

Hegel On Secularity And Consummated Religion

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I. Introduction

The relation of religion to secular order has once more assumed centre stage in the renewed conflict between secular democracies and a traditional religiosity turned fiercely political. The extreme development of the former had seen politics represented as the only true redemption and religion condemned as the malaise of self-alienated humanity, to be purged altogether or rendered subordinate to political-economic interests. The struggle between various forms of the humanist ideal state produced two world wars and half a millennium of deadly global tensions, issuing in what finally has been seen as the triumph of technocratic liberalism.¹ But as it has turned out, the end of history must be postponed as a religiosity thought to be slumbering has abruptly awakened to terrorize the global order from within, seeking the restoration of a theocratic fusion of religion and state. The question of the relation of otherworldly to worldly interests has accordingly taken on new and unexpected urgency in the confrontation between an atavistic religious extremism and the western secularism it judges decadent and satanic. A generation in the habit of thinking the relation of religion to public life had been a matter already settled finds itself obliged to consider it anew.

In his essay "Secularity and Religion", James Doull points to the difficulty which typically besets any simplistic attempt to define this relation:

There occurs at once the difficult question as to what science it belongs to speak of these matters. For the same phenomena are generally seen very differently from one side and the other. What to religion appears a lapse from the highest human concerns ... is seen by the secular as human liberation and a more serious concern for humanity.

¹. There are endless widely quoted contemporary variations on this theme, for example. Bobbitt (*Shield of Achilles*), Huntington (*Clash of Civilizations*), Fukuyama (*End of History*) etc., most of which regard the present liberal-democratic order as a finality. See also D. Peddle, "The Construction of the Secular in Rawls and Hegel etc." and F. E. Doull "Peace with Islam", *Animus* (www.swgc.mun.ca/animus/) v.9, 2004.

This cogent commonsense observation instantly renders a good deal of superficial debate irrelevant, for it is no less obvious in life than in logic that should one member in a relationship attempt to interpret or enact it exclusively on its own terms, this amounts to negating the relation itself. Moreover, should one or the other side claim its own standpoint to be wholly autonomous and comprehensive it will find its own standpoint corrupted, since the difference implied in the relation has thereby only been assimilated as an internal conflict:

The more religion denies that it and worldly wisdom are one, the more it becomes in fact more worldly, more assimilated to secular life. Contrariwise, the more secularism shuns religion and denies its common root with it, the more radically 'religious' a secularism it becomes.²

For an exclusive religiosity finds its full expression only in an asceticism that is wholly hostile to worldly things; the self-denying will is thus inherently nihilistic, as Nietzsche amply describes, a living will-not to live. Conversely, a radical humanism that eschews any appeal to a divine provenance can express itself only in an absolute subjective will that can abide nothing that would limit it, an anarchic freedom which, when it acts, can only destroy.³ Which is to say, a pure religiosity or a pure secularism are not simply difficult, but impossible to achieve since the one sustains itself only through the negation of the other, this other becoming thereby its own limit and nemesis. But nor is it unproblematic, as Doull argues, to appeal to a some supposedly objective position partial to neither side, for as Plato pointed out long ago, from the detached point of view of a 'third man', the division of terms and their relation will be taken as something fixed and given, so that either the terms must appear quite indifferent to their relation, or else they must be defined only relative to each other, in which case what distinguishes them is rendered moot.

Historical paradigms of all such extremes abound: the decadence of secular Rome, the worldliness of the medieval church, the tyrannical moralism of contemporary fundamentalism, the genocidal fanaticism of ideological politics, the ambiguity of a political-scientific absolute separation of church and state. They amply demonstrate how experiments in pure theocracy or secularism attain their goal only through force and suppression, while experiments in institutionalized separation of religion and politics often fail to do justice to the essentiality of their relation. A "better consideration", thinks Doull, would more adequately recognize the strong and perennial belief that religion and practical life, even given their distinction, are in actuality one:

[its] standpoint would be that religion and secular society are primarily one and the same and that their difference and antagonism fall within that unity. Historically such a view of the matter has no doubt been far more prevalent than the opposite. That laws and social institutions are of a religious nature and not simply the product of experience and reflection is the common belief of peoples.

². James A. Doull, "Secularity and Religion". *Animus* (www.swgc.mun.ca/animus/), v.7, 2002, p.1

³. Hegel, *Phenomenology*.(BB) vi. B.III: "Absolute Freedom and Terror".

That the secular order is independent of religion has only been definitely held by Greeks and Romans in the decline of their religions, and in Christian times.⁴

To a contemporary ear, ‘unity-in-difference’ has an abstract and rhetorical ‘Hegelian’ ring. Yet even in its elementary assumptions contemporary liberalism implies just such a subsuming of a separation of religion and politics under their unity. For it assumes a *de facto*, ‘enlightened’ resolution of the conflict from the secular political side, a ‘public reason’ that at once recognizes the religious mentality but distinguishes it from, and subordinates it to, its own. A secularism so qualified *a priori* has then no need to oppose religion: it will only insist the latter withdraw into the background and refrain from seeking to limit, influence or usurp the interests of a public reason. A political culture that so knows itself as comprehensive of religion in this limited sense can then certainly ‘tolerate’ any variety of forms of it, from outright atheism to a plurality of particular religious traditions. It might even defer to specific traditions whose spiritual ideals claim to overlap, even to ground, those of liberalism itself. But ‘religious toleration’, ‘multi-culturalism’, ‘overlapping values’ etc. tend to presume a priority of secular concerns over the religious, so that the reconciliation proposed can amount to little more than a pragmatic accommodation.

From the standpoint of the dominant liberal secularism of the day it is never clear if, or how, there is, or could be, any *essential* relation of religious to secular interests. For its freedom remains postulatory only, an ideal human condition endlessly seeking realization but never actually realized.⁵ It is just its inherent incompleteness that inclines liberalism ever to collapse into extremes of right and left.⁶ Its characteristic account of human history, both older and current, is accordingly as an ever on-going liberation of cultures dominated by the ‘closed’, absolutist perspective of religion or ideology toward the ‘open’ perspective of an economic society of free individuals, seen as a progress from a confusion of religion and state to their enlightened separation. But this same development can as readily be construed as toward the more adequate affirmation of the *unity* of spiritual and secular, of freedom and its actuality, a unity only imperfectly achieved in the finite form of an interminable progress toward it. Otherwise put: if the limit of all earlier culture is to be found in the tendency to confound religion and politics it is no less problematical how, in contemporary liberal culture, the irrepressible appeal of religious truths and values can be thought to have only a superficial bearing upon the ordering of everyday life.⁷

Doull’s observations have in mind Hegel’s account of the relation of religion to secularity as neither irredeemably contentious nor merely pragmatic, but an *essential* relation. What an ‘essential relation’ is, however, remains to be clarified. It is to describe religion as bearing upon

⁴. J. A. Doull, “Secularity and Religion” p.2.

⁵. That such a freedom should be *actually* realized is for a liberal mentality a disconcerting prospect. Even Fukuyama wonders whether life at the end of history as the endless indulgence in the fruits of technocracy and the rights of the market place can satisfy a deeper human yearning. (See F. E. Doull, op.cit.).

⁶. Bobbitt (op.cit.) has an elaborate and often strained account of liberalism, communism and fascism as the centre, left and right versions of one and the same attempt to realize a classical political-economic view of the nation state, and represents the ‘long war’ of the past century as a battle for supremacy between them, culminating in the advent of the global ‘market state’.

⁷. Using ‘everyday’ in its ordinary positive sense rather than in Heidegger’s, whose critique of “Alltäglichkeit” reads like a theologian’s denigration of secular life in metaphysical dress .

secular life, not contingently, but in and of itself; and secular life as grounded in religion, not arbitrarily, but as its own essential tendency; and that this essentiality of relation is the case, not *in spite of* their difference, but *as requiring it*. Of course it remains to be shown how this contention can be squared with the evident historical warring of the one upon the other: the typical raging of religious fundamentalism against secular humanism, the contrary prejudice of scientific humanism for which religion is seen as an obstacle to reasonable human polity.

