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Hegel's Invisible Religion in a Modern State: A Spirit of Forgiveness

Abstract This study focuses on the interrelation of freedom, finitude, and reconciliation in Hegel's understanding of religion. These three moments are found at central stages of Hegel's treatment of the religious, from Hegel's early fragments to his mature work. Finitude taking shape in the religious phenomena of a tragic fate, sin, or more generally, failing, is central to Hegel's philosophical understanding of one-sidedness. As finite, man needs to reconcile with the other, and only as reconciled does he achieve freedom. Hegel credits Christianity with the discovery of the primary essences of spirituality: freedom and forgiveness. Freedom is intensified with the death of God: man realizes that there is no God-given, only man-made, legislation. This deepening of freedom does not overcome man's finitude but instead intensifies it along with a heightened sense for responsibility, and an increased potential for guilt. In this context, forgiveness is the highest spiritual capacity of modern man, whose fate is to bear the freedom of oneself and the other.

Keywords: Hegel, freedom, finitude, sin, fate, reconciliation, forgiveness, modern state, Christianity, religion, Luther

507

“I hear the genuine ring enjoys/
The magic power to make its wearer loved,
Beloved of God and men.
That must decide!”
G. E. Lessing, *Nathan The Wise* (1991: 234)

Introduction

On this occasion of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's “Ninety-Five Theses,” scholars are again reflecting upon the deep spiritual, cultural, political, and economic transformations provoked by Luther's revolution. It is beyond doubt that this religious revolution profoundly altered both the public sphere and the way (not only) Western man relates to himself, to others, to his world, and to God. In fact, one of Hegel's central theses of both his philosophies of history and of religion is that Luther can be credited with the “discovery” of modern interiority. It may be added that Luther was a decisive factor in the constitution of the public sphere as well: the monk's ingenious use of the printing press turned the revolution into the first media event translating theological disputes into public debate. The inventor of interiority is in the most important sense an inventor of the public sphere

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as well—and it is both of these “discoveries,” inner freedom and the public sphere, that Hegel sees as the doorway to (Western) modernity.

This success-story was not without its ambiguities, even tragic defeats. Luther damaged the Reformation massively by his involvement in the Peasant's War, and Nazism—to name the gravest failure of a not-so-distant past—formed in the cradle of a largely apolitical Protestantism too impassive in the face of dangers stemming from an aberrant ideology. Irrespective of concrete historical facts, it is generally accepted that Protestantism did shape (not only) the dominant “Western spirit” profoundly and lastingly.¹

508

Even though this spiritual transformation is not easy to substantiate, central figures of Western intellectual tradition have emphasized the elective affinity of Protestantism, individualization, and rationalization. While Max Weber (1992) was interested in economic transformations that themselves gradually altered the face of religion and eventually Western society as such, Émile Durkheim wrote a “psychiatrically” oriented but no less classical counterpart to Weber's *The Protestant Ethic*. In his *Suicide* (1952), the French sociologist substantiates the thesis that in actively motivating free inquiry, and in releasing men from the burden of mediating authorities between his inner self and God, Protestantism gave rise to a pathological form of freedom—to isolation from human bonds and social structures, a phenomenon which led to a heightened proclivity to commit suicide among Protestants. For Weber and Durkheim, the protestant values gradually gaining dominance in Western culture were more than a symbol of liberation; they carried a potential for social and individual pathologies as well.

Hegel is among the first thinkers to explicitly link Protestantism with a new form of freedom, calling this religiosity the flag of “freedom, of the true spirit” and crediting Luther with the discovery of an “infinite subjectivity” (Hegel 2011: 506).² This German monk did not leave the monastery in order to embrace worldliness but to transform the world itself into a monastery of a specific kind; henceforward, any deed and any occupation performed with the inner certainty of the presence of Holy Spirit is to be viewed as an act of devotion. Faith was not to be relegated to a specific time and place; instead, the *whole* life of the Christian is to be one of repentance, as expressed in the very first Thesis (Luther 1961: 490).

1 For a most recent publication dealing with the social, political, and cultural transformations triggered by Martin Luther see Ryrrie 2017.

2 Hegel comments on Luther's principle of subjectivity as follows: “This is the new and ultimate banner around which peoples gather, the flag of freedom, of the true spirit. This is the spirit of the modern era, and it designates the modern period. The ages prior to our age have faced but one labor, have had but one task, and that has been to incorporate this principle into actuality, thereby achieving for this principle the form of freedom, of universality” (2011: 506).

