14

The Emergence of Modern Philosophy of Religion

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There seems to be no clear and consistent distinction between philosophical theology and the philosophy of religion. Yet, on purely linguistic grounds one would seem to have God and the other religion as its primary subject matter. I think it is not an accident that the editors of this volume used the term "philosophical theology" in the titles of the preceding five chapters, but switched to "philosophy of religion" for the present one. For during the time from David Hume and Immanuel Kant to Friedrich Nietzsche the focus shifted from philosophizing about God to philosophizing about religion.

Thus G. W. F. Hegel complains bitterly about the prevailing assumption that we do not know God, which, therefore, "permits us to speak merely of our relation to Him, to speak of religion and not of God Himself." The result is that "we at least hear much talk ... about religion, and therefore all the less about God Himself" (1962 [1832], pp. 191–2).

The matter is not that simple, for talking about religion cannot so easily be separated from talking about God. Still, Hegel calls our attention to what amounts to a sea change in modern philosophy, the transition from philosophical theology to philosophy of religion in the narrower sense of philosophizing about religion. In light of his intended resistance to this feature of post-Kantian modernity, it is ironic that we owe to him more than to anyone else the notion that there is a subdivision of philosophy called the philosophy of *religion*, that he develops this in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, and that the three parts of these lectures are "The Concept of *Religion*," "Determinate *Religion*," and "Consummate *Religion*." When philosophical theology will return in our own time, often as if nothing had happened in the meanwhile, it will call itself the philosophy of religion.

Pre-Kantian Philosophical Theology

Two species of philosophical theology form the background for the movement Hegel deplores. I shall call them, rather loosely, scholastic and deistic. Both are concerned with exploring what can be established about the existence and nature of God by means of human reason unaided by revelation. But the scholastic versions of this enterprise share the Augustinian assumption that pure reason, on the one hand, and

faith, revelation, and authority, on the other, are harmonious and should be seen as working together. The deistic versions, by contrast, are concerned not merely with distinguishing but also with separating the two. They wish to bring religion, in Kant's phrase, "within the limits of reason alone." To that end they seek to separate the rational kernel of religion from the irrational husk that exceeds those limits in the direction of faith, revelation, and authority. Typical examples of the kernel are God as creator and God as author and enforcer of the moral law, not only in this life but in the life to come. Typical examples of the husk are anything miraculous or supernatural and the tendency to give essential significance to anything historically particular such as the life and death of Jesus. These general strategies are worked out in a variety of ways in the English deism of Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648), John Toland (1670–1722), and Matthew Tindal (1657–1733); in the French deism of Voltaire (1694–1788) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78); and in the German deism of Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86), Gotthold Lessing (1729–81), and Kant (1724–1804).

Deism rather than scholasticism is the immediate precursor and even the beginning of the emergence here to be narrated. It can be called the religion of the Enlightenment. The horror of religious warfare and persecution hung heavy over European history, and when Enlightenment thinkers did not espouse an entirely anti-religious materialism, they sought above all to define a religion that would foster moral unity rather than immoral hostility within and among human societies.

This political agenda had both epistemological and ecclesiastical ramifications. For it was believed that a non-violent religion could only rest on the universality of reason and not on the particularity of any special revelation; nor could it reside in any church or sect which claimed authority in matters of faith and practice on the basis of such a revelation. In this context, Enlightenment rationalism (or the autonomy of reason) does not signify a rejection of the empiricist appeal to experience in favor of a purely *a priori* mode of thought; it rather signifies an appeal made by rationalists and empiricists alike to limit religion to those grounds, whether *a priori* or experiential, which are available to all people, at all times, and in all places. The contrast is not between reason and experience but between reason and faith, in so far as the latter is tied to special revelation and a particular "church."

Thus the deist project is motivated by three powerful, interlocking Enlightenment motifs: an epistemic concern for the autonomy of a universal human reason, a political concern for religious tolerance, and an anti-clericalism designed to deny to the Church both epistemic and political authority. This project clearly antedates the prevalence of the assumption, bemoaned by Hegel, that we do not know God and must therefore talk about religion. It is confident that, in one way or another, unaided human reason can know all we need to know about God. Still, in seeking to distinguish good religion (morally and politically speaking) from bad religion it begins the shift to philosophizing about religion. It is unembarrassed by talk about God, but it spends more of its energy talking about religion as a human, all-too-human social reality that is, for better and often for worse, a player on the stage we call history. The problem is less to prove God's existence than to make religion the ally rather than the enemy of morality.

