

# Inscriptions

– contemporary thinking on art, philosophy and psycho-analysis –  
<https://inscriptions.tankebanen.no/>

**Title:** Divination and contemporaneity: different thoughts of Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard on hermeneutics

**Author:** Yufeng Huang

**Section:** Academic articles

**Abstract:** This article compares two essential concepts: one is Schleiermacher's divination, and another is Kierkegaard's contemporaneity. These concepts cannot be understood without "religiousness". The first part of this article presents a preliminary study on the convergence and divergence of Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard on religiousness. While Schleiermacher presupposes what being religious is and describes what it is to be a Christian, Kierkegaard focuses on how to be religious and become a Christian. The second part focuses on Schleiermacher's theory of hermeneutics. A mysterious and intuitive interpretation, namely the divinatory, reveals its similar construction to Schleiermacher's religiousness. The last part interprets Schleiermacher through Kierkegaard by opposing contemporaneity to divination. While divination can be regarded as a state in which readers become contemporary with the original author, Kierkegaard regards this approach as a leap in the immediacy that focuses on "whatness" instead of "howness". Compared to Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard introduces an existential mode of understanding.

**Keywords:** Schleiermacher; Kierkegaard; hermeneutics

Copyright © 2023 Huang.

**Correspondence:** Yufeng Huang, e: [114020223@link.cuhk.edu.cn](mailto:114020223@link.cuhk.edu.cn).

**Received:** 1 September, 2022.

**Accepted:** 10 October, 2022.

**Published:** 15 January, 2023.

**How to cite:** Huang, Yufeng. "Divination and contemporaneity: different thoughts of Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard on hermeneutics." *Inscriptions* 6, no. 1 (January 2023): 49-59.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

# Divination and contemporaneity: different thoughts of Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard on hermeneutics

Yufeng Huang<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article compares two essential concepts: one is Schleiermacher's divination, and another is Kierkegaard's contemporaneity. These concepts cannot be understood without "religiousness". The first part of this article presents a preliminary study on the convergence and divergence of Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard on religiousness. While Schleiermacher presupposes what being religious is and describes what it is to be a Christian, Kierkegaard focuses on how to be religious and become a Christian. The second part focuses on Schleiermacher's theory of hermeneutics. A mysterious and intuitive interpretation, namely the divinatory, reveals its similar construction to Schleiermacher's religiousness. The last part interprets Schleiermacher through Kierkegaard by opposing contemporaneity to divination. While divination can be regarded as a state in which readers become contemporary with the original author, Kierkegaard regards this approach as a leap in the immediacy that focuses on "whatness" instead of "howness". Compared to Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard introduces an existential mode of understanding.

**Keywords:** Schleiermacher; Kierkegaard; hermeneutics

When Schleiermacher visited the University of Copenhagen in 1833, he would never think one of the students there would later carry out severe critiques on him. This student was impressed, especially by Schleiermacher's thoughts on religion, but then could not help accusing him of not achieving the real core of religiousness. This article will start from this essential religiousness and then examine to what extent Schleiermacher has missed methodologically and essentially the key to becoming re-

ligious. Kierkegaard proposes an existential mode of understanding to break Schleiermacher's illusion of immediacy.

## **On religiousness: convergence and divergence**

Scholars find out that both Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard have paid much attention to similar themes, such as individual experience (especially on love and personal related-

---

<sup>1</sup> University of Macau.

ness with God)<sup>2</sup>, interiority<sup>3</sup>, the passiveness of repentance<sup>4</sup>, a non-theological study of religion<sup>5</sup>. One might judge from these similarities that Schleiermacher has greatly influenced Kierkegaard. Hirsh commented that Kierkegaard was the only disciple of Schleiermacher in his time.<sup>6</sup> These investigations imply that both these two thinkers have an emphasis on religiousness. However, they seem unable to interpret why Kierkegaard criticizes Schleiermacher seriously. Among those articles concerning the differences between these two thinkers, Dalferth provides an insightful interpretation of the religiousness (religiosity; *Religiosität*) on which Kierkegaard diverges with Schleiermacher. Rogers focuses on the problem of immediacy and argues that the second immediacy is the essential difference between Kierkegaard and Schleiermacher.<sup>7</sup> The problem of immediacy should be understood with the problem of language and thinking. That is the reason Stoellger compares Schleiermacher with Kierkegaard with respect to *Sprachdenken* and shows that Kierkegaard has deepened the question with indirect communication.<sup>8</sup> Rajan suggests that Kierkegaard does not break the

hermeneutic circle, nor introduce a rupture among interpretations, but showed an ironical model innated in Schleiermacher's methodology.<sup>9</sup> However, seldom do these scholars investigate the hermeneutics itself and even less do they touch upon the relationship between understanding and religiousness, which is the starting point for both Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard.