Already Luther's break with the monastery is an act of "secularization" in the sense of a transfer of people or property from the religious to the worldly sphere.³ This secularization is, however, religiously motivated; Luther does not denigrate the sphere of the holy but on the contrary aims to strengthen it by investing common daily occupations with spiritual meaning. Neither does Hegel, conceived of as the "father of secularization theories" (Dierken 2014: 36), eliminate the sphere of the religious, even though he is critical of any form of otherworldliness. In turning away from otherworldliness, Hegel—at least in his self-understanding—embraces religion even more firmly: he takes it to be the very foundation of modernity. This surprising thesis, paradoxically, stands in no contradiction to the commonly held identification of modernity and secularity. In Hegel's perspective, religion finds its fulfilment in being integrated into the worldly realm. The West is secular precisely because it once accepted Christianity as its religion. From this very integration of the religious into the worldly sphere, the modern state arises that is no longer attached to a single concrete confession or religion but guarantees freedom of conscience. In this sense, secularization is the fulfilment of religion—it becomes invisible because it is what modern man and modern state stand on.⁴

In what follows, I want to analyze Hegel's conception of religion from the view of this secular and secularizing fulfilment. Primarily, I will focus on Christianity, since it is this religion that takes the secularization inherent in monotheism⁵ to a new level. In Christianity, the "word becomes flesh," and with it the perspective on man and God radically changes: God relinquishes a considerable part of his will to man and his world, even allowing man to condemn and sentence his son to death. No longer is it God's but man's will that is central to the story of salvation.

This theological dimension of the Christian story is the very fundament of Hegel's understanding of modernity and modern conceptions of freedom.

3 The term "secularization" has not been used until the 16th century, primarily in the pejorative sense of a profanization of the once sacred. For a history of this concept, see Strätz 1984: 792–809.

4 In this sense, Hegel can be viewed as having anticipated Thomas Luckmann's (1967) concept of the "invisible religion."

5 For secularizing tendencies in monotheistic religions, see Gauchet 1997. Gauchet follows Weber's definition of disenchantment as an exclusion of magic from the worldly sphere. In this sense, monotheism is highly disenchanting as it refuses to worship diverse sources of the miraculous. Instead, the believer subjects his entire life to the only true, but unworldly, God. As to these monotheistic and secularizing tendencies, Hegel remarks in *The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate*: "The whole world Abraham regarded as simply his opposite; if he did not take it to be a nullity, he looked on it as sustained by the God who was alien to it. Nothing in nature was supposed to have any part in God; everything was simply under God's mastery" (Hegel 1996c: 187).

The “hard saying” that God is dead means primarily that God has ceded to man the power to decide—salvation is the gift of freedom and the duty to decide for oneself. In the following study, I want to pay attention especially to the interpersonal and social aspect of religion, and, in this context, I will specifically focus on an aspect less often emphasized but central to Hegel’s conception of a religious attitude in the modern world: religion as embodied in Christianity is a spirit calling us to discover our freedom. This tremendous power is vitally linked with the second discovery Hegel attributes to the Christian spirit: forgiveness. In fact, the spirit of Christianity is essentially forgiveness, and *therefore*, it is the spirit of freedom.

Hegel’s Early Interest in Religion: The Spirit of Community

I.

510

Already in the very first sentence preserved from Hegel’s oeuvre, the young student of theology shows a lively interest in religion characteristic of his entire early thought:⁶ “Religion is one of the most decisive aspects of our life” (Hegel 1986a: 9). In these earliest fragments, religion is not understood primarily as an inner spiritual dimension but as the uniting spirit of a community, even a factor constitutive of the social sphere: where there is community, there is religion.

In a way, this is peculiar. After all, these early fragments clearly show that already the young Hegel is conscious of the fact that modern religion as experienced in Protestantism is more of an inner spirituality than a public force. Especially in his later works, Hegel takes the separation of state and religion for granted, and it seems that—along with this separation—he in fact should embrace an interiorization of religion as well. After all, the public de-potentiation of religion is only the reverse side of its interiorization (Jaeschke 2009: 10). However, does Hegel in his later work refuse the public role of religion, a role he embraced as a student of theology?

I will argue that this is not the case. In fact, Hegel’s writing is characteristic of a continuity of the early and late work. In demanding religion to be a public force, the student does not call for its re-politicization but for its re-socialization that is key even to Hegel’s later work. While a re-politicization is anathema to Hegel, a re-socialization is vital even in his later work—not despite the fact that modern society has discovered man’s innermost self, his individuality and the tremendous force of his conscience but *because* of these processes of individualization. In his early works, Hegel clearly seeks a force

6 It would be an error, however, to infer from the fact that only early texts dealing with religion have been preserved that the young Hegel was interested exclusively in religion or has written only about religion.

re-constituting or re-infirming the communal, once it has been questioned or side-lined by individualization and rationalization.

Considering the infatuation with Greek religion common among young German intellectuals in late 18th century, it is no wonder that for Hegel, the religion of ancient Greeks serves as a model. In fact, it is in view of the ancient Greeks that Hegel finds religion to be indissociably linked to community: man as related to and dependent on his fellow, is part of the sphere of the social that overlaps with the religious (Hegel 1986a: 41). Of course, in Hegel's time, religion was often conceived of as a factor endangering individual freedom and autonomy. However, Greeks are considered the inventors of personal freedom precisely *because* of their emphasis on the social realm; this social realm, however, is only the reverse side of the religious. Thus in this context, if the appreciation of the social realm is key to personal freedom and if the social realm overlaps with the religious, it is at the same time the religious that is central for this conception of freedom, at least for the Greeks as interpreted by Hegel.

