

The following is the summary theme of the segment on Hegel in a course on the Philosophy of Religion given at McGill University in the 2016 Winter term. Notation is only adumbrated.

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## Hegel's Philosophy of Religion

**The context.** The designation, “philosophy of religion” (*Religionphilosophie*), was coined in 1772 by Sigmund v. Storchenau; it was later adopted by Karl Leonhard Reinhold but given definite meaning only in Kant’s late essays on religion. The process by which the *theologia naturalis* of classical metaphysics eventually gave place to *Religionphilosophie* had however implicitly begun long before the coining of the latter term. It had at least as early as the eudemonism of the Leibniz-inspired *Popularphilosophie* of the late German Enlightenment. In the most perfect of all the possible worlds of which the popular philosophers of the Enlightenment thought of themselves as members, God’s presence was invoked only as a source of trust that in their case things would work out for their individual best. The theologian J. J. Spalding was the most notorious representative of this attitude. Hegel later rightly characterized his kind of religion as “of the useful.” Kant only gave a critical twist to it by denying theoretical knowledge of God and making respect for the moral law the fundamental interest motivating human conduct. He nonetheless retained a narrative about God and the immortality of the soul as a source of trust in a deserved future happiness. Whatever the differences in theoretical approach, the moment one shifted, as both Spalding and Kant had done, from God *per se* to God as serving determinate human needs and interests, *theologia* as the doctrine about God and his attributes had already *de facto* morphed into a philosophy of religion, where “religion,” a characteristic dimension of human existence, was the subject.

This, in general, was the historical/conceptual context of Hegel’s early interest in religion. In his case, however, the special twist to the interest came by way of Lessing. Like all pre-Kant Enlightenment philosophers, Lessing assumed as possible the knowledge of universal truths of reason as guides for a life of virtue. As he dramatically illustrated in *Nathan the Wise*, a play much cited by the early Hegel, true religion had to be one of reason. But Lessing was equally aware that,

as actually practised, religions were *positive*, in the sense that, although investing their beliefs with universal objective validity, they did so in connection with events and practices which were historical, hence conditioned by the contingencies of space and time. And, since Lessing was unwilling to dismiss such beliefs as mere superstition, the problem that religion posed was precisely one of how to bridge the “ugly broad ditch” which he saw separating historical authority and truths of reason. This also was the problem which informed Hegel’s reflections on religion, in important ways even shaping his whole philosophy. Hegel eventually returned to a kind of theology—one, however, in which God no longer figured as anything physical or transcendent, whether as *causa sui* or Absolute, but as Spirit. To understand the meaning of this Spirit is to understand Hegel’s philosophy of religion.

### **The early Hegel.**

In the years up to 1800, Hegel drafted a number of manuscripts (never published) which are commonly known in English as his “early theological writings.” This was a time when Hegel saw himself more as an educator of humankind than as philosopher—like Lessing, a humanist. Lessing himself had tried to bridge “the ugly, broad ditch” from which he said to have recoiled in despair by looking at history as a process by which humankind is raised from the particularizing conditions of natural existence to a culture of universal reason. The positivity of the historical religions was the *de facto* necessary medium in which this culture was realized. It however became a dead weight impeding progress whenever societies hung on to it in the form to which they are accustomed, despite the fact that the degree of rationality they had achieved, and in fact already motivated them, had rendered it obsolete. This was indeed an imaginatively attractive solution to Lessing’s problem, but it failed to establish any link connecting the two sides of the ditch essentially. How historical certitude would cross over to objective evidence; or, for that matter, objective evidence be ushered by historical certitude, was not conceptually comprehended. Nonetheless, Lessing’s strategy was one which Hegel also adopted in one of his more substantial theological manuscripts, the one usually referred to as “the positivity of the Christian religion” (1795-96). There, like Lessing, he distinguished between vital history and historical dross, and, repeatedly citing *Nathan the Wise*, he set his aim on a future universal religion of reason.

There were differences, however. Kant had intervened in between. Lessing's truths of reason were replaced by the idea of the law, and the envisaged universal religion of reason was given the form, in thoroughly Kantian spirit, of a life of virtue motivated by respect for the law as command of God. Another difference, perhaps less striking but in view of future developments even more significant, was that Hegel, unlike Lessing or Kant, in reflecting on the historical phenomenon of Christianity, did not limit himself to generalities. He did not simply think up a narrative on the subject as required by conceptual presuppositions, but engaged rather in what he at least intended to be a detailed account of its history—in particular how, affected at its origin by the positive dross of a legalism inherited from Judaism which influenced Jesus' teachings and the establishment by his disciples of the early church, this same dross eventually morphed into a variety of ways in the centuries that followed, gave rise to the institutionalized churches, and still affected political events close to Hegel's own time. The details of the history would hardly stand up to close historical criticism. But the point is that Hegel presented them as capable of being submitted to such a criticism. From the start, Hegel's was a *history* of reason, not just a *mythology* of it.