The interest of the Hegelian philosophy chiefly lies in its account of how religion and political order stand in essential relation to each other.⁸ It seeks above all to show, both logically and historically, how the maturing of an intuitive human spirituality into a religion that knows freedom as its principle, coincides with the development of the human community into a political life founded on the same principle; and how in the philosophical consciousness of freedom become general in modernity, the tension between sacred and secular wisdom and practice has been in principle, if not in actuality, resolved and transcended.

The uniting of worldly and otherworldly perspectives through the principle of freedom is more than just one of many themes in the Hegelian philosophy: it is its central theme, the whole being the systematic elaboration of just this principle. The Hegelian logic is by its own definition the logic of the idea of freedom,⁹ whose implications then form the basis for a distinctive science of nature, psychology, ethics and theology founded upon it. According to this perspective, the question of the relation of religion to secular life is only adequately addressed where seen to have its basis logically in the concept of freedom and historically in the emergence of a culture embodying this same principle. Thus if in more elemental cultures religious and communal seem more or less merged, if in classical times they become both starkly distinguished, if in Christianity they become known as both separate and the same abstractly, that is, in God — for the modern-philosophical mentality for which freedom has become the explicit basis of all thought and action, this theological unity-in-difference gains a new significance as an actual and present reconciliation of the divine and human worlds.

The procedure in what follows is to consider briefly, first, what is to be understood logically by an ‘essential’ relation, then to address more directly the epistemology, theology and history of what Hegel calls the ‘consummated’ religion — Christianity — concluding with a few observations on contemporary implications.

II. The Logic Of Essential Relation

The way relations are commonly represented amounts to a compounding of fallacies. Typically a distinction is drawn between two things, posited or given simply as ‘different’. Then additionally a relation between them is noted, but as indifferent to the distinction already made, grafted upon the terms distinguished after the fact. It is thus as if what are related had as such

⁸ From the standpoint of the ruling influence of the liberal idea, the content and tenor of the Hegelian lectures on religion, politics and history many now would judge outdated and metaphysical. However it remains the case that little is to be found in the literature that so directly and concretely addresses this precise issue.

⁹ See Hegel, *Encyclopaedia*, (hereafter *Enc.*) paras.158-160.

nothing to do with each other or with their being related. The first step in this procedure follows a wholly abstract rule which says: the different as different is not identical and the identical as identical is without difference. The second step, however, follows another no less abstract rule: things are unrelated so far as they are different and related so far as they are in some sense the same. These two rules contradict each other. They can hold good only where applied serially: first one, then the other.

Analytic thinking attempts to construe concrete relations as abstract ones, presuming mutual exclusivity of identity and difference and then imposing a second-order identification nonetheless upon terms so distinguished. This abstract procedure is responsible for many classical logical paradoxes — of the one and the many, substance and accident, universal and particular etc. — whose ‘solution’ consists either in an endless pyramidal proliferation of relations and correlations purporting to explain things, or lead to para-logical final solutions, such as monistic reductionism, absolute relativism and so forth. Such thinking is supposed to render matters clear, but limited as it is to a fixed distinction between identity and difference, its account of relations cannot get beyond a formal and extraneous relating of terms that are at the same time taken as exclusive of and indifferent to each other. It can thus give no account of ‘concrete’ relations in which the relating of one thing to another lies implicit in these terms themselves and springs from them, as, for example, in the relation of mother and child, or, for that matter, of a cat to a mat.¹⁰

Hegel devotes a major portion of his science of logic to precisely this question. In the so-called ‘doctrine of essence’ there is dialectically explicated how a concrete as opposed to an abstract relation is logically constituted, and what it means that a relation be essential rather than formal.¹¹ The argument commences with a critique of relations as founded upon an abstract separation of identity and difference as if these were logically primitive concepts. What Hegel assumes in this commencement is the earlier analysis of the logic of the categories of ‘being’, which concludes with the insight that unitary being, being-for-self — ‘identity’ — has more in it than unity in the abstract sense. ‘Identity’ is rather self-relativity, unity as *self*-identity. Such a unity has distinction already in it, the differentiation of itself from itself, so that what ‘difference’ must concretely mean is likewise more than simple, abstract exclusion or separation. What is concretely different is distinct in itself, *self*-distinguished. Already in their initial logical representation, therefore, identity and difference are shown to be entirely bound up with each other, and ‘relation’ is accordingly not some further logical category brought extraneously into play, but is directly given in the same dynamic whereby in identity difference is already implied, and in difference, identity.

On this basis Hegel expounds ‘relation’ initially as in principle more than the formal superimposition of identity upon difference or seeking to discover sameness among presupposed differences. Rather, where differentiation is self-differentiation, then differences refer *of themselves* to an underlying identity implicit in them — to their unitary ‘ground’. And contrariwise, where identity is self-identity, this unity generates *of itself* the differences through

¹⁰ Bertrand Russell preoccupied otherwise mature academic philosophers for some decades with the mind-numbing question, that given we know what a cat and a mat are, then to what in the proposition ‘the cat is on the mat’ the ‘is’ and the ‘on’ could possibly refer.

¹¹ *Enc* 112-159. The identity/difference discussion at *Enc.* 114-116 .

which it acquires a determinate form. Relations, so far as concrete, are thus neither analytic nor synthetic but *dynamic*: they describe the reference of determinate differences to that which forms their proper unitary ground and conversely the reference of this same self-identical unity to the *differentiae* through which it has its determinate character — these being reciprocal. Relation in this concrete sense Hegel calls *essential* relation, in its most general sense the relation of existence to essence.

The most concrete concept of essence/existence, however, Hegel will call ‘actuality’. The abstract view of things is of endless external relations piled upon one another and all grafted upon a presumed preexisting multiplicity. Actuality rather describes things as constituted and sustained through dynamical relations internal to themselves, which are their own. Dynamic constitution in general is what one calls ‘causality’, and Hegel reviews the familiar forms of causal relation — substance-accident, cause-effect, action-reaction. But ground and consequence implicate each other, effects turn into causes and actions are also reactions, which insight brings to light the concept of ‘reciprocity’, of things as mutually constitutive. Understood superficially, reciprocity suggests an account of actuality as universal interaction, a theory of relativity. But universal relativity sees reciprocity only in terms of external relations: a multiplicity of differences is assumed and then one thing then said to evoke another which in turn evokes it *in infinitivum*.

The deeper sense of reciprocity, however, is not of a mutual interaction of externals — not universal relativity — but, because what acts and reacts is ultimately the same, interaction has its ground in the *capacity* to interact, in the inner dynamic of *self*-relativity. And this is what is meant by describing anything as ‘actual’, namely, as self-effecting and effected, a *causa sui*, something self-constituting, actively self-sustained. Expressed as one activity this yields the principle of *self-determination*: to be ‘concretely actual’ is to be self-determined, in-dependent. *Actual* identity is thus self-identity, i.e., identity as resolution to unity of an active-reactive reciprocity of moments distinguished within it.

For Hegel, the logic of relation or relativity reaches its limit and completion in the concept of self-determination as the principle of whatever is actual. So far as this principle occurs to a thinking still preoccupied with the indefinite relativity of externals, it will appear as an infinite causality underlying every finite eventuality — the ‘inner necessity’ of things.

The bond of necessity as such is identity as still *inner* and hidden: the identity of things considered actual but which yet have an independence that only *ought* to be necessary.

But grasped explicitly for what it is in itself, actuality is self-determination, the simple thought of *freedom*, “pure self-interaction” which is “necessity unveiled or explicitly posited”.¹² Thus:

true necessity is freedom and true subsistence the ‘concept’: self-subsistence which, as differentially self-repelling, is yet in this repelling identical with self, and which, even in its inherent reciprocal movement, is only in relation to itself.¹³

¹² *Enc.* 157.