Enter Hume and Kant. Their combined critique of the ontological, cosmological, and teleological proofs of the existence of God was a devastating blow to the many forms of

both the scholastic and the deistic projects that built on the foundation of those proofs (see Chapter 42, Ontological Arguments; Chapter 43, Cosmological Arguments; and Chapter 44, Teleological and Design Arguments). The widespread (if temporary) belief that Hume and especially Kant had said the last word on the subject is what Hegel referred to as the assumption that we cannot know God and must therefore only talk about religion. The pressing issue became: what can philosophy say about the religious dimension of human life now that the metaphysical proofs of God's existence have been taken away?

Enter Hume and Kant, again. It is not surprising that two thinkers who were as concerned as they were about the religious dimension of human life and who were as convinced as they were that the metaphysical foundations of scholastic and deistic philosophical theology had crumbled should point in new directions. But how different are those directions!

Post-Kantian Reconstructions of the Deist Project

Kant is the deist who, having undermined the metaphysical foundations of many forms of deism, sought to provide the project with alternative foundations. Since this alternative comes in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), which follow Kant's demolition of the theistic proofs in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781; 2nd edn. 1787), we can speak of Kant as the first post-Kantian to try to rescue the deist project.

Kant's (re)formulation is distinctive in two ways. First, he claims that if there is no knowledge of God by means of pure (*a priori*) theoretical reason, we can have such knowledge by means of pure practical reason. Thus the *Critique of Practical Reason* develops moral arguments for God and immortality to take the place of the arguments discredited in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Second, Kant's account of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* begins with an account of radical evil in human nature that departs drastically from the more typically optimistic view whose fullest expression is to be found in Rousseau (see Chapter 72, Sin and Original Sin).

In the final three books of *Religion*, Kant gives a classical account of the kind of religion that could be acceptable in the Age of Reason. It is grounded in universal reason and in the service of universal morality. Kant is especially concerned with clarifying the relation between religion and morality, and he does so in three basic principles. First, "morality does not need religion at all" – either in the discovery of what our duty is or in the motivation for doing it (1960 [1793], p. 3). Second, "morality leads inevitably to religion" (p. 7 n.). This is a reminder of the moral arguments for God and immortality given in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Finally, "religion is (subjectively regarded) the recognition of all duties as divine commands" (p. 142). As such it is an aid, useful if unnecessary, to the moral life.

But there can be "no special duties to God in a universal religion, for God can receive nothing from us" (p. 142 n.). It follows that such "means of grace" as prayer, church attendance, baptism, and communion are illusions that belong to "fetish-faith" if they are conceived as anything but means to the ends of moral living. A charitable interpretation would have Kant saying that there can be no love of God separate from the love

of fellow humans, but the text seems to make the stronger claim that religion is exclusively concerned with our duty toward one another, that even God is nothing but a means toward human morality.

Kant continues his attempt to bring the Christian religion within the limits of reason alone by drawing corollaries concerning Christ and the church. The true church can only be the ethical commonwealth created on earth by the moral self-improvement of human persons. The "Augustinian" overtones of Kant's account of radical evil are here replaced by a mostly "Pelagian" soteriology and ecclesiology. Christ, in turn, can be of significance only as an archetypal ideal of moral perfection. Any "Christology" within the limits of reason would be a construction of pure reason, independent of historical fact and historical knowledge. Here Lessing's principle (1957 [1777], pp. 51–6) that rational knowledge of God must depend on nothing historically contingent is employed, not to reject traditional Christian themes but to reinterpret (or, perhaps, "demythologize") them radically.