511

How can this be, or even more importantly: how did Hegel conceive of this interrelation of the social, the religious, and freedom? For Hegel, man is defined by his capacity for freedom, but man is man only among other men; he is free only in the plural. Plurality, communality, and freedom are intimately related; an isolated and solitary man is not free, but is he religious? Not in the eyes of Greeks, and neither in Hegel's. Greek religious feelings find expression primarily in feasts—and for feasts (just as for freedom), there need to be at least two or three. Hegel formulates the link between the concept of religion, community or nation, and freedom straightforwardly: “Folk-religion... goes hand in hand with freedom” (Hegel 1986a: 41).

Already in Hegel's early fragment, *Volksreligion und Christentum*, the student emphasizes the fact that religion is not primarily related to the theoretical faculty but is decisive for human affectivity and volition. Just as his predecessors Kant and Fichte, Hegel derives religion from a “need of the practical reason” (Hegel 1986a: 17). However, in contrast to Kant, Hegel's interest lies not with religion's role to motivate morality. Rather, the inspiration of Greek religion leads him to conceive of religion as a force constituting the realm of the social in the first place.

This aspect carries systematic consequences for his entire future work: religion is not an outer perspective on the given world and it certainly is not an “as-if-fiction.” Instead, it is constitutive of social reality and based on this constitution it *secondarily* takes on an ethical or moral dimension; it expresses the substantial, even ontological dependence of man on nature, fellow man, or gods, and conceives of this dependence not as a burden to be shaken off

but reinterprets it positively. In this vein, the dependency expressed in religion is fundamentally conceived of as an openness—it is the ability to view oneself as part rather than a whole and to appreciate this fact not as a desideratum.⁷ Only in conjunction with others, with nature, and with God does man reach wholeness.

In this sense, it is characteristic that the young Hegel holds a negative conception of understanding (*Verstand*): taken in isolation, this faculty of differentiation is an instrument of self-love and closure. On the contrary, reason (*Vernunft*) is the ability of synthesis; its social “representation” would be communality, an appreciation of one’s dependence on familial and social bonds, on bonds with nature, one’s body, and even on emotions. It is especially in one’s relation to one’s kin and near ones, in relation to the duties one has to others, that man transcends his limited self-consciousness and partiality.

512

In this context, Hegel voices his harsh judgement on present-day Christianity, even claiming that it has perverted the nature of religion; instead of educating the human being to remain true to his world, the Christian is a “citizen of the heavens” (1986a: 43). Thus, Christianity disturbs man’s relation to the worldly and social realm, and it leads to intolerance, even misanthropy (1996c: 201). In this sense, present-day Christianity is for Hegel a prime example of an otherworldly religion that elevates a narrow spectrum of phenomena to an absolute and by this degrades other manifestations of life as well as other gods to a status of inferiority or even falsehood.

Along with considering Kant or Fichte’s religion “within the bounds of mere reason,” in his early writings Hegel further turns to Lessing, whom he credits with finding a way to divest monotheism of his exclusivist and potentially fanatic spirit of an either/or (Hegel 1996b: 72). The emphasis on the rational aspect of religion, on the so called “natural religion,” is to be understood as an attempt to blur the conflicting and often bloody borders of different religions or confessions and to find a new common ground of which the different religions were conceived of as mere modifications. Dilthey called the attempt to formulate a “religion within the bounds of reason” aptly “an opportunity to take a breath in a world tormented by the pressure of confessional wars” (Dilthey 1911: 95). Hegel consents to this move: reason transcends divisions—not because of a passive indifference, but due to its insight

7 This conception finds a direct echo in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Commenting on the nature of religion, Hegel notes: “But this substance is now manifest; it is the depth of Spirit that is certain of itself, which does not allow the principle of each individual moment to become isolated and to make itself a totality within itself; on the contrary, gathering and holding together all these moments within itself, it advances within this total wealth of its actual Spirit, and all its particular moments take and receive in common into themselves the like determinateness of the whole” (1977: 414).

into the nature of differences that constitute each other. In this sense, reason is fundamentally linked to an “opening of borders,” and thus, it is liberation.

However, for Hegel this rationality inherent in religion is not linked to a Kantian noumenal sphere or to logical reasoning; instead reason is the bond uniting men: it is the ability to find oneself in the other, to transcend one's limited perspective and thus live up to the dictum “the True is the Whole” (1977: 11). If this dictum be considered from the perspective of Hegel's religious thought and his emphasis on sociality, Hegel is more a follower of Lessing than of Kant: the wearer of the “genuine ring” is not characterized by a specific knowledge or by rational and regulative ideas but by his ability to make oneself “beloved of God and men” (Lessing 1991: 234).

II.

Hegel looks closer at this fundamentally religious and spiritual liberation (that is of an interpersonal and social nature) in the early fragmentary treatise, *The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate*. In a philosophically more systematic manner, he formulates a unity of life that is not stifling as in the case of unifications envisioned by monotheistic religions. The monotheistic faith is built on exclusion, on a rupture: “The first act which made Abraham the progenitor of a nation is a dissection which snaps the bonds of communal life and love” (Hegel 1996c: 185).