‘The concept’, in Hegel’s lexicon, is self-determination so far as it is a *logical* principle. Otherwise, in appropriate contexts, it is ‘freedom’, or ‘spirit’. Hegel’s logic of essential relation as culminating or consummated in the principle of self-determination stands in the starkest possible contrast to the common approach to a logic of relation with its typical appeal to a wholly formalistic compounding of ‘identity’, ‘difference’ and ‘relation’ taken in their most abstract sense. Hegel affirms the opposite: these terms belong together and should be thought as such. For ultimately and concretely, all relation is unity-in-difference, that is, ‘actuality’, and actuality has its completion and consummation implicitly in the concept of necessity and explicitly in the principle of self-determination: freedom.

When in an Hegelian vein one speaks of ‘unity-in-difference’, then, this is not to be thought a piece of logical rhetoric or legerdemain: it expresses logically what an ‘essential’ relation is, a relation whose terms are wholly transparent to each other, which actively generate, invoke and sustain each other, a dynamic relativity pointing beyond itself to its consummation in a unity transcending their relativity as such. For Hegel, this is the infinite form belonging to all relations so far as they are concrete or determinate, i.e., ‘actual’ relations. The phrase specifically means to override and correct the bad habit of an abstract thinking which separates relations from what is related.

It is with such a logic of consummation in mind that the discussion can now turn more specifically the relation of the spiritual to the secular. To describe the relation of religion to a secular order of life as ‘essential’ is to say much more than that they are similar, have this or that in common, are antithetical, compatible or incompatible, or even that one is grounded in the other. It is rather to describe this relation as wholly sustained in and through their distinction and interaction, to view the worldly and otherworldly mentalities and communities as evoking and sustaining each other, to represent the relation of God to Man and of Man to God as in actuality one relation, to know that *the interdependency of sacred and profane can make itself fully evident only where these are grasped in their most extreme opposition.*

III. Representational Knowledge

For religion generally it is as if the divine order of things and what lies within the reach of human experience are two separate realities. Before all worlds, says God, I am, infinite and eternal, while we mortal creatures live our uncertain lives in a wholly temporal and finite world. Everything in religion thus becomes a question of how, given this absolute separation, we nonetheless somehow stand in relation to the divine, bear witness to it or ‘know it not’, turn from or submit to it, find in it only fatality and mystery or draw from it a beneficent law for personal and communal life.

From a speculative standpoint, however, this sharp division between spiritual and worldly realities that religion presents may be seen as the work of a ‘reflexive’ thinking whose characteristic act is to oppose to itself an ‘ob-jective’ world as distinguished from the ‘sub-

¹³ *Enc.* 158.

jective' world of its own thinking activity. This objective-subjective polarization yields a dual reference: to a presumed pre-reflexive order of reality 'out there' and a corresponding, reflexive order of thought-positing ideality — images, symbols, ideas and so forth — 'in here'.

In the jargon of epistemology such reflexive thinking is generally called 'representation' (Ger. *Vorstellen*), and the important point about it is that the one element in the polarity — the notion of a pre-empirical reality prior to representation (a Kantian 'in-itself') is no less the product of this thinking act than is the other element, the represented world of a thinking imagination. It is one and the same reflection that produces both the other-worldly world of mnemonic imagination and the contrary worldly world of 'empirical reality', and it is only for epistemological abstraction, for empirical realism or phenomenological idealism,¹⁴ that attempts are made to derive the one from the other.¹⁵ Representation, far from a mere wallowing in the decayed residue of sensible reality, as with Hume, or a pure act of synthesis a priori, is the spontaneous, mediating art through which thinking subjectivity liberates itself from enthrallment with what is simply 'there' for an unreflective consciousness; which transforms this content into a form then available to the free, comprehending insight of thought. If a religious believer may lay claim to a knowledge higher than a mundane witness to things, the same can be said of the most ordinary everyday act of imagination: it confers a measure of autonomy upon what experience immediately presents as finite and temporal, allowing for its transfiguration and reconnection within the free, a-temporal medium of thought.

It is thus not just for poets that a world conjured in imagination is as true or truer than the prosaic one: it is the everyday epistemological fact of life.¹⁶ Representation is a dynamic no less intrinsic to the psychology of everyday consciousness than to science, art or religion: all bear witness to the spontaneous, positing action of thought which liberates experience to knowledge. The German '*Vorstellen*' better captures this sense of an active transfiguration of experience setting the empirical in relation to thought, than does the English 'representation', which suffers from an empiricist bias. It is in this active sense that recollection, figuration, imagination, signification etc. are the first mediating steps toward a 'higher' knowing in which things are not simply 're-presented', but 'com-prehended', that is, brought together under a principle.

But if imagining, symbolizing, recollecting constitute forms of knowing, the reflection that re-presents provides the initial objectification whereby the content of an otherwise witless sensibility is first set into a relation to thought. As such, representation has its distinct limit in

¹⁴ Hegel describes the Kantian critique as "containing the propositions only of a *phenomenology* (not of a *philosophy*) of mind." *Enc.* 415.

¹⁵ This reflexive 'oppositing' (Fichte's term) of thinking to experience provides only for an incomplete and ambiguous form of knowing — 'empirical' knowledge. The Kantian limitation of knowledge to experience expresses precisely what representational thinking is, as also its limit. Kant declared the *Vorstellung* to be the universal form of all objects of knowing (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B.377), even of conceptual knowing, thus limiting all knowing a such and absolutely to a transcendental-phenomenological reference of cognitive forms to ultra-empirical things. Kant was notoriously forced to the conclusion that all knowledge is empirical and every principle hypothetical. The working through of the logic of representation, *a propos* of this Kantian 'phenomenology' of experience (Hegel's term) that rests wholly upon it, forms the main burden and interest of the post-Kantian German idealism.

¹⁶ It is only as abstractly construed in materialist psychology that representation is made to appear a spurious incursion of a spurious subjectivity into a first-order empirical sensibility — indeed, this very distinction of first-order and second-order is itself the product of reflective thought.

that the free act of thought is not itself present in it but is manifest only indirectly in the fixed reflexive opposing of subjective to objective, of ideality to reality, image to fact, signifier to signified etc. — thus an incomplete reflection in that only a partial transition from experiencing to knowing is made. Knowing in the more complete sense requires the recognition of the subjective-objective dichotomy into which in representation everything is cast, as in actuality an essential relation, thus nothing absolute or fixed, but the active, mediating reciprocation of ideal and real on the part of a thinking subjectivity which thereby recollects, recovers and recognizes its own freedom in whatever it knows. If from a Kantian standpoint ‘comprehension’ is confused with representation, thus limited to an empiricism that ever ought to know but cannot, this incompleteness finds consummation in a thinking that recognizes the phenomenological polarization of thought and experience for the essential relation it is, takes this reciprocity into itself and by this means gains access to the principle of the thing itself. Such a knowing Hegel speaks of as philosophical in the broad sense, a knowing more concrete than that which representation and its empiricism provides since, rather than dissociate itself from the latter or oppose to it some other kind of knowing altogether, brings it to its proper completion and consummation.

IV Religious Knowledge

The contention ‘man is by nature free’ expresses the ordinary witness of human beings to an infinite interiority, which is to say the human animal is as such a *self-conscious* being, or in Spinoza’s brief axiom: ‘Man thinks’. So far as this witness to freedom is inward only it stands in problematic relation to the coincident and contrary experience of a multifarious world — given, finite, temporal. To the resolution of this experienced world to a form consistent with freedom the thinking individual is inevitably drawn. The openness to and interest in the idea of universal truth, of a ‘preordained’, objective and actually realized freedom compatible with their own — conformable, that is, to thought — is thus spontaneous and unquenchable; which is to say human beings are, in consequence of their very freedom, religious: they are aesthetically, intellectually, morally and philosophically infinitely inquisitive.

Thus if, in respect to content, much that is given to religion is subject to experience and cultivation, the impulse to religious knowledge itself is decidedly not acquired; it is a foolhardy psychology that would seek to show otherwise.¹⁷ Hegel frequently observes that religion is the form in which humanity in general has hold of universal truths, that is, as a representational knowledge through the medium of personification, parable, mythical narrative, miraculous events and so forth.