Unlike Kant, the Romantic Friedrich Schleiermacher and the anti-Romantic Hegel are not properly described as deists. But with Kant they are major figures in the post-Kantian effort to reformulate the deist project. Schleiermacher addresses an audience unsympathetic not only to the metaphysical quarrels of scholastic and deistic philosophical theologies, whose claims about providence and immortality he dismisses as "externals" (1958 [1799], p. 14), but also to the moral rigorism of a Kantian alternative. Both metaphysics and morality belong to the husk of religion; its kernel is to be found in feeling, in "the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things, in and through the Infinite, and of all temporal things in and through the Eternal" (p. 36).

Schleiermacher's explicit enthusiasm for Spinoza, whom he describes as "full of the Holy Spirit" (1958, p. 40), suggests a pantheistic move away from the deistic and theistic notions of God as a personal being distinct from the created world. Thus he writes:

> The sum total of religion is to feel that, in its highest unity, all that moves us in feeling is one; to feel that aught single and particular is only possible by means of this unity; to feel, that is to say, that our being and living is a being and living in and through God. But it is not necessary that the Deity should be presented as also one distinct object.

Such a representation would be "vain mythology" (p. 50).

Schleiermacher's "church" would be the communion of all who recognize the feeling or immediate contemplation of the unity of all in the Infinite and Eternal as the only true religion. But this does not mean the simple rejection of the churches committed to some specific system of metaphysical beliefs and moral or liturgical practices. Such a church is only "an association of persons who are but seeking religion ... the counterpart of the true church" (p. 157). But "I would have you discover religion in the religions. Though they are always earthly and impure, the same form of heavenly beauty that I have tried to depict is to be sought in them" (p. 211).

This advice is possible because Schleiermacher believes that the universal kernel must clothe itself in particular ideas and practices. The immediacy of religious feeling needs to be mediated in some concrete form, however contingent. The important thing

is to remember that such ideas and practices are neither necessary nor sufficient for true piety. With reference to any particular beliefs and practices, their absence is no barrier to true religion, while their presence is no guarantee of it.

Hegel is too much the speculative thinker to be satisfied with either Kant's reduction of religion to morality or Schleiermacher's reduction to feeling. Religion must be the knowledge of God, and while Hegel finds Kant's theology unconvincing, he finds Schleiermacher's, to which he is more sympathetic, simply confused. He rejects all Romantic claims to immediacy on the grounds that they either are empty of all conceptual content whatsoever and thus compatible with every absurd belief and every immoral practice, or have a content that needs to be articulated and defended. The appeal to immediacy is merely dogmatism in disguise. Schleiermacher is just kidding himself when he thinks his own talk about the Infinite and Eternal is not already a conceptual mediation that requires analysis and argument as much as more traditional talk about Trinity, Incarnation, atonement, and so forth.

Hegel thus assigns to himself the twin tasks of defending metaphysical theorizing in the aftermath of Kant and of developing a religiously significant metaphysics. He undertakes these tasks primarily in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), his *Science of Logic* (1812–16), and his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1817, 1827, and 1830). His central thesis is that the content of religion and philosophy are the same but that they differ in form, with only philosophy having the conceptual form adequate to true knowledge. The religious form is too tightly tied to sensory images and historical narratives. Even the scholastic and deistic philosophical theologies, whose speculative instinct is to move beyond popular forms of religious representation, fail to free themselves sufficiently, for the concepts they employ are only suitable for a finite subject matter and not adequate to the Infinite and Eternal. Only a thoroughgoing reinterpretation of the philosophical concepts of Idea and Spirit can (1) justify philosophical speculation itself, and (2) provide us with concepts suitable for doing philosophical theology.

Hegelian idealism is a philosophy of the Idea much closer to Aristotle and Plotinus than to George Berkeley and Kant. But it is perhaps best understood as a form of Spinozism. It is unlike that of Lessing (whose sympathy for Spinoza distinguishes him from typical deists) in that it becomes the basis for the radical reinterpretation (demythologizing) rather than the rejection of traditional theistic and Christian themes; and it is unlike the Spinozism of Schleiermacher in that it will not hide in claims to immediate feeling but will seek to articulate and defend itself in philosophical argument.