These differences were however accidental when measured against a subsequent essay, commonly known as "the spirit of Christianity" (1798-99). Here again the history of the Christian religion is presented as affected by an inherited Judaic legalism. The main issue, however, was how and why that legalism would have arisen in the first place. For this, Hegel reached back to Abraham, portraying him as one who felt himself a stranger in the land where he roamed with his herds because, unlike other peoples whose gods were rooted there, he was beholden to a God who transcended it; who had commanded him to leave it for another which he promised for his descendants but which Abraham himself could only imagine; who, moreover, had tested his obedience by ordering him to sacrifice his son Izaak in violence to all his natural feelings as father. In effect, Abraham was being iconically portrayed as the first rational man, for his relation to nature was no longer direct. It was rather mediated by the idea of a transcendent God which distanced him from any land he happened to inhabit at the moment, and made the fact that he inhabited it in need of justification. Alienation thus defined the spirit of Judaism according to Hegel. It made for its legalism. Jesus, by contrast, stood opposite to Abraham. To the law as felt by the latter—as coming from a transcendent Other and imposed on nature externally—he opposed his law of love.

Reconciliation through love—of God and one’s neighbour—was the spirit of Christianity.

But Jesus’s message was obfuscated by the dross of the Judaic past, as Hegel continued to narrate. Kant’s moralism, which defined human existence in the previous essay, was now presented as itself part of this dross. This was indeed a radical change, yet only symptomatic of a much deeper conceptual revolution. Lessing’s “ugly, broad ditch” was still at play—not, however, as an externally observed fact of experience, but as a *felt* fact: one which had supposedly shaped Abraham’s life and which Hegel was imaginatively trying to recreate from Abraham’s own internal standpoint, phenomenologically. Moreover, the ditch—the distance separating Abraham from God, and Abraham from nature—was not just a given fact, but was internally generated by Abraham himself inasmuch as he, the iconic first rational man, was given to conceptualization. This was the decisive new insight now shaping Hegel’s vision. Reason had been responsible for the distance, making nature, including Abraham’s historical individuality, problematic. But, if the distance was internally generated, then it could also be internally bridged. This was the contribution of Jesus’s reconciling love.

But there were difficulties. As Hegel incidentally admitted, love cannot be in general. It is directed to individual objects (“*thy* neighbour”) which, in order to be identified, need conceptual determination. In other words, Lessing’s problem of how to connect the universal of reason with the historical particular (now rephrased by Hegel as one of connecting the infinite and the finite) still needed resolution. And this Hegel finally had in view—only in principle, of course—by 1800. As a self-professed humanist, he had hitherto blamed philosophy and conceptualization for the alienation which Abraham had experienced and which still affected modern society (witness Kantian moralism). But, in rendering nature problematic by confronting its particularities with the infinite, the concept had thereby already invested it with a significance that made it more than just physical nature. Nature had been humanized, albeit *ab origine* only as a problem. In effect, the concept that created Lessing’s ditch also bridged it in the very act of creating it. The essence of reconciliation consisted in recognizing precisely this much, as religions had indeed done since time immemorial. As Hegel said in a paragraph he added in 1800 to the 1795-96 essay in an apparent effort at revising it, but in fact subverting its original Lessing-based conceptual framework completely, the singular, the contingent, what for the rationalist was a scandal, was for religion the *sacrosanct*; where God

appeared. It was time, therefore, as Hegel said also in 1800, in a letter to Schelling just before moving to Jena, that he turned to philosophy, precisely to the study of the concept. Hegel had become a committed philosopher.

By 1800 the essential components of Hegel's concept of religion were thus already in place. (1) Man is religious *because* he is rational.<sup>1</sup> (2) Religion itself is essentially *celebratory*, the felt recognition that *reconciliation* is already at hand, that God is with us. (3) Christianity is the consummate religion because of its two defining dogmas of the Incarnation and the Trinity. The one depicts God as *Father*, i.e., at once transcendent authority yet familial figure; the other, the life of God as *communal*, three distinct person sharing one single substance, united as persons by a bond of love. (4) All this is reflected in the essence of religion, which is essentially *communal*.<sup>2</sup> Still missing to Hegel, however, was the overall theoretical framework for bringing these components together into an internally well articulated conception. And the test of success, the measure of the seriousness of Hegel's "reconciliation," would have had to be whether the framework allowed for evil (a scandal to the rationalists) as an essential factor in human existence. Lessing, in the character of his Nathan, had been conspicuously inconclusive on the issue.

### **The Jena years.**

These were the most important formative years for Hegel concept of religion. In a number of unpublished manuscripts he presented religion as the communal bond establishing a people (*Volk*). Speculatively, its concept also was the factor that gave closure to Hegel's system of experience as presented at the time. But it was in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), at the end of the Jena period, that the mature concept was substantially achieved.

