions, and theologians explored all three, as we shall see in this and the following two sections of this chapter.

The first option was to seek a locus for religion other than pure or speculative reason. Kant himself, as we have seen, did this in his *Critique of Practical Reason*. He argued that it was wrong to think that religion is basically an intellectual matter, for in fact religion is grounded, not on the intellect, but on the ethical sense. Human beings are by nature moral, and the basis of that innate moral sense one can prove the existence of God, the soul, human freedom, and life after death. In a way, Kant thus attempted to salvage something of the Christian rationalism that his *Critique of Pure Reason* had undermined, and to do this by placing religion in a locus other than pure reason.

Early in the nineteenth century, Friedrich Schleiermacher proposed a similar solution, although he gave up the attempt to base religion on reason, be it “pure” or “practical.” He was born and raised in the home of a Reformed pastor of Moravian tendencies who placed his son’s education in the hands of the Moravians. Although Schleiermacher was Reformed, Moravian Pietism did leave its mark on his theology. In any case, young Schleiermacher went through a period in which the pervading rationalism of his time made it difficult for him to continue holding several of the traditional doctrines of Christianity. He was helped out of that situation by Romanticism. That movement held that there was more to human beings than cold reason, and gained many adepts among the younger generations who felt that rationalism was dehumanizing. Making use of the insights of the Romantics, Schleiermacher began to find his way out of the impasse and doubt in which rationalism had left him. His first major work, *Speeches on Religion to the Cultured among Its Despisers* (1799), was precisely an attempt to show to an
The Nineteenth Century

The audience steeped in Romanticism that religion must still occupy an important place in human life. His main argument was that religion is not a form of knowledge, as both the rationalists and the orthodox believed. Nor is it a system of morality, as Kant implied. Religion is grounded neither in pure nor in practical or moral reason, but rather in Gefühl—a German word that is best translated, although not quite accurately, as “feeling.”

The *Schröders* did not clarify the content of such “feeling,” and Schleiermacher undertook that task in his more mature work, *The Christian Faith*. There he clearly shows that this is not a sentimental “feeling,” nor a passing emotion or a sudden experience, but is rather the profound awareness of the existence of the One on whom all existence depends—both ours and that of the world around us. Thus, it is not an undefined or amorphous feeling, for its clear and specific content is our absolute dependence on God. Such “feeling” is not based on rational faculties nor on moral sentiment, but it does have significant consequences both in rational exposition and in ethical responsibility.

This feeling of dependence takes a specific form in each religious community. The purpose of religious bodies is to communicate to others and to future generations their particular constitutive experiences, so that they may share in the same feeling. Schleiermacher himself is interested in the Protestant religious community, which is based on two fundamental historical moments: Jesus and the impact he made on his first disciples, and the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

The function of theology is to explore and expound the implications of that feeling of dependence at three levels: the self, its relations with the world, and its relations with God. Anything that cannot be shown to be related to the feeling of dependence has no place in theology. Let us take, for instance, the doctrine of creation. That doctrine is of paramount importance for the feeling of absolute dependence, for it affirms that all existence depends on God. To deny this would be to deny the dependence that is central to Christian religious feeling. But this does not mean that we have to affirm a particular mode of creation. The creation as told in Genesis may or may not be historically accurate—Schleiermacher himself did not think it was—but in any case this is not a proper matter for theological inquiry, for it has nothing to do with the feeling of dependence. Even if the stories of Moses were true, and had been revealed in some supernatural way, “the particular pieces of information would never be articles of faith in our sense of the phrase, for our feeling of absolute dependence does not gain thereby either a new content, a new form, or clearer definition.” And the same is to be said about other questions such as the existence of angels, of Satan, and so forth. For the same reason, the traditional distinction between the natural and the supernatural should be set aside, not because it opposes modern science, but rather because that distinction limits our feeling of dependence to those events or places in which the supernatural is made manifest. By thus insisting that religion is different from knowledge, Schleiermacher could interpret the central doctrines of Christianity in such a way that they did not contradict the findings of science.

Schleiermacher’s influence was great. At a time when many believed religion to be a matter of the past, people flocked to church when he preached. But he was even more influential over later generations, which appropriately called him the “father of liberalism.”