¹⁷ By materialist psychology is meant the common way of speaking of psychic life as organic reactions, brain activities and the like. It is the notorious illusion of contemporary psychology that it begs the question entirely as to how there could be a demonstrable psychological science at all were the autonomy of scientific reasoning and criteria of proof not presupposed. If ‘thinking’ were itself no more than a neurological phenomenon, then science itself would immediately lose all credibility since it would be impossible to decide what a true or objectively valid judgment would be.

That the religious content is present primarily in the form of representation is connected with [the fact that] religion is the consciousness of absolute truth in the way that it occurs for all human beings.¹⁸

Its basic tendency is to distinguish sacred from secular as an absolute and fixed separation, the two standing nonetheless in relation. In this lies the premier example of the logic and limits of representational thinking so far as it does recognize that the terms it distinguishes stand in essential relation to each other. Hegel, however, takes up a position that directly recognizes the reciprocity between God and the knowing of God:

In this separation we have two elements, God and the consciousness for which God is. In representation we can thus start just as readily from the one as from the other.¹⁹

When religious knowledge is described as representational, as opposed to an aesthetic or scientific thinking about universal truths, this is not to say that God is only an image: rather that religious consciousness as such consists in positing or setting-forth (*Vor-stellen*) an objective reality defined as absolute and infinite and the coincident distinguishing from it of the finite subjectivity whose experience it is. The relation of the latter to the former is then an ‘inward’, subjective knowing through images, signs, icons, myths, parables, legends etc. which are meant to ‘represent’ a divinity that for its part remains nonetheless posited as beyond all such subjective cognition. Thus religious knowledge is by definition a knowing and not knowing, a ‘knowing in part’, since while a knowing through images it is not concerned with these as such (unless indeed degraded into superstition)²⁰ but with the absolute truth they are meant to reflect, mediate and express.

On this matter Hegel derives the important insight that the limit of religious knowing lies, not in some other standpoint outside it, but within itself, in the representational form of its knowing.²¹ By reason of its para-empirical character religious knowledge shares in the same ambiguity and limit that applies to representational thinking generally, an ambiguity by virtue of which, though intended to provide access to an absolute truth and a highest good, is notoriously the source also of the most profound nihilism, obfuscation, cruelty and corruption — a point Nietzsche and others have exploited to excess.²² For as constituted in the *opposition* of divine to human to divine, the religious mentality can never have an intrinsic guarantee of the truth of what is believed, which guarantee must therefore derive from some extraneous, positive source:

¹⁸ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. One vol. ed.(1827), tr. P.C. Hodgson, Los Angeles, 1988, p.144. (Hereafter *Religion 1827*.)

¹⁹ *Religion 1827*, p.129.

²⁰ Common cynicism brands religion as superstition on the ground that its objects and events are fictional, not factual. But it is no less superstitiously metaphysical to take the opposite course: to suppose the distinction of factual and fictional is any more properly resolved by reducing the ultra-empirical to the empirical.

²¹ In the Enlightenment tradition the religious standpoint is generally written off as simply ‘unscientific’ and thus inherent nonsense, or, as with Feuerbach and others, it may be assimilated to a humanist metaphysics. But where the limit of religious knowledge is seen as its own, then within such limits the truth of its content remains unaffected and the transposition of its meaning into speculative terms does not entail discounting the validity of the religious representation.

²² See S. Michels, “Nietzsche and the Religion of the Future”. *Animus* (www.swgc.mun.ca/animus/), v.9, 2004.

a sign from heaven, the word of a holy man, a book of prophetic utterances etc. The characteristic positivity of religion derives just from the fact that the trans-empirical must yet be empirical, the evidence of things unseen be yet seen. For representation, the object of belief is known as unknown, is seen through a glass darkly, an actual face-to-face knowledge only possible hereafter, 'in another life'.

That divinity itself and the finite standpoint of belief belong to the same religious reflection, that the relation of divine to human is an essential relation, Hegel expresses in a cryptic aphorism borrowed from a contemporary:

“God is God only as self-knowing: his self-knowledge is further a self-consciousness in man and man’s knowledge of God, which progresses to man’s self-knowledge in God”.²³

Or, more prosaically:

As God, the content [of religion], determines itself, so on the other side the subjective human spirit that has this knowledge determines itself too. The principle by which God is defined for human beings is also the principle for how humanity defines itself inwardly, or for humanity in its own spirit. An inferior god or a nature god has inferior, natural and unfree human beings as its correlates; the pure concept of God or the spiritual God has as its correlate a [human] spirit that is free and spiritual, that actually knows God.²⁴

To the religious representation as such of an infinite divinity there thus stands opposed a coincident reflection on the finitude of the human condition. Yet latent and implicit in this opposition is a reciprocity of one to the other, as has its picturesque metaphor in Michelangelo’s Creation of Adam, but also in many other religious images of incarnation/reincarnation, eternal return, birth and rebirth, the giving and receiving of law, the first and the second coming and so forth. But in religion itself such a reciprocity or reconciliation of temporal and eternal, worldly and otherworldly, conflicts with a divine-human disparity essential to religion. Their essential relation thus cannot be recognized in religion itself except ambiguously, that is, again as a representation, a unity-in-correlativity posited in the divine itself, in the beyond and hereafter, from which the finite human standpoint remains excluded.

That the limit of religious knowledge is not imposed from outside but lies in religion itself, in its representational grasp of its principle, is a central premise in Hegel’s account of Christianity as ‘consummated’ religion, the religion through which a free, philosophical knowing is made possible. All religion, Christianity included, represent absolute truth as a transcendent mystery made available to the believer only indirectly and para-empirically — thus determinately — through prophetic words, miraculous events, sacred signs etc. that manifest the divine but do not fully reveal it. It is the otherness of the divine to the human world that predominates, so that even their reconciliation is so only for representation, accomplished in and by God but actual for the believer only in faith, hope and ritual.

²³ *Enc.* 564.

²⁴ *Religion 1827*, p.203.

In the Christian religion, however, even while its revelation is likewise positive or determinate, this reconciliation is represented as already accomplished, and this from both the one side and the other. God himself is defined as Love, that is, is this relation of divinity to humanity, while on the human side, the recognition and enactment of a reconciliation with divinity has actually been accomplished in a world-historical individual. Accordingly, the knowledge the individual believer has, is of divinity directly self-manifest in and for his own finite mind and will, rather than through some alien medium. The uniqueness of the Christian religion lies in its characterization of the divine-human relation, not as an unbridgeable gulf between lord and servant, infinite and finite, but as an essential reciprocity, thus open to reconciliation, not from some further standpoint, but in and through itself. Even though, as religion, it may know this reconciliation only representationally, and thus incompletely, it is ‘consummated’ religion in so far as the reconciliation is represented as one actually and already accomplished, and this both in the divine itself and as well from the human side.

In and through the specific content of what is believed, therefore, Christianity implicitly knows the limit of its own knowledge qua religious, even though it knows this in a religious way. It is thus religion become acutely ambiguous,²⁵ since it is conscious of what its own knowing is and thus pointing beyond its own world of myth, image and ritual to another wisdom that is at once speculative and concrete in so far as at once spiritual and human. It is religion come to know what it is, that looks beyond its own positivity, which has not only the certainty of what it believes but the awareness also of the limits of this knowledge *qua* religious and an openness to a more complete, philosophical knowledge springing from that belief and comprehensive of it. With that, the reconciliation of religion with a secular knowledge and life become not only possible but mandated in and by religion itself. Through the consummate form to which it attains in Christian religion, religion becomes self-conscious: it has the certainty that religion as such can go no further, and knows that its own vision of redemption in fact lies beyond all distinctions of worldly and otherworldly in an ethical disposition and order of life that religion supports and sustains but no longer dominates.