Both Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard discuss not only Christianity but also a general religion. For Schleiermacher, religiousness is the capacity to be religious for each human being and is necessarily constructive for human's *Bildung* (the full development of culture).<sup>10</sup> Religiousness seems to be an indispensable part of cultivation that does not oppose science but is harmonious with science to some extent. All religions (including Christianity) contain a construction through which unbelievers can be converted. This conversion does not originate in metaphysics or morality.<sup>11</sup> Instead, it depends ultimately on intuition and a personal feeling of dependence on the divine.<sup>12</sup> This feeling is a subjective, individual and inward experience of the unity of God. Christianity

<sup>2</sup> M.J. Ferreira, "The single individual and kinship: reflection on Kierkegaard and Schleiermacher", in *Schleiermacher und Kierkegaard: Subjektivität und Wahrheit – Akten des Schleiermacher-Kierkegaard-Kongresses*, ed. Niels Cappelørn (Copenhagen: De Gruyter, 2006), 137-141.

<sup>3</sup> D. Kangas, "The metaphysics of interiority: the two paths of Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard", in *Schleiermacher und Kierkegaard*, 656-660.

<sup>4</sup> R. Crouter, "More than kindred spirits: Kierkegaard and Schleiermacher on repentance," in *Schleiermacher und Kierkegaard*, 680-681.

<sup>5</sup> P.E. Capetz, "Theology and the non-theological study of religion: a critical assessment of Schleiermacher's legacy", in *Schleiermacher und Kierkegaard*, 183-184.

<sup>6</sup> Cited from V.I. Dalferth, "Die Sache ist viel entsetzlicher: Religiosität bei Kierkegaard und Schleiermacher", in *Schleiermacher und Kierkegaard*, 219.

<sup>7</sup> C.D. Rogers, "Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, and the problem of first immediacy", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 80, no. 3 (2016): 259-278.

<sup>8</sup> Stoellger, "Sprachdenken zwischen Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard und Rosenzweig. Zum Vor- und Nachleben des Sprachdenkens in hermeneutischer Perspektive," *Naharaim*, 4, no. 1 (2011): 117.

<sup>9</sup> Tilottama Rajan, *The supplement of reading: figures of understanding in romantic theory and practice* (London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 65-66.

<sup>10</sup> Capetz, "Theology and the non-theological study of religion: a critical assessment of Schleiermacher's legacy," 180.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On religion: speeches to its cultured despisers*, trans. John Oman (New York: Harper & Brothers, 2006/1958), 34-35.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian faith*, trans. Paul T. Nimmo (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), §4.

represents the highest piety to God among religions. Thus, Schleiermacher seems to deepen his thinking on religion, from revealing the essence of religion to conveying to his audience what it means to be a Christian.

For Kierkegaard, similar patterns can be detected when Climacus distinguishes Religiousness A with Religiousness B. First, being religious is not an attribute of an individual but a mode of existence or a becoming that should be actualised. Religiousness requires an existing individual to be religious in his existence. Secondly, Religiousness A is the dialectic of deepening one's innermost being, which constructs a living relationship between an individual and God. It guides the individual to a subjective feeling and dependence on the absolute. Kierkegaard quotes Schleiermacher and highlights the importance of feelings in a religious sense.<sup>13</sup> Only with a subjective appropriation can the individual live in and live out the truth of religiousness. Thus, subjectivity is truth. Religiousness B, on the contrary, is a religion of paradox in which sin comes upfront while subjectivity becomes untruth.<sup>14</sup> An individual lives in the awareness of the original sin and the continuation of sin. He can only wait and hope for redemption from the Almighty. Lastly, Religiousness A can also be found in pagan religions, while Religiousness B is only for Christianity since it has unique requirements, such as faith in paradox. It does not mean that Religiousness A is worthless. By understanding Religiousness A, a person living in Christendom can exclude the illusion of being a Christian and eventually build up an authentic relationship with God. Kierkegaard

deepens his thought from understanding the capacity of being religious in general to a more specific and demanding religiousness in Christianity.