**Hegel’s System**

Another route that remained open after Kant’s critique was to agree with him that the mind stamps its seal on all knowledge, but then, instead of seeing this as proof of the limits of reason, to affirm that reason is reality itself. Reason is not something that exists in our minds, and which we then use in order to understand reality. Reason is reality, the only reality there is.

Such was the route followed by G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). Hegel began his intellectual career in the field of theology, but later decided that theology was too narrow a field of inquiry, for it was necessary to try to understand, not only religion, but the whole of reality. Reality must be seen, not as a disconnected series of things and events, but as a whole. He proposed that this could be achieved by affirming the identity of reason and reality. It is not simply a matter of reason being able to understand reality, or of reality setting limits to reason. It is rather that reason is reality, and that the only reality is reason. As he said, “what is rational exists, and what exists is rational.”

However, in speaking of “reason” Hegel does not refer to mere understanding, nor to the conclusions of reasoning, but to the process itself of thinking. In thinking, we do not stand before a fixed idea, in order to study it. On the contrary, we pose an idea, examine it so as to surpass it or deny it in favor of another, and finally reach a third idea that includes whatever there was of value in the two previous ones. This process of posing a “thesis,” questioning it by means of an “antithesis,” and finally reaching a “synthesis,” is what Hegel calls “reason.” This is, therefore, a dynamic reason, a movement that is constantly advancing. Nor is this reason something that exists only in the human mind. The universal reason—the Spirit, as Hegel sometimes calls it—is the whole of reality. All that exists is that dialectic and dynamic thought of the Spirit.

On that basis, Hegel built an impressive system that included the entirety of history as the thought of the Spirit. The various religions, philosophi-
made manifest in the presence of God in the community. All this taken together is the “Kingdom of God,” which comes to historical fruition in the moral life and in the order of the state—for Hegel had a lofty notion of the state. The result of this, as Hegel saw it, was a philosophy completely free of the narrowness of all dogmatic or partial systems.

This far-reaching scheme of reality found many admirers. It was said that finally humans were able to see reality as a whole. In order to bolster the system, Hegel’s followers sought to show how various elements of reality fit in the vast Hegelian system. In protest against the popularity of Hegel’s system that the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard facetiously spoke of how all problems would be solved “now that the System is complete; or if not, will be complete by next Sunday.” But even among many who did not accept it, Hegel’s system forced philosophers and theologians to take history seriously. After Hegel, history would no longer be a secondary matter for those who were concerned with eternal realities, but would be seen rather as the locus in which eternal realities are known. This notion, which has helped later theologians recover much of the biblical perspective, is part of the legacy of Hegel and of the nineteenth century.

Kierkegaard’s Work

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813–1855) was one of the most interesting figures of the nineteenth century. Born in a strict Danish Lutheran home that left a deep imprint on him, Kierkegaard had an unhappy youth. His frail and slightly twisted frame made him the object of mockery that he had to suffer throughout his life. But he soon became convinced that his undeniable intellectual gifts meant that he was called to a special mission, and that before that call every other interest must give way. On that basis he broke his engagement with a woman whom he deeply loved. Marriage, he thought, would have made him happy, but would also have prevented him from being the solitary knight of faith that he was called to be. Years later, he would compare that painful decision with Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac; and he would also declare that some of his books were written “because of her.”

Kant’s critique of rationalism left a third option, different from those followed by Schleiermacher and Hegel: although reason is unable to penetrate ultimate truth, faith can. Kant’s “pure reason” can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God; but faith knows God directly. From this perspective, the basis for Christianity is not its reasonableness, but its place of honor in a system such as Hegel’s, nor even a feeling of absolute dependence. Christianity is a matter of fact; of faith in the God whose revelation comes to us in the Scriptures and in Jesus Christ.
In response to the tragedy of Christendom, Kierkegaard conceived his calling as "making Christianity difficult." This did not mean that he was to persuade people that Christian faith was wrong. Rather, it meant that he must tell them that what they had heard preached and taught was far from the true faith of Christianity. In other words, in order to be truly Christian, one must become aware of the cost of faith and pay the price. Without that, one may well be a member of Christendom, but not a Christian.