513

In Hegel's conception of Judaism, God is the master, man the slave, and this fundamental relation finds its continuation in the relation of the believer to his or her world: the chosen one is the master, the pagan a slave to be subdued, and as God's partner man has the duty to subject under his power outer nature as well as his body (Hegel 1996c: 183). This peculiar dualism specific for Judaism carries significant consequences for the political structure. While monotheism favors a monarchical constitution, polytheistic religions allow for a decentralized political structure, even an opening towards other nations. The Greeks “by their gentle arts and manners won over the less civilized aborigines and intermingled with them to form a happy and gregarious people” (Hegel 1996c: 185). On the basis of his study of the spirit of different religions and communities, Hegel formulates a philosophical concept of life that gives an answer not only, even not primarily, to the nature of different religions but that answers the ontological question, “What is being?” According to the young Hegel, it is “life,” an immanent, restless dynamic overcoming distinctions. These distinctions, however, are not overcome—as is the case in the “spirit of monotheism”—by subjection. Instead, Hegel likens life to the archetypical element of water, its ability to overcome any distinctions being based on its malleability.

In likening life to water, Hegel follows the oldest conception of *arché* in Western philosophical thought. However, for Hegel water is only a metaphor, and rather than evoking Pre-Socratic thought, Hegel's idea stems from early modern sources. Different intellectuals such as Jacobi, Hölderlin, Nietzsche, and even Fichte take life to be an immanent principle of wholeness polemically directed against a reifying scientific worldview and a profanation of the world in the modern era. This is the decidedly modern background of Hegel's interpretation of Greek religion. In his reading, the ultimate goal of Greek religion is to find oneself united with life, and the only means to reach this wholeness is by worshipping all aspects of life, a failure to stand up to the manifold duties in life ending most often in a tragic fate.

514

In view of this interpretation, Judaism, being a religion that places man's focal point into the transcendent and calling man to tear himself away from the one but multifaceted immanent dynamic of life, fails to live up to this spiritual challenge. On the contrary, Christianity's central term, love, is a life-unifying dynamic. As to this, Hegel contrasts it with the Jewish religion: "Abraham wanted not to love, wanted to be free by not loving" (Hegel 1996c: 185).⁸ Of course, love is neither a mere emotion nor a perspective. For Hegel, as the conjunction of differences love is the law of life, and thus life and love are twins.

However, Hegel's contrast of Christianity and Judaism is not convincing unless his robust pre-suppositions are taken into consideration. In fact, Abraham's life seems to have been dominated by his very love for God, going so far as to sacrifice his only son. Hegel retorts that Abraham's faith is a form of devotion but not of love; more specifically, it is a devotion to an other-worldly ideal, a sentiment that makes him a foreigner to the real world (Hegel 1996c: 187). Love, on the other hand, Hegel associates strictly with worldly, secular phenomena.

Why is love to be related exclusively to worldly phenomena? For Hegel, the world is a realm where man does not belong to himself, and love is the confirmation of the fact that "nothing is unconditioned; nothing carries the root of its own being in itself" (Hegel 1996a: 304). The loving person feels clearly that he or she does not belong to himself or herself completely and that he is complete only as related to the beloved one. In this sense, the phenomenon

8 This rejection of Judaism is in many ways inappropriate and has rightly been criticized (see e.g., Jaeschke 2010). At the same time, Hegel does capture an important trait of monotheism that is closely studied even among contemporary scholars of religion. According to Jan Assmann, Judaism in fact invented what is today called religious fundamentalism and with it religious violence because it introduced the question of truth into religious worship: either man worships the right and truthful God, or he is on the side of falsehood and thus guilty of idolatry. As the Old Testament amply illustrates, the rule "No God but One" has been enforced by a form of violence unknown among polytheistic cults and religions (Assmann 2016: 31).

of love, prominent in Hegel's early work, expresses something substantial about the human being: by his very nature, man is dependent on others, of course not only or even primarily in his affections but above all in his spirituality and freedom.

Still, how does this relate to Abraham's faith in God and his alleged inability to love? Key to the understanding of Hegel's argument is the fact that Hegel refers to Abraham's God as to an "ideal." Hegel's unusual terminology betrays his interpretation of Judaism from the perspective of a "Kantian" structure of thought. It is typical of his early as well as his later work that Hegel conceives of the Kantian (but above all post-Kantian, i.e., romantic) subjectivity as a solitary and thus "un-worldly" inner realm relating *qua*, its inner, to an unconditional. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the reader comes about a structurally analogous form of consciousness: it is the conscience that is free from any content and can therefore "possess the majesty of absolute autarky" (1977: 393).

However, the problem thematized repeatedly in Hegel's work is that one's own peculiar subjectivity can easily be mistaken for an (alleged) unconditional: instead of subjecting oneself to an impersonal norm, to a duty or sacral law, man elevates his own peculiar subjectivity to godly heights. In this sense, Hegel thematizes a phenomenon later taken up by Durkheim: freedom in the form of liberation from the outer can lead to a pathological, even fanatical, isolation. Therefore, Hegel emphasizes that it is crucial that any faith be lived *in relation* to another human being; anything taken to be absolute needs to be communicated and laid open to others' judgement. In other words, the fate of modern religion is a "linguistification of the sacred" (Habermas 1985: 77–111), and in this process, the role of philosophy is indispensable. For Hegel, it was philosophy that managed "to liberate godly reality from its other-worldly imprisonment" (Siep 2015: 179) and made it part of the (worldly) realm of argumentation.