This text, rich in levels of meaning, can also be read as a narrative of individuals as they existentially engage each other's presence in the medium of language. In each case, according to the type of communication they achieve, they thereby establish a particular social bond; and, since language is the "immediate existence of Spirit," they also embed in this bond, that is, in the values

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<sup>1</sup>E.g.: Lectures on the Phil of Religion (Hodgson), p. 339ff.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. *ibid.*: "thus the [religious] community is [. . .] God existing as community." 473.

and practices it entails, a decision regarding how to invest their otherwise pure needs and desires with a meaning and a value that transcend them as just natural. Every communal form of existence thus entails a judgment of identity, *a parti pris* regarding the sense in which the natural and historical particularity of a community—its positivity—is *sacrosanct*. Religion arises in this context. It “is [a knowledge] which, as a knowledge that has a perceived or outer existence [i.e. is expressed in some narrative or other], is the utterance of the community concerning its own Spirit.”<sup>3</sup> “God’s spirit is [present] essentially in his community; God *is* spirit only insofar as God is in his *community*.”<sup>4</sup>

Hegel systematically considers a series of such communal bonds, according as each is informed by the degree of subjectivity historically achieved by the members of a given community. There is the communication heroically played out in battle before the walls of Troy, where in the battle the combatants recognize each the sacrosanctity of the other—in this sense, therefore, each stands on a level spiritual ground with the other; thus, albeit primitively, truly communicates with the other. This equality is lost in the successive forms of social engagement, and not recovered until the end, when, in Hegel’s own time, after the spiritual discipline undergone through the experience of the French Revolution and Kantian morality, the original battle of prestige gives place to a battle of *consciences*. At issue are the contending and unreconcilable claims (unreconcilable because advanced on equal spiritual grounds) of souls who take the voice of their conscience, historically and naturally particularized as such a voice necessarily is, as nonetheless the absolute norm of value. Here is where the source of evil, which has hitherto affected every social bond only *de facto*, is finally unmasked for itself. It lies in wanting to be like God—as rational man necessarily does inasmuch as, *as rational*, while generating the gap between nature and spirit, has thereby already bridged it by investing nature with infinite value. The early Hegel had already depicted this much in the figure of Abraham, for whom his land had to be, not just *a* land, but a divinely appointed one.

With the emergence of conscience, either communication is totally disrupted and any social bond dissolved, or a new bond is established capable of cementing a community whose members explicitly live by their conscience. This comes about with the language of confession and

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<sup>3</sup>Phenomenology

<sup>4</sup>Lectures on the Phil of Religion (Hodgson), p. 90.

forgiveness, in the medium of which alone a common and level ground is forged for the contesting consciences. There is no true forgiving unless the forgiving conscience, in forgiving, at the same time places itself at the same level as the confessing conscience—acknowledges, in other words, that, in judging the other as evil, itself invests its own *de facto* singular standpoint with absolute value: is itself evil. And there is no true confessing unless, in acknowledging one's evil, the confessing conscience places itself at the level of such who can understand what it is to be evil—places itself, in other words, in the company of the forgiving conscience. The community is thus born of such who know (this is their Spirit) that they, while not abolishing evil (this would amount to falling back into mere nature), can nonetheless contain it: limit it. This is the explicitly religious community.

Counter to long standing traditions, evil is for Hegel the product of reason, not its failure. Humankind is evil *because* it is rational; and, *because* in being rational it is evil, it must also be religious. It is in need of redemption. Religious language and religious practices are the matrix in the medium of which the social arrangements so far examined by Hegel in the *Phenomenology* were founded in the first instance. There is no community without communication. But communication requires a levelling of those effectively engaged in it—a mutual recognition, in other words, of the type which only the language of confession and forgiveness provides, in however primitive, even brutal form, this might occur. Hegel proceeds, therefore, to examine historical religion, not just according as its beliefs, and the practices associated with them, are simply one more material component in the life of the historical communities he has already gone through, but *per se*, i.e., inasmuch as the content of such beliefs and associated practices objectify the founding Spirit of the communities. It is this Spirit that speaks in them. And it does so most explicitly, according to Hegel, in the biblical narrative, which is the story of precisely man wanting to be like God—the story, in other words, of sin and redemption which, in some form or other, is acted out in the life of every community. Biblical religion is thus “manifest religion,” or religion that knows itself to be such. “Spirit’s knowing of itself as it is implicitly is the *being-in-and-for-itself* of spirit, the consummate, absolute religion in which it is manifest what spirit is, what God is; and this religion is the Christiana