V. Determinate And Consummate Theology

It is only for a philosophical comprehension which assumes a free reciprocity of subject and object that the religious and secular worlds can be thought to reflect and ground each other. For religion the evidence of this free reciprocity can be given only positively and para-empirically, that is, in representation, ritual etc. What distinguishes Christianity as consummated religion is found more definitely in the object of its belief, in its characterization of divinity, and here again Christianity’s unique theology has implications that go beyond religion itself.

If everything in religion turns on how the nature of God is represented, this provides a further measure of what Hegel intends by the distinction between ‘determinate’ and

²⁵ “So far as the Christian reconciliation still remains in a doctrinaire form, i.e., remains a *religious* representation, traditional Christianity, no less than other religions, retains the mark of spiritual dividedness even while it just the overcoming of this alienation that constitutes its principal article of faith”. J.A Doull, “The Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit”. *Animus* (www.swgc.mun.ca/animus), v.8, 2004, p.4.

‘consummated’ religion. Where the divine is described as of its nature mysterious and inscrutable, where the reason and purpose for creation is not given or given only enigmatically, where the fate of man in particular is thought to lie ‘in God’s hands alone’ but is otherwise undisclosed — in all these respects God, like the ‘Being’ of Heidegger, is in his own unconcealment concealed, hidden precisely so far as manifest in finite, determinate modes and events in which he is present as absconded.

Religion is determinate so far as it knows God as only ambiguously self-disclosed, that is, as revealed in some determinate, para-empirical mode contrary to his infinity — thus not available to the believer as he is in himself but only paradoxically as an infinity manifest in some finite entity or event. And where this paradoxical finite-infinity is not merely attributed to the limiting subjective vagaries of the religious experience itself, but is posited as belonging to very nature of God himself, then ultimately this is to know a limit in divinity. Where God is known as unknowable, his presence invoked only mystically or ritualistically, then too must the reconciliation of the divine with the human remain unconsummated. This is the characteristic of all religion so far as determinate: it knows only an unknown God, a ‘jealous’ divinity which, though all-powerful, is incompletely self-revealing, revealed only through some earthly agency.

Where God is as such unknowable it does no good to seek enhanced understanding by attribution of infinite names and predicates — God as all-powerful, all-merciful, all-this-and-that. For the believer, knowing this attribution to be after all his own, knows also their utter inadequacy: the unspeakable transcendence of God must elude them all. This is how things stand theologically in most monotheistic religions, the infinite defined as the absolute Other or Beyond of the finite. It is a prime Hegelian axiom that infinity should be defined on its own terms, not as the ‘other’ of the finite, the ‘*in*-finite’, which defines it only from a finite standpoint. For ‘reference-to-an-other’ is precisely what the finite is, the endlessness of limiting and transgressing of limits, the ‘spurious infinity’ (*schlechte unendlichkeit*) where every now is at once a then, every here a beyond, where every determination has indeterminacy attached to it.

Applied theologically, the Beyond or Unspeakable is but another name for such a ‘finite infinity’: nothing positive is affirmed in it. It renders the question of the religious knowledge of God wholly moot: in relation to an unknown God the faithful cannot really know where they stand, except to know the nothingness of their own finite humanity. A free and concrete relation to God would rather require the nature of God be likewise concretely known, but this could be the case only where the relation of divine to human is known as essential in the very concept of the divine itself, where the fullest revelation of God to the world lies in God himself as his own very nature and essential act.

For religious representation generally, again, the reconciliation of human and divine cannot be actually consummated, only accomplished virtually, that is, sacramentally and as an object of ‘hope’. In Hegel’s terminology, ‘consummate’ religion does not as such break through this limit: it does not produce or actually occupy its kingdom of heaven. It is consummate religion so far as it knows its limit as surmounted in principle, that is, ‘in God’. Put otherwise, if for determinate religion generally the correspondence between God and humanity remains at the level of miraculous possibility, religion is consummated where it has the intuition of God in himself as the overcoming of this very rift, a God who makes himself completely known to man.

According to the Christian definition, while God is posited as infinite beyond everything finite, it is not as a negativity overwhelming all things finite, withdrawing into itself and concealed. Rather God's infinity is represented as revealed in a trinity of dynamics in which the relation of infinite to finite is expressed as both essential and necessary. In the logic of the Christian Trinity, the dynamics of God's relation to a finite world are posited as a relation among aspects of divinity itself, such that in each the whole dynamic is implied. The strictly religious aspect has the form of the Judaic father-God whose freedom is power and upon whom everything absolutely depends. But God is also defined as freely passing into a finite, human form and given over to secularity, in and through which the latter's alienation is overcome and its unity with the divine restored. The Christian divinity is a meticulously articulated metaphor of a God who, as both parent and offspring as well as the love binding one to the other, is known as infinitely creative, self-determinative, self-reconciliatory activity — which conceptually is the principle of freedom. Through this image of the divine, it points beyond its own religious conception to the ideal of a fuller freedom made actual and concrete, a spiritual life that is itself neither religious nor secular simply.

Latent in the Christian representation of God is thus the more complete thought of a living unity of human and divine, an ethical life in which the eternal and temporal worlds play into and confirm each other and have no independence apart from this interaction.²⁶ But such a thought conflicts with the positivity of religious imagination which can do no more than represent the unity of divine and human as additional to and unaffected by their disparity. Hence, even though in the Trinity the thought of the spiritual life as a living unity of human and divine is the central tenet of the Christian religion, as religion it can only represent this unity in finite representations which are inadequate to the full measure of its meaning — in other words, only as a mystery:

The Christian religion is called the revealed religion. Its content is that God is revealed to human beings, that they know what God is. Previously they did not know this; but in the Christian religion there is no longer any secret — a mystery certainly, but not in the sense that it is not known. For consciousness as understanding, or for sensible cognition, it is a secret, whereas for reason it is something manifest.²⁷

VI. Consummate Religion

The designation of Christianity as 'consummated' religion does not mean its singling out as alone true: for Hegel all religions contain the same elements and intend the same general truth and differ only in their determinate content. The sense is rather historic, that in Christianity the religious mentality itself discovered its limit, revealed at the point where the terms of the relation of human to divine came to be explicitly recognized as thoroughly interactive, an 'essential' relation in which each term defines itself through the other: thus God self-revealed in human form, man self-knowing in God, and these as twin dynamics constituting one infinite reciprocity.

²⁶ An overview of religion and the state as 'mutual guarantees of strength' is found in Enc.552.

²⁷ *Religion 1827*, p.130.

The religion that came so to represent God as existing for himself in man, and man as having in God the principle of his human being, attained to a self-consciousness beyond which it was impossible, as religion, to go. Christianity is in this sense religion and more than religion, religion oriented toward another mentality, the ‘last’ religion, as indeed it spoke of itself from its inception: God self-revealed “in the fullness of time”.

From a relativistic point of view of ‘comparative religion’ nothing much can be made of the uniqueness so described of the Christian vis á vis historical religions in general. Everything rests on the crucial historical fact that Christianity did not, as most religions preceding it, originate as the spontaneous mythopoeic expression of a particular tribal or imperial people: it is not an *ethnic* religion.²⁸ On the contrary, it arose at a time of high civilization when the ethnic religions of pre-classical cultures had reached maturity and sublimity only to be overwhelmed by the reason-based, humanistic culture of the Greeks and Romans that had subordinated all religion to its ideal. Unlike any other before it, the Christian religion took its rise significantly and specifically in response to that great experiment of classical culture and bears that experience within it.

With the Greeks there had developed for the first time in history a thinking beyond mythopoeic imagination which accounted for the nature of things and the due order of life through a representational spawning of divinities. Plato would identify the ‘idea’ as the proper object of this supra-representational thinking, and Aristotle would know all nature and culture systematically as the work of one infinite, self-animating intelligence. The Romans, remarkable for having made this free standpoint of thought their cultural presupposition, devoted themselves to putting it to practical effect. The thought of a reason “deep down things”, of a universal necessity drawing everything into it, transformed superstitious human animals into self-conscious individuals, problematically aware of a certain independence of their own pre-conscious nature as also of thought-less attachment to any particular cultural or religious regimen.