515

This insight is present even in Hegel's theological reflection of the founder of Christianity. In Jesus, God has revealed himself completely, and in this, he concluded the need for further revelations; now, we know the nature of God (Hegel 2011: 145). Just as God has laid himself open to scrutiny and judgement, so too it is the duty of anyone to reveal oneself. However, what has God revealed? Jesus is the incarnation of love and humility, and *as* love made flesh, He is God. Substantially, Jesus is relation; relation is the new absolute, and in Hegel's early fragment, this absolute takes on the form of love and life.

As already mentioned, for Hegel, religion is an interpretation of one's dependence; in religion, man learns to understand his finitude. In this context, the question of punishment becomes central. While for the Jews punishment reinforces the fact that man is deficient in view of God's law, Jesus

is the friend of sinners, and he does not call for punishment when nailed to the cross; instead, he invokes mercy and forgiveness. This is central to understanding the Christian message as interpreted by Hegel: faults, sins, and failures are not condemned but instead are stepping stones, even “rocks,” on which spirituality is built. In other words, they are to be accepted as an integral part of the very substance of reality and even of truth.

This does not mean that sins and misdeeds are welcomed, but the amazing message of Christianity (and curiously of Hegel's philosophy as well) is that any wound inflicted upon life can heal (Hegel 1996c: 230, Hegel 1977: 407), and that any fault can be corrected. Again, forgiveness is shown to be akin to freedom; that man can correct any fault means that he is never simply a victim of his own failings but thanks to his freedom can follow up on these in a positive manner. This insight discovered in a theological context will be pivotal for Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Here, truths are essentially faults corrected.

516

Hegel's Phenomenology of a Religious Spirit?

I.

It is a paradox that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* has often been read as a grand narrative of reconciliation even though it is a series of conflicts not solved but abandoned. The conflict of master and slave does not lead to resolution, neither Antigone and Creon's fight nor the struggle of the noble and base consciousness. In this sense, the dispute of the judging consciousness and the acting conscience is exceptional, and it is in these closing passages of the chapter on spirit that Hegel examines his central concept of reconciliation, taking up the motives of judgement, evil, and conscience encountered in his early fragments.

Hegel stages a conflict between a Kantian “judging consciousness” and a figure called “the doer” (1977: 404). While it is not known what this “delinquent of conscience” is found guilty of, the judging consciousness calls it “evil”: it failed to act according to universal norms and now appeals to an inner conscience as to the criterion of rightness. However, for a Kantian, whoever places himself above the universal, acting according to his own law and conscience, is in fact wrongdoing others (1977: 402). The doer objects to this condemnation: at least he has acted. Meanwhile, the judge is a hypocrite: he refrains from action in “dread of besmirching the splendour of inner being by action and existence” (1977: 400). Instead of acting, he moralizes.

Suddenly something pivotal happens. The good conscience exclaims: “I am so” (1977: 405) and with this repents for his act. In repenting, man aims at a transformation; the profession of one's guilt is more a practical than a theoretical act. The repentant seeks to lay open new possibilities both for himself

and for others. This can be illustrated by the simple and everyday act of apologizing; we do not apologize to inform the other of a fact that happened but to motivate him to come forth, to cancel some of our guilt, maybe to even acknowledge that he too has found himself many times guilty. In short, an apology is a call for reciprocity: "this utterance is not a one-sided affair, which would establish his disparity with the other" (1977: 405). Neither does the good conscience want its repentance to be understood as a piece of information. Instead, in the failings of the good conscience, the judge shall recognize that his position is limited, too. After all, just as the concept of conscience is not without its problems so is the abstention from acting.

In other words, both protagonists are to acknowledge that the universal is real only in the deed, but this does not prove the judge altogether wrong; the individual's deed is deemed legitimate only in being universally acknowledged. One needs to act in view of the universal, and one needs to correct the particular act that necessarily fails to be universal by a form of retrospective rationality. There may be situations in which it is necessary to break universal norms. *Post factum*, however, the agent needs to convince the others that his breach was well motivated. If he fails and if his act is not acknowledged, by Hegel's standards, an act not acknowledged cannot be considered good.

517

However, the judge is not ready to make any concessions and "repels this community of nature" (1977: 405); it is the "hard heart that is for itself, and which rejects any continuity with the other." The fluidity of communication, the life of the spirit is disrupted (1977: 406), and the possibilities the situation offers seem to have been exhausted. Yet at this moment something even more unforeseen than the confession of the evil-doer happens; after the heart of the judge has "hardened" and after even the good conscience has retreated into itself, suddenly both are prepared to reconcile.

What has initiated this strange break? Hegel does not even attempt to demonstrate how this reconciliation "logically" came about. There is no logical stringency to reconciliation; if a conflict can be reconciled, something contingent that cannot be enforced by either of the parties, needs to happen. The acting conscience cannot force the judge into forgiving; neither can the judge force the good conscience to understand his viewpoint, and even one's own willingness to forgive is not sufficient for forgiveness. We ourselves may *want* to forgive and still be unable to do so. Forgiveness is an act implying willingness by the parties on both sides, while at the same time transcending them.