religion.”<sup>5</sup>

### **The Berlin Lectures**

Hegel clearly distinguishes between religion and “faith,” the latter at least as understood in the tradition of the *credo quia absurdum*, within which Hegel could well locate Kant.<sup>6</sup> Religious beliefs do not come into play simply where knowledge-conditions no longer apply, yet one needs some sort of intellectual commitment due to existential pressures. Such a situation arises for Hegel only on a mistaken perception of the relations of reason to nature which results in turn in a sickness of spirit. Rather, for Hegel religious beliefs are themselves already knowledge, albeit as if “in a glass darkly.”<sup>7</sup> They are already rationally mediated, as one would indeed expect, since reason is the originitive form of human existence, and religion its first realization. Hegel has no problem with the positivity of religion; no objection to the witness of “the spirit and the power”; for he assumes no absolute break between the internal and the external. Religious education entails indeed the passive reception of doctrine. Hegel’s point, however, is that the culture which provides the education is itself, originally, a product of spirit. Religion is simply “spirit as conscious of its essence.”<sup>8</sup> Conceptual reflection need only bring out, therefore, the inherent rationality of its beliefs, thereby to step into the realm of philosophy as such.

The problem obviously arises on this position of how religious beliefs, which are integral to the life of a community, can nonetheless survive in a culture which has become universally philosophical—where critical reflection inevitably strips their imaginary content of the realism they otherwise immediately convey, and religion just as inevitably appears, as it already did in Lessing’s times, as philosophy for the unenlightened. This, namely the relation of religion to philosophy, was an issue which Hegel explicitly addressed in his Berlin period, in his lectures on the philosophy of religion of 1824, 1827, and 1831, and in the *Encyclopaedia* of 1830. His motivation was in part to

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<sup>5</sup>Lectures on the Phil of Religion (Hodgson), p.109.

<sup>6</sup>Phenomenology.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Lectures on the Phil of Religion (Hodgson), p. 148: “initially through a dim recognition.”

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. 405. But see 402-405.



deny (very likely with Schleiermacher in mind) that religion is simply a matter of feelings. If religious feelings are to be more than vapid sentiments, they require dogmas, beliefs with a definite content. However, when Hegel came to translate such dogmas into the medium of the pure concept, the life of God, such as Christians portray in their beliefs and presuppose in their cultus, turned out to be identical with the life of the concept as such. “The concept is what is alive, is what mediates itself with itself; one of its determinations is also being. [ . . . ] As far as the concept is concerned, it is immediately this universal that determines and particularizes itself—it is the activity of dividing, of particularizing and determining itself, of positing a finitude, negating this its own finitude and being identical with itself through the negation of this finitude. This is the concept as such, the concept of God, the absolute concept; this is just what God is.”<sup>9</sup> And when he came to re-validate the proofs of God’s existence which Kant had discredited, admittedly by reforming them radically, as restated by him they were simply steps in the elevation of the mind to metaphysics.<sup>10</sup> On these claims, one has indeed reason to wonder whether the dogmas’ content had not be reduced to mere imaginative trappings.

Hegel’s apparent favourite formula for the difference separating religion and philosophy—a difference which he definitely wanted to retain—was that the content of the two is the same, albeit under a different form in each. But the formula obscures more than elucidates, for it begs the question of how a content can be the *same* when differently informed. One possible construal is to take this content to consist in spirit’s activity of reconciliation. If one considers, moreover, that the concept is essentially discursive, hence communal; that there is, in other words, a typically philosophical community which, according to Hegel, even has its own cultus,<sup>11</sup> then one can conceive the relation at issue as one of two communities, each attaining reconciliation in an existentially different mode.<sup>12</sup> The philosopher contemplates the human situation reflectively, at speculative distance; he attains reconciliation, therefore, only in the sense of understanding that evil *will* be, but

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<sup>9</sup>184-185.

<sup>10</sup>167, 405. But make more specific according to pp. 420-421.

<sup>11</sup>194.

<sup>12</sup>There is reconciliation even in the life of God: the Spirit is love. 429, 418.

that confession and forgiveness are also there to redeem it. The believer is engaged in the same situation immediately, precisely as individual, and in the representational medium best apt to this immediacy. Involved as he is in the life of the religious community, he does not just know, but is subjectively certain, that reconciliation has been accomplished.<sup>13</sup> In Hegel's time, the distinction between the two communities had become blurred.<sup>14</sup> How it was re-thought, according as one interpreted Hegel's favourite formula, has been the history of post-Hegel Hegelianism. In a more contemporary framework, post-Holocaust thinkers have wondered what reconciliation—the knowledge of “evil [allegedly] having no power of its own”<sup>15</sup>— might possibly mean in a world disrupted by the irruption of an evil only describable as satanic. GdiG

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. 470(last line)-472.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. p. 151 (an isolated community of philosophical priests) in Vol. III of the Speirs&Sanderson translation. Google books, 1895. (In my files)

<sup>15</sup>479.