However, it does not mean that Kierkegaard agrees with Schleiermacher regarding to the essence of religiousness. As Dalferth correctly argued, Kierkegaard agrees with Schleiermacher only within the context of Religiousness A and is never a disciple but a rebel of Schleiermacher.<sup>15</sup> If that is the case, then it is reasonable and also explicable that Kierkegaard is unsatisfied with Schleiermacher's interpretation of religion, for Schleiermacher has misunderstood faith in Christianity and remained in Religiousness A.<sup>16</sup>

The essential divergence is the different guiding questions raised respectively by these two thinkers. As a pastor who has the right to give a sermon, Schleiermacher provides for his audience an analytic description.<sup>17</sup> He first brings out the essence of religion (especially one of Christianity), then describes what a Christian is and finally reveals how to be a Christian. What lies behind the scene is the being of a Christian (Christ-Sein). Exactly the opposite, Kierkegaard, as an author without any authority, applies a hypothetic description through which not a proposed nor posited Christian life comes upfront, but different life stages with or without the religious present themselves and guide readers to their own existence. Thus, Kierkegaard focuses not on what a Christian is but on how to become a Christian (Christ-Werden). While Schleiermacher believes that there are many Christians in Christendom, and he is one of them, Kierkegaard

<sup>13</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical fragments*, ed. and trans. H.V. and E.H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 167.

<sup>14</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding unscientific postscript to philosophical fragments*, ed. and trans. H.V. and E.H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 555-560.

<sup>15</sup> V.I. Dalferth, "Die Sache ist viel entsetzlicher: Religiosität bei Kierkegaard und Schleiermacher," 220.

<sup>16</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's journals and notebooks*, vol. 1-9, ed. and trans. Niels Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay, David Kangas et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007-2017), DD:9; 36 I A 273.

<sup>17</sup> V.I. Dalferth, "Die Sache ist viel entsetzlicher: Religiosität bei Kierkegaard und Schleiermacher," 232.

claims that there might be no Christians in an ultimate sense and confesses that he is not a Christian.

Therefore, Kierkegaard departs with Schleiermacher on the guiding questions, which results in different methods of understanding religiousness. Then, we have to investigate how these two thinkers understand differently on understanding, especially the understanding of the religious. Seldom do scholars link Schleiermacher's general hermeneutics to his understanding of religion, which Kierkegaard has precisely discussed in his writings. Palmer, one of the exceptions who has noticed a hidden but close relationship between the religiousness and hermeneutics in Schleiermacher's thought, wrote the following:

Religion had to do not with man living according to some rational ideal but rather living, acting, and feeling in relation to his creaturely dependence on God. Similarly, hermeneutics was held by Schleiermacher to be related to, the concrete, existing, acting human being in the process of understanding dialogue.<sup>18</sup>

To be religious is to intuit and feel the absolute dependence of God, which cannot be understood apart from one's understanding of the sacred text, the ritual of the church and, most importantly, the living relationship of the individual with God. Hermeneutics plays an essential role in it since it shows us how understanding functions generally for each individual. It is not a question of knowing what the text says literarily. It belongs to a broader category in

which a human being is a being of understanding.

## Schleiermacher's general hermeneutics

Schleiermacher aims at finding a general hermeneutics as the art of understanding. He distinguishes two kinds of hermeneutic practice: one is less rigorous than the other. The less rigorous one is based on the assumption that understanding occurs as a matter of course.<sup>19</sup> From this perspective, misunderstanding is accidental and should be avoided. This less rigorous practice gives birth to various branches of hermeneutics, such as philology and exegetics. Each branch has its interests and principles that guide and enable it to tackle some particular misunderstandings. However, for a rigorous practice of hermeneutics, misunderstanding occurs as a matter of course.<sup>20</sup> To achieve a better understanding, one should apply the dialectics between misunderstanding and understanding.<sup>21</sup> This rigorous practice, namely the general hermeneutics, reveals the fundamental structure and operation of understanding per se. It is more rigorous than special hermeneutics because it focuses on how understanding generally functions rather than on how it works in some particular subjects. This rigorous hermeneutics would, in turn, serve as the foundation for other branches of special hermeneutics.

Schleiermacher argues that the general hermeneutics consists of two specific moments: one is grammatical interpretation, and another is psychological interpretation.<sup>22</sup> The gram-

<sup>18</sup> Palmer, *Hermeneutics: interpretation theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Northwestern University Press: 1969), 85.

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, "Foundations: general theory and art of interpretation," in *The hermeneutics reader*, ed. Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1985), 81.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>21</sup> Gadamer commented on this: "Schleiermacher speaks not so much of lack of understanding as of misunderstanding." (*Truth and method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 184.)