Significantly, the willingness and eventual ability to forgive is the closing act of the chapter devoted to the spirit.⁹ In this sense, forgiveness can be called

9 Stekeler calls this phenomenon aptly the "logical secularization of the concept of mercy" (2014:721).

the highest spiritual act. Hegel uses in this context the expression *Versöhnung*, meaning not only “reconciliation” (1977: 408) but hinting as well at a more spiritually, even religiously, charged “atonement.”¹⁰ In *Versöhnung*, we apprehend *Sühne*, the German expression for “penance.” That Hegel in fact wants this act to be understood religiously is emphasized in solemnly announcing that at last God has arrived on scene, and Hegel even paraphrases a biblical sentence: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20).¹¹ God dwells in a “reconciling Yea” (1977: 409) in which both expand into “duality” (Hegel 1977: 409).

II.

518

Does this religious dynamic transcend the sphere of the interpersonal? In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel focuses on the social aspect of religion in his explicit treatise of Christianity. Here, the reader hits upon the “hard saying” that “*God himself is dead*” (1977: 476). For Hegel, this thesis is, however, not primarily of utmost theological significance but has primarily social repercussions. The moment self-consciousness realizes that “God is dead,” it reaches the insight that any normativity is “man-made.” It is man, not God who is endowed with the “infinite power of decision” (1986b: 404). No longer is normativity conceived of as stemming from eternal, godly sources; it is essentially social. With this insight, self-consciousness refuses Antigone’s claim that there is a law “unwritten and infallible,” and therefore “everlasting” (1977: 261). This insight into the timely nucleus of everything that is, is the birth of modernity.

The closing passages of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* illustrate this fact that in modernity, human invention now takes the role of divine normativity. Absolute knowledge is insight into the fact that as a fundamental part of the social, self-consciousness is both on the side of the subject *and* the substance.

10 Etymologically, “at-one-ment” is related to the process of becoming one (Skeat 2005: 37). Just as on other stages of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, this is what self-consciousness is aiming for. However, on its spiritual journey, it learns that, paradoxically, self-consciousness can be one only in the other (1977: 406); identity is mediated by the difference. A unity exclusively with oneself, bare of differences is, to the contrary, a “non-spiritual unity of [mere] being” (1977: 407).

That this spiritual journey is religiously connoted is something noticed by Paul Cobben (2012) as well: “From the retrospective view of the (concluding) last chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it becomes clear that religion pervaded the entire development. for this reason, Conscience reflects on a society that has passed through the development of revealed religion” (189).

11 This biblical citation is found in *The Spirit of Christianity*, as well (1996c: 387). In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel alters the citation to fit the subject matter: “it is God manifested in the midst of those who know themselves in the form of pure knowledge” (1977: 409).

Subjective categories are substantial as far as they are social. As *social*, they are not at will of the *individual* subject, but since they stem from a social *subjectivity*, they are open to modifications, even by the individual *subject*. Living reflexivity flows and solidifies into objective structures of institutions.

This insight into the overlapping of spontaneity and passivity, into the subjectivity of the objective, is what Hegel calls absolute spirit. Key to this insight is an appropriate understanding of the central term of Hegel's philosophy—reconciliation. In reaching reconciliation, the subject realizes that his or her spontaneity and the acceptance of this commonly shared background are two sides of the same coin. Substantiality is no longer linked to an otherworldly God, to eternity, but is part of the timely communicative horizon of society.

In this context, we can return to Hegel's thesis that Christianity has put an end to revelations once God has revealed himself in the figure of Jesus. Henceforward, there is no secret to venture. The meaning of this "end" of revelation is, once again, decidedly social; in modernity, the dichotomy of a revealing other-worldly God and a passive receiver of revelation is no longer convincing. Instead, the world *as* communicated to other men in scientific, aesthetic, or religious vocabulary turns into an ongoing process of revelation.

519

The *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*: Spirit's Will to World

I.

Hegel seems to hold two opposing views on the relation of modern society and religion. On the one hand, he takes religion to be the very foundation of the state. On the other hand, he decidedly emphasizes that the modern state is defined by being secular; and in a secular state, religion loses its monopoly on deciding what is right and wrong, and it is no longer key to offering life-orientation. In the modern state, the political is set up with the intention to secure man's freedom against religious demands no longer deemed legitimate.

The subsumption of the religious under political power is in accordance with Hegel's emphasis that in modern times, subjective freedom is pivotal. In the Foreword to his *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, he adds that it was the Christian worldview that captured this new concept of freedom for the very first time.¹² However, this concept is not exhausted in the subjective inner freedom but needs to translate into a new social reality as well. Echoing St. Paul's *Letter to the Galatians* (3:28)—"There is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus"—in §

12 In the Preface to his *Outlines*, Hegel stresses the absence of this inner, subjective freedom in Plato's work and relates the discovery of freedom to an "impending revolution," i.e., the birth of Christianity. The modern world is its heir (2008:13).