This mentality had its objective or practical expression in the ideal of a universal secular order that would give political effect to a freedom thus abstractly conceived in the form of the recognition of persons as equal under the law, in return for their absolute submission to its authority. To ‘the inherent freedom of the abstract ego’ Hegel writes, there corresponded “an [equally] abstract ... political constitution and power over concrete individuality.”²⁹ To this universal all extant cultures were likewise obliged to submit, the scattered gods of the older extant religions gathered up and pressed into service in the consecration of everyday, mundane ends.

But this external, legal freedom the Romans would attempt to realize, soon proved grossly ambiguous. The prestige and authority of the state rested on its role as guarantor of the rights of persons conscious of being absolute in their individuality. But these bearers of rights know themselves at the same time to be no more than finite, mortal and willful animals. To seek

²⁸ Though not the only non-ethnic religion. Islam with a similar post-Roman-imperial inception also specifically laid claim to a supra-national universality. Likewise many more modern sects.

²⁹ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*; English. ed. *The Philosophy of History*. Tr, J. Sibree, New York, 1956, p.279. (Hereafter, *History*.)

to impose a universal objective order upon a mass of such atomic, self-interested individuals, not to speak of the cluttered residue of their barbarian cultures, proved futile. The individual who finds himself infinite in his finite skin, whose absolute 'I' is yet imprisoned in an animal driven as much by passion and opinion as by reason and freedom, will know this very freedom as a bondage: the very thought of a freedom so bound to nature must evoke an equal and contrary awareness of the utter contingency of actual life. On the reef of this contradiction, at once inward and political, the historical first attempt to establish a polity founded on reasonable principles came famously to grief.

Hegel describes the universal misery into which Roman secular culture eventually fell as a consequence of their attempt to graft a freedom witnessed subjectively upon an relentlessly finite given nature and world.³⁰ As realized only superficially in externals, in the mere right to finite things, powers and property, it is a freedom that only ignited and reinforced a vivid sense of the fatality and futility of worldly life. Individuals were condemned to either giving over entirely to a pointless and deadly worldliness, or seeking hollow relief in ascetic, aesthetic or sceptical detachment or more popularly in superstition. The Romans, in Hegel's words "were either at war with sensuous existence or entirely given over to it",³¹ or as Doull puts it, they had the thought of freedom but equally of their incapacity for it.³² To this intrinsic meaninglessness of their world the Romans could find no practical solution, for, as they would discover, the aetiology of the disease did not lie in alterable circumstances but in the principle that had been disclosed to them: in the anguish of a riven, self-conscious individuality that had come to know an inner freedom it was yet impotent to realize.

Hegel's account of what underlay this extreme perturbation that gripped the Roman soul stands in vivid contrast to the commonplace account of it as the mere contingency of a lapse into decadence, the triumph of a power-hungry materialism, a reversion into barbarism, the succumbing to the wicked lure of a willful 'secular humanism'. This kind of moralistic view belongs properly to a later time and in fact presupposes the Roman experience. Hegel makes the opposite case: the collapse of the ancient culture was the direct result of a first attempt to establish freedom as the basis of an order of life, a freedom which, since belonging to the empirical subject only, could neither comprehend nor subdue the finite nature and world in which it found it had come to consciousness. The enigma as to how freedom is to be reconciled with actual human life was the true legacy of the Roman experiment.

It was in response to this spiritual stalemate that Christianity took its rise. The Roman enigma it wholly internalized as the issue of the reconciliation of the conflict between the inner spiritual witness to freedom and a natural human willfulness contrary to it. No mere revival of simple myth-based religion could possibly console the divided consciousness of a culture whose unique accomplishment was precisely to have already broken free of the spontaneous, ethnic religiosity of the older cultures. Even if the great classical experiment in rational freedom had failed, the standpoint it established was irreversible: there could be no turning back from thought or its freedom, no return to a pre-rational, myth-dominated condition as if the genius of Greek art and science and Roman political humanism had never been. The origin of Christianity owes as

³⁰ *History*, p.320.

³¹ *History*, p.317.

³² J.A. Doull, *op.cit*, p3.

much to the cultural achievement of Rome and the predicament it presented as to the model and word of the Nazarene. As Hegel writes:

The principle of the Roman world we have recognized as finite and particular subjectivity exaggerated to infinity. The salvation of the world is born of the same principle, namely ‘this man’, [*ecce homo*], abstract subjectivity, but such that, in contrast, finitude is only the form in which he appears, whose essence and content consists rather in infinity, in an absolute being for self.³³

Here again is the crux of what distinguishes Christianity from the ‘determinate’ form of earlier religion. It is *thinking* religion. Rather than the codification of spontaneous spiritual intuitions of a particular tribe or people in terms of determinate, para-empirical manifestations of divinity, it was born in a civilization that had already surpassed and comprehended that form of the religious standpoint in another which brought to light and assimilated to itself the principle of thinking subjectivity and the attempt to establish an order of life based upon it. That this enterprise failed does not alter the fact that through it the ideal, if not the fact, of a realized freedom was established in the world. There was no turning back to a spirituality experienced only in mythical terms: Christianity from its inception specifically sought the healing of a sundered self-consciousness which, though inwardly certain of its freedom, could not square its experience of the world with it.

Taking this opposition to its furthest extreme, Christianity was born in the recognition that the relation of spiritual to worldly, divinity to humanity, God to Nature was an essential one rather than a fixed and absolute disjunction. This reciprocity defines the initial Christian representation of divinity itself, no longer as an awesome but indifferent power, a necessity ruling a world in which it but ambiguously reveals itself, but rather a reconciling spirit binding the inward to the outward life from all eternity, a divinity fully self-manifest in a world and having therefore an infinite interest in it. It was such a divinely justified, consummated freedom that Christianity particularly preached, the gospel of a god-forsaken secular life in principle already overcome, and the promise of a spiritual kingdom actually realized on earth.

Christianity thus contains in its very origin and intent the idea of an accomplished unity-in-difference of sacred and secular and of a knowing more complete, more ‘face-to-face’ than what appears in the mirror of religion.³⁴ From the perspective of a strictly religious mentality this is both unintelligible and heretical: it violates and transgresses the very purview of religion. It asserts that God is degraded into finite human form as a mortal individual, not merely by us, but by his own act of self-abasement. To a strict religiosity such propositions can only appear as the purest blasphemy, to compromise the very divinity of divinity, leading inevitably to the abyss of paganism or to a godless secularism that divinizes human willfulness. On the practical side, the representation of the divine purpose as actual on earth likewise offends the religious sense of the divinity of the divine, appearing to render finite humanity absolute, the ultimate hubris and indignity. To a religiosity other than Christian accordingly, Christianity can readily appear as the absolute corruption of the religious spirit itself, the religion of the Devil.

³³. *History*, p.318.

³⁴. The most offensive being the son-ship of God and the resurrection: “unto the Jews a stumblingblock and unto the Greeks nonsense” - 1 Cor. 1:23.

It is the 'salvation' of the world nonetheless that Christianity posits as an essential moment in God. That God is defined as Love means his relation to humanity is no mere afterthought on the part of the divine, no arbitrary act of beneficence after the fact. It rather declares the relation of divinity to humanity to constitute the very essence of the divine itself, while the essence of humanity is revealed, through the resurrection, in a converse redemptive orientation and destiny. For the Christian accordingly, an interest in secular life is not something apart from, additional to, or even mandated by what is given in religion: rather it is the true aim and object of religion itself, its own impulse beyond itself to a worldly actualization of its principle. The incarnation of the sacred and the sanctification of the secular are the converse dynamics of one and the same spiritual life.