<sup>22</sup> Schleiermacher, "Foundations," 82.

grammatical interpretation links each word to its sentence, each sentence to its text, and each text to the literature. It is a negative, objective and historical process that limits the operation of understanding.<sup>23</sup> Any interpretations of a text should be confined to its grammatical structure. In addition, the grammatical structure guides readers into a text whose world is alien and unfamiliar to them. It is an anchor that enables the reader to drift no more on the sea of history but gain a chance to land on a concrete text. Thanks to it, readers can now become the original audience.<sup>24</sup>

Understanding merely with grammatical interpretation is not enough. This interpretation only shows the shore on which readers can land. There still exists a gap between the anchor and the shore. Only becoming the original audience is never enough for understanding the whole text since it misses the original composition of the text. A reader, for this reason, needs another active and subjective leap to get onto the shore and understand better. This subjective process is called the psychological interpretation, which seeks the author's individuality and his peculiar genius.<sup>25</sup>

However, how can readers understand the text by the psychological interpretation? Schleiermacher introduces here an intuitive but mysterious approach called divination. The divinatory enables a transformation in which readers grasp the author's individuality directly and immediately.<sup>26</sup> A reader shares the same genius with the original author so that through a mysterious operation in congeniality, this particular reader can put himself into the author's

self and immediately comprehend the author's mental process fully.<sup>27</sup> After that, the reader not only understands what the author intends to mean in the text but also realizes the implicit meanings that the author might not even know.

Divination is similar to the process of composition but in the opposite direction. It requires readers to reproduce the text and, more importantly, to reach the subject's orientation. It is a subjective and creative way of understanding.<sup>28</sup> Neither does the reader remain a stranger to the text, nor does he merely become the original audience of the text. He becomes a new author who reproduces the text and creates new meanings with the original author. Gadamer highlighted the indispensability of the divinatory for Schleiermacher: "[T]he ultimate ground of all understanding must always be a divinatory act of con-geniality, the possibility of which depends on a pre-existing bond between all individuals."<sup>29</sup> The unity shared by the author and readers is the genius of each individual. A reader can identify an author's genius by locating the work of genius in its grammatical world. At the same time, it is by operating his own genius that the reader joins into the orientation of the author's genius. Thus, he also co-operates in the operation of the author's genius. By operating one's own genius and identifying it to the genius embedded in the text confined by an objective and grammatical interpretation, an understanding becomes more comprehensive and in-depth.

The general hermeneutics maintains a similar structure to Schleiermacher's religiousness.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 83. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: interpretation theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*, 89.

<sup>24</sup> Schleiermacher, "Foundations," 78.

<sup>25</sup> Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 89.

<sup>26</sup> Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 90.

<sup>27</sup> Schleiermacher, "Foundations," 96.

<sup>28</sup> Thus, Dilthey wrote: "He [Schleiermacher] was, however, only able to analyze Understanding as a re-experiencing or reconstruction in its vital relationship to the process of literary production itself." (Dilthey, "The rise of hermeneutics," in *The hermeneutic tradition: from Ast to Ricoeur*, ed. G. L. Ormiston and A.D. Schrift (New York: State University of New York, 1985), 110).

<sup>29</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 188.

For the latter, there are two essential elements: intuition (*Anschauung*) and the feeling (*Gefühl*) of absolute dependence. For the former, there are two moments of interpretation: the psychological one (divination) and the grammatical one. The feeling of absolute dependence affirms the Other on which one should depend. It identifies the distance and difference between one and the whole. Similarly, the grammatical interpretation identifies the distance and difference between the original text/author and readers. They might be deemed as a principle of difference. Necessarily supplementary to this is a principle of unity grounded in intuition and divination. In intuition, the individual sees the possibilities of a living unity under the love of God.<sup>30</sup> Through divination, the individual revives the texts and reconfirms a vital relationship with the authors. Therefore, it exists neither a unity without differences (a text without further interpretations) nor differences without a unity (an arbitrary interpretation).

If the general hermeneutics is so-called “general”, then one could not exclude it from being applied to the understanding of religiousness. Schleiermacher developed his hermeneutic theory right after he finished his speeches on religion. The general hermeneutics is a further interpretation of the understanding of religion to some extent. Understanding what it means to be religious is not the same as understanding some lines literarily in a sacred text. The understanding of religiousness is related to the essence of an individual and is accordingly related to one’s capacity for understanding. If the grammatical and psychological interpretations serve as the required methods for one’s general understanding, then they must also function in one’s understanding of religiousness and play a

guiding role in one’s being a religious person. However, it is when they function in one’s existence that, as Kierkegaard points out, reveals the betrayal of their initial intentions.