209, Hegel states: “A human being counts as a human being in virtue of his humanity, not because he is a Jew, Catholic, Protestant, German, Italian, etc.” (2008: 198).¹³

It is consequential that for Hegel, the foundation of this “oneness” invoked by St. Paul lies not in the person of Jesus Christ but in the *institutions* making up the *modern* state. Only in the modern state is this Christian freedom taken to be a general property safeguarded by legal structures. It is well known that Hegel interprets history as the “progress of the consciousness of freedom” (2011: 88), a progress achieved by world-transforming individuals and their fights for freedom. In this sense, the modern state is itself a revolutionary, world-transforming structure in making the fight for freedom of individuals superfluous.¹⁴ One shall not need to be exceptional to be free: freedom is a right common to man as man, an institution safe-guarded by the state. In this regard, Hegel’s later work differs from his earlier writings; in the early fragments, the theology-student criticized the tendency of early Christianity to surrender to deadening positive structures. In his later works, Hegel notes that Jesus’ work has been fulfilled not by Jesus himself, but by his followers. In fact, it is only in the apostles that we find the whole and developed truth because even “the kingdom of God, needs organization” (1986b: 397).

520

Luther challenged this institution for its decay, and according to Hegel, rightly so. However, Luther’s Reformation needed and in fact found a new objective structure—the modern state. In this sense, it is crucial to account for both the Christian teaching *and* the specific historical development of the Western state, society, and culture. Religion in the form of the “Protestant principle” is the groundwork of the modern state—but in the form of a *principle*, not in the form of a concrete institutionalized church.

This principle finds its embodiment in the whole structure of the modern state and its institution—and it is this manifold structure that is the telos of history, not a concrete church decreeing its truths. The modern state is the true home of the realm of the spirit because it is universal and thus encompassing but supervening any concrete institution. As embodying a wholeness rather than a particular standpoint, it safeguards the right to have concrete rights. Therefore, for Hegel, it is the modern state, rather than the church, that is universal, and therefore the state is the rightful inheritor of the spirit of Christianity.

13 “They count not as Greeks, Romans, Brahmins, or Jews, as high or low class; instead they have infinite worth as human beings and, in and for themselves, they are destined for freedom” (Cf. Hegel 2011: 457).

14 “The heroes who founded states, introduced marriage and agriculture, did not do this as their recognized right, and their conduct still has the appearance of being their particular will” (Cf. Addition to Hegel 2008: § 93).

II.

This strengthening of the state in view of the religious sphere is clearly motivated by the fear of religious conflicts endangering the stability of the state and the freedom of its citizens. However, Hegel's interest in fanaticism reflects more than this fear. In fact, fanaticism is of systematic interest because it is the utmost sign of a loss of spirituality and thus of a loss of context and the victory of partiality. Fundamentalism is an especially rampant danger in modern societies since its members need to accept that there is no one standpoint that is the home of the absolute. In this sense, fundamentalism is an anti-thought linked to the inability to accept modern reality; it is a negation of the present, the given, and in this sense, of the finite since any concrete institution is finite and lacks the ability to be universal. A hallmark of fanaticism is undue emphasis on a particular standpoint elevated above competing perspectives and the attempt to subdue these. Against these fantasies, Hegel places the often-misunderstood thesis formulated as a speculative sentence:

521

What is rational, is actual/and what is actual, is rational (2008: 14).

If interpreted in a conservative, even reactionary, vein, as many of Hegel's critics have done, the sentence says that under the assumption that the actual is rational, we are to be satisfied with the present state of society, and thus no changes are warranted. However, upon focusing on the first part, the sentence lends itself, quite to the contrary, to a revolutionary interpretation: if the rational is actual, we are licensed to aim at an actualization of whatever we consider rational. This revolutionary interpretation is suggested by a version of the sentence found in Hegel's work: what is rational, *will* be actual (Henrich 1983:51).

The "trick" of this *Doppelsatz* is that both viewpoints need to be taken: "what is actual, is rational" means that we need to take what is empirically given here and now as our departure; as spiritual, we are subjected to the demand to overcome and at times bracket our subjectivity, and we are to seek the rational in what is present, irrespective of our self-centered contentions of how the world *shall* be. This standpoint is a normative demand of what Hegel calls formation (*Bildung*): man needs to remain perceptive to his own blind angles and respect that the present in a way exceeds any one individual viewpoint since it arises from an objective spirit, i.e., from the spirit of the collective. In this sense, man shall be "obedient" to the present.

The first part of this speculative sentence, however, hints towards man's spirituality: man is spiritual precisely in taking his own standpoint on reality, in not accepting everything as simply given. In looking at the present as something to be accepted, man thus at the very same time needs to take

a second glance and ask, "What of the present is indeed rational?" With this second glance, freedom and obedience are integrated.

In view of this first part's emphasis on one's freedom, the call to accept the present in the second part is neither reactionary nor a call for blind obedience; rather, it is a form of *caveat*: man needs to take the standards of his measurements of what is good and bad from the present. The day is measured by the possibilities inherent in the present day, not from the distant future or past, since both of these are "otherworldly."