Finally, it is unlike Spinoza himself, but not because Hegel takes God to be a personal being distinct from the created world. Only the understanding, which Kant rightly found incapable of knowing God, takes God and the world, or finite spirit and infinite spirit, to be distinct beings; reason understands that they "are no longer two" (1984–7 [the 1827 lectures] vol. 1, p. 425). Hegel's only defense against the charge that this is pantheism is that, unlike Spinoza, his highest category is spirit rather than nature or substance. When Spinoza says *Deus sive Natura* (God or Nature), Hegel replies *Gott oder Geist* (God or Spirit).

Religion is the elevation of finite spirit to absolute or infinite spirit. In its religious form, this is (mis)understood as the encounter with Someone Other. In its philosophical form it is the discovery that the highest form of human self-awareness is the sole locus

in which the infinite totality, which is the only reality, comes to self-knowledge and is spirit rather than just nature, subject rather than merely substance.

Religion as this elevation of the human spirit occurs in all the religions, but most fully and adequately in Christianity as the consummate religion. However, Christianity can play this role only when it takes on philosophical form and systematically reinterprets its basic themes. For example, it is the revealed religion, not because in Jesus and the prophets, the Bible, and the Church God has come to the aid of a human reason limited by finitude and wounded by sin, but because in its philosophical form human reason makes the true nature of God fully manifest. Or again, Incarnation is the central Christian truth. Jesus is not, however, to be seen as the unique locus of the identity of the human and divine; rather, he is the embodiment of the universal truth that the human as such is divine.

Hume and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Modern philosophy of religion grew out of a deep dissatisfaction with historic Christianity. But the response of Hume and his followers was very different from that of Kant and his followers. Instead of seeking an alternative religion, inoffensive to modernity, they looked to see whether the problem might not lie at the very heart of religion and not in the disposable husks.

Suspicion, rather than skepticism, arises when instead of asking about the evidence for or against religious beliefs one asks what motives underlie religious beliefs and practices, and what functions they play in the lives of believers. In *The Natural History of Religion* Hume develops a notion of instrumental religion according to which piety is primarily a flattering of the gods grounded in selfish hopes and fears. The piety of self-interest immediately gives rise to self-deception, since the pious soul cannot acknowledge that it has reduced the sacred to nothing but a means to its own ends.

Self-interest and self-deception are basic themes in the hermeneutics of suspicion in Karl Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. With Marx the question shifts from motive to function, and thus from psychology to sociology. He asks what function religion plays in society and answers that it serves to legitimize structures of social domination. His theory of religion thus belongs to his theory of ideology. Every historical society involves economic and political exploitation, whether the victims are slaves, serfs, or wage laborers. Ideas that represent such an order as natural or rational are needed both to salve the consciences of the beneficiaries and to encourage cooperation by the victims, since violent repression by itself is never sufficient. Nothing does the job quite as well as religious ideas, for what higher justification could a social order receive than to be divinely ordained? For Marx, then, religion is primarily a matter both of social privilege seeking legitimation and of the oppressed seeking consolation.

For Nietzsche religion is rooted in the slave revolt in morals, but given his postulation of the will to power as universal, his slaves are less concerned with consolation than with revenge. Unable to give vent to their resentment physically, they join forces with the priests who help them to designate their dominators as evil. This gives them the satisfaction of moral superiority and, to the degree that it permeates the social order, it

makes the strong feel guilty. Divine perfection is defined in terms of the punishment of our enemies.

In this area Freud is as much the philosopher as the psychologist. He sees religion as wish-fulfilling illusion. At the ontological level it offers consolation in the face of nature's indifference to our desires and the harsh repression of those desires by the super-ego. At the moral level it offers cosmic support for the moral order when it is in our favor and cosmic leniency when it is not.

For Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud the claim tends to be that this is the whole story about religion. What suspicion reveals is all there is. But this assumption is not necessary, and this kind of suspicion is not the monopoly of secular thought. It is the key to the attack on Christendom that is the heart of Søren Kierkegaard's writings. Their critique of bourgeois Christianity is not directed toward its theology, which Kierkegaard largely shares, but toward its double ideological function. By equating the present social order with the kingdom of God it not only confuses something finite and unfinished with something absolute and ultimate; it also tells the individual that God asks nothing more than that I be a respectable member of this society. The biblical tension between Jesus and every established order is lost. For Kierkegaard, suspicion is motivated by faith seeking to purge itself of idols rather than unbelief trying to rid the world of religion.

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