This teaching of the consummation, the unity-in-difference, of human and divine makes itself evident at the outset. But the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth concerning his Sonship, the spiritual kingdom etc. acquire absolute significance only in and through the free act of faith on the part of those who already knew both the freedom of Roman individuality and its contradictions. Again, for the religious mentality as such that divine truth should in some way be given in the private witness to it - this 'personalization' of religious knowledge - is absurd. But the appeal of the Christian revelation was precisely to the individual become wholly self-conscious of the abyss of human finitude, of a natural sinfulness, so that a free act of self-overcoming was as necessary to the completeness of the divine-human reconciliation as was that revelation itself. The conscious act of self-committed entry into a relation to God is essential to and reciprocates the emptying and becoming incarnate of god for the sake of man. It is this dual dynamic lying at the heart of Christian belief that qualifies it to be described as 'consummated' religion.

While Hegel's lectures on religion and history are dismissed by many as outdated and metaphysically arcane they are unique in that they provide a clear and specific account of Christian history as the working out of this essential relation, both from its divine side, theologically, and from its secular side as the struggle of Christian-European culture to discover its adequate political form. In this double development the tendency of religion is toward overcoming its rigid otherworldly focus and the coincident progress of secular culture toward an ethically founded order of life. The chronicle of the life, son-ship and execution of Jesus provided the historical paradigm for the triumph of spiritual individuality and freedom over both unenlightened religiosity and the deadly scepticism of a godless secular culture. But Christianity does not primarily rest, as religion generally, on the appeal to persons, events or words alone, but ultimately on a spiritual resurrection, a 'Pentecostal' affirmation on the part of mortal individuals, freely choosing entry into a relationship with divinity, thereby a spiritual resurrection.

The Christian religion found its first secular realization in a spiritual culture superimposed upon a residual Roman one, a confusion of peoples, ancient and contemporary. The preoccupation of 'Christendom' was with the development of theological and institutional forms adequate to its belief. Otherwise the emphasis was otherworldly and monotheistic, eschatological and monastic, somewhat indifferent to the 'earthly city' that hosted it. Such a purely adjunctive, theocratic superimposition of spiritual upon secular persisted among the civilized peoples of the eastern empire. In the western empire, Christianity found in the

unlettered European peoples who had overrun Rome a comparatively untilled soil in which to grow a secular culture more proper to itself. This it thought it achieved in the founding of the empire that called itself both Holy and Roman.

The Church thus become imperial, a spiritual theocracy established on earth, could no longer remain indifferent to the residue of an older secular culture it saw as inherently sinful and godless, a stumbling block to its own authority and an offense to its divine mission of the saving of souls. It took up arms against it, theologically and militantly, warring against world, flesh and devil, heresy and apostasy. In the process the church became increasingly a worldly state, its pope a king, its spiritual power the power of arms, influence and wealth, entering into conflict with the similarly constituted worldly-spiritual power of Islam. The inner free spirit was corrupted into theological correctness, the basis of a spurious intellectualism and legalism enforced by inquisitorial judges and juries. Christianity in short resolved itself into a worldly power, in the very completion of whose hegemony it became thoroughly decadent.

What was sought in medieval Roman Catholicism was the total Christianization of a godless secularity it saw as opposed to itself. What was achieved was the consolidation of a rigid dualism in which church and state live their lives in each other's shadow. Devoted to a war against worldliness, the church itself appropriates the role of a magnificent but worldly state, its inward spirit thereby corrupted. In this corruption is revealed the wholly spurious character of a rank opposition of religious to secular life: that what appear as opposed are in actuality aspects of *one* life, its constitutive moments.³⁵ Coincident with this intuition, the Christian heart and mind revert to the original inspiration of the early church, to the inner witness to a unity of the human with the divine, but now additionally the certainty of the experience that the secular and religious cannot be opposed but belong concretely to the one standpoint. Manifest originally in a still religious form as Protestantism, this insight directly gave impetus to a more comprehensive, philosophical mentality appealing to the same spirit of reconciliation, though no longer in representational terms but more comprehensively in terms of the principle of freedom grasped in thought, and this as the basis for a rational wisdom surpassing theology as well as a vision of a new secularity founded on ethical principles.

The standpoint and spirit of modernity cannot be described as either religious or secularist simply, but as these taken up into a philosophical and political self-consciousness, a concrete spirituality, appealing explicitly to freedom as at once an inward truth and a worldly principle. In its early, Protestant stages there is much ambiguity as to the relation of religion to the state in respect of this free, philosophical spirit: whether it is through separation of church

³⁵. Hegel's argument is to be found at various points in the collected lectures on religion, typically under the heading 'the realization of religion' which discusses the Christian 'cultus' or religious worship and practice as the actual carrying out of the reconciliation of the divine with the worldly life promised in faith. In the religious community generally it is effected only 'representationally', that is, in rites, rituals and sacraments' more specially in the 'confirmation' of priests as distinct from a laity, or again in a holy life based on ascetic vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. But Hegel points out that ritual is reconciliation only in symbolic externals, that a churchly community ruled by a priestly caste contradicts the spiritual freedom of all; and that the monastic 'holiness' must remain unrequited since in the end a wholly subjective, nihilistically otherworldly, and thus essentially unfree spiritual condition. The true Christian cultus is the free, ethical commitment to the ordinary life of domestic, economic and political community: "The ethical life is the most genuine cultus". (*Religion* 1827, p.194)

and state or confessional institutionalization that the new freedom is best ensured.³⁶ There follows the general debate, by no means ended, between the tendency to resolve the new spiritual-worldly standpoint of modernity itself to one or other of its elements, to some kind of humanized religiosity or religiose humanism, a conflict between faith and enlightenment, evangelical theocracy or ideological secularism.³⁷ These debates continue to rage in our own time. But they differ crucially from older forms of the conflict between religion and secularism in that, in spite of the appearance of reverting to the one side or the other, in spite of appeals to the authority of ‘traditional values’ or of ‘scientific objectivity’, they in fact presume the coincidence of inward, spiritual interests with those of secular life, justifying their positions in a language of freedom that is essentially *philosophical*. To this modern and post modern tension the older polarities of theological and secular have thus for the most part succumbed: what predominates is the consciousness that both religion and politics must answer to a higher measure of their legitimacy.

VII ‘Religious Secularity’

Hegel frequently refers to religion as the mode in which truth is present exoterically for the generality of humankind,³⁸ a point to which, on its face, it would be foolish to object. He speaks of philosophy on the other hand as in essence esoteric, even while a comprehension more concrete and complete than that given in religious representation. Elsewhere he contrasts the role of the ancient to the modern philosopher precisely in that the former is the special self-consciousness of the few while the latter only reflects a spirit become general and embedded in the general culture. Clearly, ‘philosophy’ in its academic meaning is esoteric in the same sense as ‘theology’ is: neither is ‘for everybody’, yet both seek to crystallize intellectually what is generally known in other ways.

When Hegel describes Christianity as in essence a thinking or philosophical religion, a religion whose own core beliefs impel it beyond representation to a more adequate, face-to-face knowledge, that is not to say that only the intellectually sophisticated are saved any more than to say the Christian heaven is populated only by theologians. On the contrary, on repeated occasions Hegel extols the merit of the Christian religion to lie, not only in that ‘the gospel is preached to the poor’, but precisely that this gospel itself presents God in the plainest, most humane way, supremely available to the most naive consciousness (in lore, even to the animals): God as incarnate in an actual, historical, fully mortal individual, humbly born and exposed to the trials of life in a real-time world of pride, false witness and secular politics, and yet spiritually triumphant over them. That the Christian *Vorstellung* is simple in no way compromises its sophistication, however, nor does its account of itself as a thinking religion restrict its universal

³⁶. On this subject, see S. Kow, “Hobbes Critique of Miltonian Independency”. *Animus* (www.swgc.mun.ca/animus) v.9, 2004, and T. Kirby, “The Civil Magistrate and the ‘*cura religionis*’ etc. (Same issue).

³⁷. The debate between the followers of the philosophes and of Jacobi and Schleiermacher instantiate this conflict as it stood in Hegel’s time. Hegel, however, sees it as a much broader tendency and interestingly cites Enlightenment and Mohammedanism as co-instances how, even where religion and secularity are grasped as a unity, this unity itself can resolve into opposite extremes of atheistic secularity or totalitarian theocracy.