True Christianity has to do with a person's very existence, and not merely with the intellect. It is at this point that Kierkegaard feels compelled to reject the illusions of "the System"—his sarcastic name for Hegel's philosophy. What Hegel and his followers have done is to build an imposing edifice in which there is no place for true human existence—an existence that takes place in anguish, doubt, and despair. They have built a sumptuous mansion and decided to live in the barn, for their building is too good for them. Existence—actual, painful, human existence—is prior to essence, and much more important than it. This emphasis on existence made Kierkegaard the founder of existentialism, although most later existentialists pursued interests very different from his. Existence is a constant struggle, a struggle to become, to be born. In placing existence at the heart of matters, one is forced to abandon, not only Hegelianism, but every other system, and even all hope for a consistent system. Although reality itself may be a system for God, it can never be seen as such from the perspective of one in the midst of existence.

Kierkegaard, however, was interested in a particular form of existence: Christian existence. It too cannot be reduced to a system. The tragedy of Christendom, of easy Christianity, is that existence has ceased to be an adventure and a constant risk in the presence of God, and has become a form of morality or a doctrinal system. Hence, Kierkegaard's great problem, which he sought to pose before all: how to become a true Christian when one has the disadvantage of living in the midst of Christendom.

Christianity and History

The interest in history that characterized the nineteenth century also left its mark on biblical and theological studies. In Tübingen, F. C. Baur (1792-1860) sought to expound the development of theology in the New Testament following Hegel's scheme. Baur and his followers felt that at the very root of the New Testament one finds the conflict between Peter's Judaizing Christianity and the more universal perspective of Paul. The tension between that thesis and antithesis was then resolved in a synthesis that some said was the Fourth Gospel, and others said was second-century Christianity. Baur's
that existed at the time, led to long and scholarly discussions as to the date and authorship of each book of the Bible. Many looked upon such debates, and their startling conclusions, as a menace to faith. In any case, these debates led to increased refinement in the tools of historical research, and to a better understanding of the Bible and its times.

The study of church history followed a parallel course. The idea that Christian doctrines have in fact evolved through the centuries proved a stumbling block to many. Some insisted that such evolution was only the unfolding of what was already implicit in early Christianity. But others—among them the leading historian Adolph von Harnack (1851-1930)—saw the development of dogma as the progressive abandonment of the faith of the early church, moving away from the teachings of Jesus to teachings about Jesus. According to Harnack, Jesus taught the fatherhood of God, universal brotherhood, the infinite value of the human soul, and the commandment of love. It was later, through a process that took years, that Jesus and faith in him became the center of the Christian message.

Many of these ideas were derived from one of the most influential theologians of the nineteenth century, Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889), whom Harnack called “the last of the fathers of the church.” Like Schleiermacher, Ritschl responded to Kant’s challenge by placing religion in a sphere distinct from pure or cognitive reason. But he thought that Schleiermacher’s “feeling of absolute dependence” was too subjective. For him, religion—and Christianity in particular—was neither a matter of rational knowledge nor of subjective feeling, but of practical life. Speculative rationalism he regarded as too cold, not requiring a commitment of faith. Mysticism, on the other hand, he rejected as being too subjective and individualistic. Christianity is practical in that it is lived out in the practical, moral life.

But Christianity is practical also in the sense that it must be based on the factual knowledge of events, and particularly of the event of Jesus. What is of primary importance for the practical life is God’s historical revelation in Jesus. When theology forgets this, it falls into either rationalism or mysticism. Against both errors, historical study shows that the center of the teachings of Jesus is the Kingdom of God and its ethics, “the organization of humanity through action based on love.” It was this aspect of Ritschl’s theology that served as the basis for Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel, of which we have spoken in chapter 25.

The interest of the nineteenth century in history led to the “quest for the historical Jesus.” In order to know the true essence of Christianity, it was thought, one must find the factual Jesus hidden behind the faith of the church and even behind the accounts of the gospels. The difficulty in such a quest, however, is that the historian’s own values and image of reality are superimposed on any findings. Therefore, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the famous theologian, musician, and missionary Albert Schweitzer con-

cluded that the quest had looked for a man of the nineteenth century, and instead of finding Jesus had found its own image.

The theologians mentioned in this chapter are only a few of many worthy of study, for the nineteenth century was marked by a theological activity rivaled by few other periods. But the few mentioned suffice to give an idea of the great variety of opinions and positions that appeared within Protestantism, and the intellectual vitality reflected in that very variety. Naturally, in that feverish intellectual activity statements were made, and positions taken, that would soon need to be corrected. But the undeniable fact is that the nineteenth century proved that there were in the Protestant ranks many who did not fear the intellectual challenges of their time.