### Schleiermacher’s divination and Kierkegaard’s contemporaneity

A question might arise: how can one read religiously into a sacred text and understand his being (or becoming) as a religious person? To answer this question, Kierkegaard can give a radical example. A priest gave a sermon on Sunday morning about Abraham and Isaac, while one of his listeners came up to him at night saying that he had heard a voice in the air that commanded him to kill his son.<sup>31</sup> Then, how could the priest answer his listener? Showing to the latter how exegesis had interpreted Abraham would not be helpful since Abraham himself remained silent and did not turn to anyone for help.<sup>32</sup> Rebutting what his listener had said would be paradoxical because the priest had praised Abraham for his deeds and encouraged his audience to follow the father of faith during the sermon. What the listener sought was neither words in the Bible nor merely meanings in words, but the orientation of Abraham. The becoming of Abraham implies a concrete, living and creative relationship with God. It demonstrates an existential relationship in a subjective sense instead of epistemological knowledge in an objective sense. Thus, this example should not be treated in the realm of biblical hermeneutics but in a more fundamental way related to one’s general understanding.

According to Schleiermacher, the author’s mental state and composition of his works can

<sup>30</sup> J.H. Smith, “Living religion as vanishing mediator: Schleiermacher, early romanticism, and idealism,” *The German Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (2011): 143-144; 153.

<sup>31</sup> Each individual can imitate Abraham’s behaviour, which implies the difficulty and indispensability of faith in one’s action. (Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and trembling*, ed. and trans. H.V. and E.H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 30.)

<sup>32</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and trembling*, 113-115.

be reconstructed through grammatical and psychological interpretations. The process implies an original “contemporaneity” between a reader and the author. Divination is the key to it. Gadamer regarded the divinatory as “a placing of oneself within the whole framework of the author” and the understanding, following this process, as “a reconstruction that starts from the vital moment of conception, the ‘germinal decision’ (*Keinmentschluss*) as the composition’s organizing center”.<sup>33</sup> Thanks to the ability to put oneself into the decisive orientation of the other, readers can immediately get to the level of the author as if the former is writing with the latter but with a better consciousness in understanding the composition. It is the opposite process of composition in which the talented reader immediately jumps upfront to the original author with the same original decision and eventually blooms from that little germ the whole picture of the author’s creation. The relationship between readers and the author is supposed and remains in an intuitive relatedness, which means that in each hermeneutic circle, readers know in immediacy what the author meant.

It can also be applied to the understanding of one’s religiousness. While the grammatical interpretation excludes the possibilities of arbitrary interpretations of sacred texts, each individual should also have a sense of intuition and a direct feeling of dependence on the divine to reach the immediacy of religion. Living in the immediacy of religion is the essential requirement of religiousness. Schleiermacher wrote: “In religion then everything is immediately true, as nothing is expressed at any moment of it, except the state of mind of the religious person.”<sup>34</sup> The immediacy of religion shows the believers what is true, especially the truth of religion. An accurate understanding of the sacred text demands divination that enables be-

lievers to build a direct, specific, secure living relationship with God. Therefore, by divination, the immediacy of religion guarantees an authentic relationship in religiousness.

It would be beneficial to show how Kierkegaard agrees and disagrees with Schleiermacher on contemporaneity. Like Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard points out the futility of objective investigations in understanding a text and its author. Neither philology nor historical studies fulfil their purposes with their arguments and demonstrations. The philologist starts and ends up with controversial debates that argue for nothing but the speaker’s intelligence. At the same time, the historical materials remain approximate from the beginning to the end.<sup>35</sup> On the one hand, philology and historical studies promote an illusion of being contemporary directly and immediately with the original author with some grammar and historical information. On the other hand, they presuppose a distance through which contemporaneity is proved impossible since no one can attain absolute certainty. For example, if one investigates Bible objectively with a philological or historical approach, he might figure out some grammatical mistakes or the fact that the Bible is written by someone in history, which distracts his understanding of the real subject matter (e.g., the faith for which God demands throughout the text). Therefore, in objective investigations, either the original contemporaneity seems to be buried in the historical distance, or one’s attention would be diverted from the subject matter.