What does it mean that they are otherworldly? An undue emphasis on the future fails to respect the present, even denigrates it to a transfer point without value on its own. The nihilism of this future-orientedness has proven fatal for totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. Neither is it an idealized past that shall be the measure of the present day. Once again, man sets up an ideal excluded from a rationality that is real only as lived in communication and argumentation. To be rational means to be open to scrutiny, even refutation, but both nostalgia and visions of a better future are irrefutable and therefore irrational.

522

Hegel's double imperative expressed in his speculative sentence can be summed up thus: Take the present to be rational! Look for what is rational in the present! In this reading, the double-sentence is formulated as a precaution against religiously or politically motivated expectations of a new redemptive social order.

In view of this, it is clearer why Hegel decidedly refuses to take the church to be an arbiter of spirituality (2008: § 270, 249). In a secular state, any one party loses its monopoly on truth and authority. In this sense, secularization is not synonymous with a weakening of religion exclusively. The modern state too has to leave space for individual self-determination on the three basic levels of the modern state—the family, public society, and participation in state institutions. The state is thus a unity in difference, an identity of identity and non-identity: "The state is actual, and its actuality consists in this, that the interest of the whole is realized in and through particular ends. Actuality is always the unity of universal and particular, the universal articulated in the particulars which appear to be self-subsistent, although they really are upheld and contained only in the whole" (2008: § 270, 253).

From Hegel's perspective, freedom and Christianity are twins—they tend toward reconciliation of the individual with that which grounds or transcends an individual. Both strive toward truth. Truth as felt and lived is love; truth as expressed and institutionally lived is rationality. True to his speculative double sentence, Hegel fights on two fronts: against an activist political theology and against a sentimental religion of the solitary inner. These two fight

zones are systematically treated in Hegel's philosophy and in his dictum that "what is rational, is actual." This famous *Doppelsatz* is applicable to religion as well: one's own individual religious feeling—this tremendous Christian discovery of the inner realm—needs to be shared to create lived love and truth in the present. The spirituality of self-consciousness is the will to the world, the sphere of the secular.

Conclusion

Throughout his work, Hegel emphasizes Jesus' demand not to judge. Jesus never condemns anyone—and by this he transcends the distance between himself and others, between saint and sinner, even Jew and pagan, but above all between God and man. This motive is taken up in the central passages of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* where Hegel treats the conflict of a judge and a wrong-doer and eventually introduces his concept of reconciliation. It is significant that a secular setting changes into a religious one once both protagonists are prepared to reconcile.

523

Hegel's spirit is religious, by way of being reconciliatory. However, it would be a mistake to assume that Hegel aims at a dissolution of differences. On the contrary, he repeatedly emphasizes that the spirit is an acceptance of difference since these are at the same time means to apprehend one's own limitations: the judge and the conscience reconcile once they realize the one-sidedness of their attitudes. However, it is crucial that this difference be encountered as incarnated in a concrete figure. Once the two figures reconcile, their differences do not vanish: "they are these sheer opposites for one another." They are *identical* in their *duality*; thus, they are reconciled (Hegel 1977: 409).

For Hegel, freedom is essentially linked to one's ability to forgive, and forgiveness is an act that Hegel treats almost exclusively in a religious setting. In this sense, religion is the foundation of modern society defined by its wide scope of freedom accorded to individuals. The free act moves the previously unmoved, by this the unforeseen comes into the world, and along with it emerges guilt: "Innocence, therefore, is merely non-action, like a mere being of a stone, not even that of a child" (1977: 282). Freedom is movement, and thus is at the same time guilt and pain.

True to his education in theology, Hegel takes Christianity to be key to the discovery of both primary essences of spirituality: freedom and forgiveness. Freedom is the greatest of our gifts—we have obtained the power to determine ourselves independently of God and independently of any of our individual failings. However, forgiveness is the highest spiritual capacity in the context of a being whose fate is to bear freedom—both of oneself *and* of the other.

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Hegelova nevidljiva religija u modernoj državi: duh praštanja

Apstrakt

Ova studija se fokusira na međusobne odnose slobode, konačnosti i pomirenja u Hegelovom shvatanju religije. Ova tri momenta se pronalaze u centralnim stadijumima Hegelovog bavljenja religioznim, od Hegelovih ranih fragmenata do njegovog zrelog rada. Konačnost koja se oblikuje u religioznim fenomenima traži sudbine, greha, ili opštije, neuspeha je u centru Hegelovog filozofskog razumevanja jednostranosti. Kao konačan, čovek mora da se pomiri sa drugim, i samo kao pomiren dostiže slobodu. Hegel pripisuje Hrišćanstvu zasluge za otkriće primarnih suština duhovnosti: slobode i praštanja. Sloboda se intenzivira sa smrću Boga: čovek shvata da ne postoji Bogom-dano, već samo ljudsko zakonodavstvo. Ovo produbljivanje slobode ne prevazilazi ljudsku konačnost, već je intenzivira, zajedno sa pojačanim osećajem odgovornosti i uvećanim potencijalom za krivicu. U ovom kontekstu, praštanje je najviša duhovna sposobnost modernog čoveka, čija je sudbina da podnese svoju i tuđu slobodu.

Ključne reči: Hegel, sloboda, konačnost, greh, sudbina, pomirenje, praštanje, moderna država, hrišćanstvo, religija, Luter