³⁸. See D. Peddle, the article cited in note 1.

availability. On the contrary, it is in and through its emphasis on a worldly disposition and ethic that a secular outlook and interest find their adequate religious recognition.

For where Christianity is understood as completed (*vollendete*) religion, this is not to mean that among all others it is alone true, but religion strained to its limit, knowing what it is, and as such overcoming its own strict religiosity; indicative of more complete comprehension and practice in which religion has a role, but as contributing to a spirit exceeding its own. The object of Christian belief awakens the need go beyond religious imagination and ritual to a spiritual life consistent with it, but realized in a more concrete and philosophical life Hegel calls *Sittlichkeit* — ‘ethical life’. Ethical life he defines as follows:

‘Ethical life’ is the divine spirit indwelling in a self-consciousness actually present in a people, and in the individuals comprising it. It is a self-consciousness which, withdrawing into itself out of its empirical actuality, brings what is true in the latter to consciousness; having then the certainty of itself both in its own faith and conscience as in [objective] spiritual actuality.³⁹

Ethical life has its subjective reflection in a religious cultivation of a conscientious disposition and mentality, its secular realization in a polity explicitly and deliberately constituted on the basis of a principle of objective freedom. On the one side:

Only from ethical life and by ethical life is the idea of God seen to be free spirit: outside the ethical spirit therefore, it is vain to seek a true religion and religiosity.

On the other side:

Ethical life is the state reflected into its inner heart and substantiality, the state in turn the development and actualization of ethical life... The state rests on the ethical sentiment and this on the religious.

Hegel is far from intending here that the authority of the state somehow derives from religion or *vice versa*. It is

a monstrous blunder ... [to view] the relation of religion to the state as if the latter already existed for itself — springing from whatever independent power or force — while religiosity is seen as ancillary and subjective with individuals, desirable perhaps to bolster the political bulwarks ... or treated as indifferent to the ethical life of the state...

On the other hand, religion so far as it remains stubbornly positive and denies or suppresses its essential link with secular life, becomes itself an externalizing mentality, from which externalization “flows every other phase of externality: of bondage, non-spirituality, and superstition”: religion as a mere “moving of lips”, the worship of prophets and saints, the

³⁹³⁹. The following series of quotations from *Enc.* 553.

devotion to images, bones and rituals, reliance on a scripture that itself declares that ‘the letter killeth’. It promotes holiness over freedom and

Along with the principle of spiritual bondage and the application of it in religious life there can only go, in the legislative and constitutional system, a legal and ethical bondage, and in political life, a state of lawlessness and immorality..

A free state and a slavish religion are incompatible. It is silly to suppose we may try to allot them separate spheres under the impression their diverse nature will maintain an attitude of tranquility to one another and not break out in contradiction and battle.

In short, it is Hegel’s meaning that an ethical disposition and order of life — a ‘spiritual kingdom’ in this concrete sense — is at once the measure of what can be claimed subjectively as religious ‘truth’, as also the objective principle of a reasonable secular life. That the two cannot be thought separable has much to say of the history of post-Hegelian times; whether, for example, a purely liberal-democratic secular order either tolerant or dismissive of religion can expect so easily to dispose of, or appropriate to itself, the religious instincts of peoples, or whether, on the contrary, retrogression into a more or less theocratic, literalistic religiosity can hope to hold sway against the “philosophical awakening in the spirit of governments and nations of a wisdom able to discern what is actually right and reasonable in the real world”.⁴⁰

VIII Conclusion

It would seem evident even on superficial grounds that the contemporary spirit is fundamentally an ethical, philosophical one driven by the ideal and certainty of freedom. Even the most ordinary, popular language of justification respecting the standards both of personal virtue, as of a justice to which every aspect of secular life should be conformed, rest on the spontaneous appeal to the principle of freedom as if to a universally intuited truth. To the extent this intuition has gained predominance, religion in contemporary life — in the old Western democracies at least and even where still prominent in family and personal life — tends for the most part to be respectfully relegated to the background; to be ‘liberalized’ as the symbolic celebration of a spirituality whose actuality is to be found in the present world of private and public life, rather than in the beyond or in the performance of ritual speech and sacrament.

For Hegel modernity is the extended, post-religious form of Christianity, its main thrust since his time⁴¹ having been clearly weighted on the secular, ideological side, in the attempt to realize a political order which, while freedom-driven, is in some measure independent of the inward religious spirit: an eschatological humanism, a socio-economic paradise as promised by

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ For an account of Hegel’s view of his own time, see E. Diamond, “Hegel’s Defense of Monarchy”. *Animus* (www.swgc.mun.ca/animus), v.9. 2004.

various doctrines and most recently by the champions of capitalist democracy.⁴² In one form or another, this ‘secular humanism’ has become the dominant global culture within which the residue of older religious cultures persists, including Christian religious culture itself. It appeals to a freedom developed mostly on its external side, as the guarantee of the civil and economic rights of empirical individuals, and realized in a state-less global marketplace sustained by universal busyness, industry and enterprise, by unrestrained technical inventiveness, and by an experimental science that represents both nature and human nature as essence-less and indeterminate, thus meaningful only as resources available to a materializing freedom.

The deeper import of freedom — its religious, spiritual or universal meaning as the governing principle no less of nature than of human history, and realized in a communality appropriate to the inner certainty of freedom, an ethical order founded explicitly on the acknowledgment of the infinite significance of personal life — this concept of freedom is certainly very much alive in modern consciousness, since it is, after all, its underlying Christian inspiration. But it finds itself undeveloped and overwhelmed by the still dominant and increasingly depersonalizing hegemony of the economic-technocratic global culture, which latter now finds itself, at the very pinnacle of its purported success, confronted by a fierce religiosity that can only seem to it perverse and even evil, while it in turn appears to that religiosity as a wholly corrupted secularity, no less perverse or evil. This new tension between the religious and secular tendencies of modernity no longer has the external character of the wars between church and state or the ideological wars between the ‘free West’ and ‘Godless’ communism or fascism of more recent times. It is rather a tension internal to modernity itself as it seeks its way toward a more adequate balance between personal and political freedom. For the non-western cultures from which this new religiosity partly emanates have already been thoroughly imbued by the Western liberal spirit, whether through colonial, Marxist or other like influences, a spirit which they currently struggle to reconcile with their own. And Western secular culture itself finds emergent within it a conflict between a liberal left having largely lost its ideological confidence and direction, and a recrudescing fundamentalist right seeking artificially to impose potted ‘traditional Christian values’ upon political issues.

This new form of the conflict between the religious and the secular spirit thus takes place entirely within the context of the universal belief in their essential coincidence; but this within a ‘free society’ that chiefly measures its success in external terms of a global market economy. The corresponding demands of the other side, of the religious-philosophical witness to a deeper, personal, immortal freedom, are less clearly met.

⁴² The authors mentioned in note 1 write as if history has reached its final form in the liberal-democratic state; they differ only in how see this new-consummated order in relation to the wider world. Bobbitt, for example, offers a power theory of the state as originating in Machiavelli’s day (curiously, no earlier); a ‘princely state’ which through a series of mutations culminates in the global ‘market state’. The troubling feature of such histories is that they seem to assume the classical political-economic theory of the state to be the final and true account of it, whereas more subtle contemporary liberal thinking is far more conscious of the ethical underpinnings of North American freedom especially: see for example D. Peddle, “Puritanism, Enlightenment and the U.S. Constitution”. *Animus* (www.swgc.mun.ca/animus), v.3, 1998; and “Hegel’s Political Ideal: Civil Society, History and *Sittlichkeit*”. *Animus*, v.5, 2000. For Hegel himself, economic society rendered absolute yields only the ‘external’ state (*Philosophy of Right*, 157-B, 183), not the ethically constituted state, comprehensive of civil society, he had in mind.