To achieve the original contemporaneity, Kierkegaard criticises three wrong interpretations of contemporaneity. The first interpretation regards those who lived in the same historical period as the author as the contemporary. For Kierkegaard, though the contemporary is comparatively easy to collect direct

<sup>33</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 186.

<sup>34</sup> Schleiermacher, *On religion*, 103.

<sup>35</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding unscientific postscript*, 23–28. Schleiermacher, “Foundations,” 78.

observations of the creation, they remain uncertain because of either the incompleteness of objective observations or the ignorance of the historical situation from which a contemporary genius stems. Kierkegaard expressed his concern clearly:

But what does it mean to say that one can be contemporary without, however, being contemporary, consequently that one can be contemporary and yet, although using this advantage (in the sense of immediacy), be a noncontemporary—what else does this mean except that one simply cannot be immediately contemporary with a teacher and event of that sort, so that the real contemporary is not that by virtue of immediate contemporaneity but by virtue of something else.<sup>36</sup>

Maintaining a direct and immediate relationship with the author, the contemporary mistakenly identifies the author with his life and neglects the contributions of his creation. The contemporary exactly becomes noncontemporary. Up to this point, Kierkegaard seems to agree with Schleiermacher that it would not be an easier task to understand the text, even for those who lived contemporary with the original author. To achieve an original contemporaneity is by virtue of something else.

The second interpretation is that historical studies can achieve contemporaneity. It believes that later generations can understand historical periods from the perspective of each period. Understanding can eliminate the historical distance. Kierkegaard argues that this overcoming of the historical distance is no more than a misunderstanding of the task. The fundamental task of understanding is not merely knowing the original meanings of the contents as if an independent and atemporal understand-

ing exists. If so, it would be much easier for later generations to understand the text since they are equipped with better scientific methods or more extensive information. However, the authentic understanding is to understand the *howness* instead of the *whatness*. Historical studies only convey to their audience the content without revealing how to become. In contrast, understanding requires not an objective study of the subject matter but building a living relationship with it, which is the same task for every generation.

The third misinterpretation is that an individual can achieve contemporaneity by a direct and intuitive understanding of the text. For Kierkegaard, one cannot achieve the original contemporaneity directly through immediacy, including Schleiermacher's divination. Schleiermacher is coherent regarding the author as another unqualified interpreter because "the only standard of interpretation is the sense of his creation, what it 'means'."<sup>37</sup> The only justified interpretation for the author is his creation. Once after the creation process, he loses the authority of interpretation and leaves it behind for his readers. Readers are responsible for joining the composition through an intuitive divination process and carrying out new meanings (or hidden meanings) in the text. Seemingly, the genius of the reader operates congenially with the author's genius. Gadamer doubted this claim: "Schleiermacher's problem is not historical obscurity, but the obscurity of the *Thou*."<sup>38</sup> The historical distance can be clarified by the grammatical interpretation and bridged by divination so that readers can know what the text initially and potentially means. However, it remains obscure and unknown to readers how the author could relate himself to his writing and textual meanings, let alone the implicit genesis of the author and his becoming. Eventually, the reader is lost in his divination

<sup>36</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical fragments*, 67.

<sup>37</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 192.

<sup>38</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 190.

of the original author, the *Thou*, and sinks into the obscurity of the “howness” of the “Thou”. The original is buried in the mysterious darkness of the orientation.

Kierkegaard oppositely focuses on “howness” instead of “whatness”. Deep down in Kierkegaard’s heart is an existential mode of understanding. He is unsatisfied with only knowing what has been intended by the author. He searches for how the author has related himself to the text and, more specifically, how he became that particular *author* through his composition. Kierkegaard wrote the following sentences with brilliant insights: “When a person does not become what he can understand, then neither does he understand it. Only Themistocles understood Miltiades; therefore that’s also what he became.”<sup>39</sup> Themistocles stopped neither at merely knowing what Miltiades had achieved nor worshipping the achievements and historical meanings behind what Miltiades had done. He stepped forward and understood Miltiades in Miltiades’s own becoming, which resulted not in divination that he knew why Miltiades had done such things or what Miltiades had done, but in a becoming that he understood how Miltiades did such things. Eventually, Themistocles never became Miltiades in immediacy since Themistocles was always in his own becoming and only through becoming Themistocles himself could Themistocles finally understand Miltiades. For Miltiades did not become others but exactly Miltiades himself. One cannot understand the other without one’s own becoming.

Kierkegaard commented critically on Schleiermacher, linking Schleiermacher’s emphasis on immediacy and his religious under-

standing.<sup>40</sup> Kierkegaard wrote:

The error in Schleiermacher’s dogmatics is that for him religiousness is always really a condition [...] he represents everything in the sphere of being, Spinozian being. How it becomes in the sense of coming to exist and in the sense of being maintained does not really concern him. This is why he is unable to pick up very much from dogmatics. Every Christian qualification is characterized by the ethical oriented to striving. From this comes fear and trembling, and the you shall; from this also the possibility of offense etc. This is of minor concern to Schleiermacher. He treats religiousness in the sphere of being.<sup>41</sup>

If one can quickly and directly achieve what the author or the dogmatics intend to mean in the immediacy proposed by the divinatory, then he is already in being, which means that he has already understood “what is” without the need to change himself. He already *is*. However, for Kierkegaard, what the authentic understanding (especially regarding to religiousness) proposes is not being but becoming. Merely knowing the meanings of the text does not entail the reader’s practice and existence. Believing that one has understood the meanings in the text is never enough for actually becoming a person who actualizes the meanings in his own existence. In its most profound sense, understanding is becoming.

Finally, we can return to the story discussed at the beginning of this section. Schleiermacher’s approach seems unable to answer the question raised by the listener who identifies himself as another Abraham. The grammatical

<sup>39</sup> Kierkegaard, *Journals and notebooks*, JJ: 480.

<sup>40</sup> While Schreiber argued that Kierkegaard’s critique of Schleiermacher on the first immediacy is unjustified (Schreiber, “The real targets of Kierkegaard’s critique of characterizing faith as ‘the immediate,’” *Acta Kierkegaardiana* 5 (2011), 137–167), Rogers opposed that Kierkegaard’s critique is indeed a de facto critique (Rogers, “Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, and the problem of first immediacy,” 259–278). This article agrees with Rogers’s argument.

<sup>41</sup> Kierkegaard, *Journals and notebooks*, NB 15:83.

interpretation cannot avoid this interpretation appearing, while the psychological interpretation (especially the divinatory) seems to allow this interpretation to come into being. After all, becoming an author is different from becoming a reader. Understanding what the text means is different from understanding how the text has been written. Being at the original author's level is different from becoming one's own self through the author's becoming an author. From Kierkegaard's point of view, the listener has misunderstood the "howness": how Abraham became Abraham and how Abraham related himself to God. Only by answering this *how* can the listener understand the essentials of religiousness.

## Conclusion

This article presents the similarities and differences between Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard on religiousness. These two thinkers examine the general capacity of being religious. At the same time, it is the understanding of this essential religiousness that Kierkegaard departs from Schleiermacher, for the former aims at how to be religious and how to become a Christian, while the latter presupposes what being religious is and describes what is to be a Christian. For Schleiermacher, this religiousness is closely related to the hermeneutics method. Thus, by virtue of uncovering the primary element in Schleiermacher's hermeneutic theory and comparing it with Kierkegaard's thoughts, the essential difference between these two religious thinkers could be made explicit. Then, this article compares Schleiermacher's divination with Kierkegaard's contemporaneity. The divinatory can be regarded as a kind of contemporaneity. It eliminates the temporal distance intuitively and immediately. However, Kierkegaard regards this approach as an illusion of immediacy that focuses on the "whatness" instead of the "howness". Kierkegaard em-

phasises an existential mode of understanding. The relationship depends not on the immediacy (what the relationship immediately is) but on how one relates himself or herself with the subject matter (how the relationship comes into being).

## References

- Beyers, Jaco. "On the border between religion and superstition: Schleiermacher on religion." *Theological Studies* 77, no. 2 (2021): e1-e9.
- Capetz, P.E. "Theology and the non-theological study of religion: a critical assessment of Schleiermacher's legacy." In *Schleiermacher und Kierkegaard: Subjektivität und Wahrheit - Akten des Schleiermacher-Kierkegaard-Kongresses*, edited by Niels Cappelørn, 179-196. Copenhagen: De Gruyter, 2006.
- Crouter, R.. "More than kindred spirits: Kierkegaard and Schleiermacher on repentance." In *Schleiermacher und Kierkegaard*, 673-686.
- Dalferth, V.I. "Die Sache ist viel entsetzlicher: Religiosität bei Kierkegaard und Schleiermacher." In *Schleiermacher und Kierkegaard*, 217-264.
- Dilthey, Wilhelm. "The rise of hermeneutics." In *The hermeneutic tradition: from Ast to Ricoeur*, edited by G.L. Ormiston and A.D. Schrift, 101-114. New York: State University of New York, 1985.
- Dole, Andrew. "Schleiermacher on religion." *Religious Compass* 4, no. 2 (2010): 75-85.
- Ferreira, M.J. "The single individual and kinship: reflection on Kierkegaard and Schleiermacher." In *Schleiermacher und Kierkegaard*, 125-144.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and method*. Translated by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall. New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Kangas, D. "The metaphysics of interiority:

- the two paths of Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard.” In *Schleiermacher und Kierkegaard*, 655–672.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Philosophical fragments*. Edited and translated by H.V. and E.H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- . *Fear and trembling*. Edited and translated by H.V. and E.H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- . *Concluding unscientific postscript to philosophical fragments*. Edited and translated by H.V. and E.H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- . *Kierkegaard's journals and notebooks*, vol. 1–9. Edited and translated by Niels Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay, David Kangas et al. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007–2017.
- . *Papers and journals: a selection*. Translated by Alastair Hannay, Penguin, 1996.
- Palmer, R.E. *Hermeneutics: interpretation theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*. Northwestern University Press, 1969.
- Rajan, Tilottama. *The supplement of reading: figures of understanding in romantic theory and practice*. London: Cornell University Press, 1990.
- Rogers, C.D. “Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, and the problem of first immediacy.” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 80, no. 3 (2016): 259–278.
- . “Schleiermacher in the Kierkegaardian project: between Socratic ignorance and second immediacy.” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* 21, no. 1 (2016): 141–158.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich. “Foundations: general theory and art of interpretation.” In *The hermeneutics reader*, edited by Mueller-Vollmer. New York: Continuum, 1985.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *On religion: speeches to its cultured despisers*. Translated by John Oman. New York: Harper & Brothers, 2006/1958.
- . *The Christian faith*. Translated by Paul T. Nimmo. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Schreiber, G. “The real targets of Kierkegaard’s critique of characterizing faith as ‘the immediate’.” *Acta Kierkegaardiana* 5 (2011): 137–167.
- Smith, J.H. “Living religion as vanishing mediator: Schleiermacher, early romanticism, and idealism.” *The German Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (2011): 137–158.
- Stoellger. “Sprachdenken zwischen Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard und Rosenzweig. Zum Vor- und Nachleben des Sprachdenkens in hermeneutischer Perspektive.” *Naharaim* 4, no. 1 (2011): 97–119.

Copyright © 2023 Huang.

**Correspondence:** Yufeng Huang, e: [114020223@link.cuhk.edu.cn](mailto:114020223@link.cuhk.edu.cn).

**Received:** 1 September, 2022.

**Accepted:** 10 October, 2022.

**Financial statement:** The scholarship for this article was conducted at the author's own expense.

**Competing interests:** The author has declared no competing interests.

**How to cite:** Huang, Yufeng. "Divination and contemporaneity: different thoughts of Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard on hermeneutics." *Inscriptions* 6, no. 1 (January 2023): 49-59.

# 2023 Ereignis Summer School

June 4 – June 11  
in Gdynia, Poland

Join us for a week of seminars, workshops, and talks at the **2023 Ereignis Summer School**. Designed to ease the transition from graduate study to professional engagement this summer school will help you write better essays, give more professional presentations, and increase your academic acumen. The summer school consists of academic seminars, workshops, and evening events. The summer school culminates in the 3rd Ereignis Conference, with an opportunity to present your paper. Our students are also invited to submit an essay to our peer-reviewed scholarly journal *Inscriptions*, giving you the chance to join the academic publishing circuit.

- Seminar with **Andrew Jorn**: Time famine – temporal castration and capitalist subjectivity
- Seminar with **Christopher Norris**: Deconstruction and the politics of truth
- Workshops on academic writing and presentation skills
- Free attendance at the 3rd Ereignis Conference

... and more

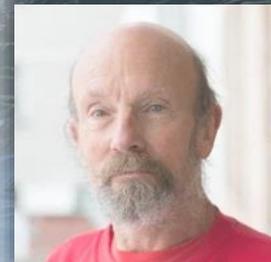
Visit our web-page for more information and to apply.

€ 500

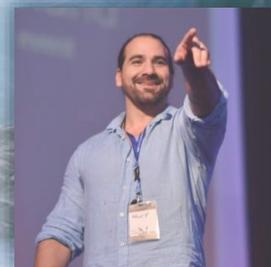
[ereignis.no/](http://ereignis.no/)



Andrew Jorn



Chris Norris



Sharif Abdunnur

