

## Hegel's Philosophy of Religion

Paul Redding

(To appear in Graham Oppy & Nick Trakakis (eds), *History of Western Philosophy of Religion, Volume IV: Nineteenth-Century Philosophy & Religion*, (Chesam: Acumen, 2007).

### *The ambiguity of Hegel's attitude to religion*

It is said that reading her husband's posthumously published lectures on the philosophy of religion had caused the devout and pious widow, Marie Hegel, considerable distress (Pinkard 2000: 577). How could the man she knew to have been a good Lutheran express the heretical views that were to be found there? This anecdote captures well the apparent ambiguity that marked the attitude to religion of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), an ambiguity that was at the heart of the undoing of the “Hegelianism” of his followers in the years after his death.

As is well known, after Hegel's death in 1831, his followers soon split into “left” and “right” factions, and while this split is now remembered in terms of its political consequences (it was from the “left” Hegelian faction that the doctrine of Marxism was eventually to emerge), the context of the split was a religious one. A contest over the properly “Hegelian” philosophical attitude to religion had been sparked by the publication in 1835–6 of David Strauss's *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*. While the conservative right defended Hegelianism as a philosophy that reflected Christian orthodoxy, the left came to see it as a humanistic doctrine of the historical emancipation of mankind. However, while this was the first internal breach of Hegelianism, the implications of Hegel's philosophy for religious belief had been contentious since his rise to prominence in the 1820s.

Only a few years after his appointment to the chair of philosophy at the University of Berlin in 1818, Hegel started to attract accusations of “pantheism” and, a little later, “atheism” from more orthodox thinkers. Here the issues seemed to centre around the consequences of Hegel's metaphysics for the traditional issues of the

personality of God and the immortality of the soul. On the former, a defence of Hegel could appeal to the fact that Hegel had himself, in his first major work, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1808), explicitly characterized his position against Spinoza, the prototypical pantheist: while Spinoza had conceived “the absolute” as “substance”, Hegel had asserted that it had to be equally understood as “subject” (Hegel 1975: § 17). But exactly what was meant by this formula, and whether it amounted to the idea of a personal God, was, in fact, far from clear. Indeed, Hegel elsewhere clearly suggested that the existence of God was dependent on the existence of the humans who had *thoughts about* God, and for an orthodox Christian this sounded much like pantheism. On the issue of the immortality of the soul, Hegel’s defence seemed equally worrying. Hegel rarely seemed to say anything as simple as affirming or denying that the soul was immortal, but would direct his attention to the problems of the conception of time presupposed by the opposing concepts “mortal” and “immortal”.

Such aspects of Hegel’s approach were in fact symptomatic of the general relation of Hegel’s philosophy to religion that critics found objectionable. While officially declaring that philosophy and religion had the same *content*—“God”—Hegel claimed that the *conceptual* form of philosophy dealt with this concept in a more developed way than that which was achievable in the imagistic representational form of religion. Many opponents were suspicious that the concept of “God” was emptied of its proper meaning in the process of Hegel’s philosophical translations. Ultimately, then, the source of the corrosive effects of Hegel’s philosophy on religion indeed could appear to be the insistence that the content of religious belief, like everything else, be grounded on rational, in fact *logical*, considerations—the logical coherence of the system of philosophy itself—rather than on anything like revelation.

Perhaps while he was alive, the possibility that religion and philosophy, faith and reason, could coexist might have seemed to have been exemplified in the person himself. After all, despite what he preached in the lecture hall, Hegel *did* seem to be the man his wife took him to be. But after his death, and with his thoughts now distributed over a variety of very different individuals, the fissures emerged all too clearly. Hegel’s popular lectures on religion, given four times at Berlin during his 13 years there, were the first to be edited and published posthumously, and it was the

doctrine articulated in these that showed the fault line that proved the undoing of a unified Hegelian philosophy of religion, and, more generally, a unified Hegelian philosophy itself. Crucially, it was not so much the issues that concerned critics in the 1820s that were now central as much as the apparent tension between the systematic and more “historicist” aspects of Hegelianism (Jaeschke 1990, 373–5).

This general tension within Hegel’s philosophy is perhaps most clearly encapsulated in the well-known slogan from his *Philosophy of Right* that philosophy is “*its own time comprehended in thoughts*” (Hegel 1991: 21). Did this not suggest that philosophy itself is to be understood as an historical product of a culture and to be accounted for by the particular conditions of its genesis? And are not cultural products so explained thereby “explained away”? This was closer to the attitude of Marx who later wanted to replace Hegel’s idealist philosophy with “science” as it had come to be conceived in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, but such a fate for philosophy itself was first enacted for religion. Were not forms of religion such as Christianity to be explained away genetically in terms of their evolution under conditions that perhaps no longer obtained? Of course, from his point of view, by grounding religion in *conceptual* truth, Hegel had thought he was *saving* it from the types of secular reductive analyses that were common during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover rather than approach Christianity as just one of many possible forms taken by religious belief, he took it to be the “absolute” or “consummate” religion. If Hegel’s “left” successors were bringing out the essential features of Hegelianism, then these would seem to be features at odds with the intentions of its founder.

To understand the conflicting attempts to grapple with the significance of religion within Hegel’s philosophy it is necessary to review some of the major parameters of that cultural field within which Hegel’s thought had developed and which had left their distinct traces in his mature philosophy—traces that Hegel believed could be integrated into his unified system if only one understood correctly the “logic” of that conceptual unification.

## *Sources of Hegel's Philosophy of Religion*

### Kant's moral religion

Any attempt to understand Hegel cannot bypass the figure of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who had transformed the German-speaking intellectual world in the 1780s with his “critical” philosophy. All three of his “Critiques”, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781 and 1787), the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), had implications for religion, and in 1792 Kant addressed the issue directly in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant had purportedly refuted traditional philosophical proofs for the *existence* of God. But in that work, and in a more developed form in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant had suggested another way of reconciling philosophy and religion by claiming the “*idea*” of God to be necessary for all rational beings. While not able to be secured as an existent known through theoretical reason, God was nevertheless a necessary “postulate” of practical, that is, *moral* reasoning, and Kant thought he had demonstrated the necessity of *that*.

Kant went on to sketch out this idea in terms of the notion that religious representations gave symbolic *exhibition* [*Darstellung*] to fundamentally *moral* ideas, and with this his attitude to religion seemed to be close to such enlightened thinkers as G. E. Lessing, who had interpreted the Christian myths, taken to be *literally* false, as providing a metaphorical presentation of some deep *moral* truths (Allison 1986: 133–4). Thus in his *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant sketches a view of the life of Christ as a moral exemplar. While not *denying* that Jesus was “a supernaturally begotten human being”, he nevertheless points out that “from a practical point of view any such presupposition is of no benefit to us, since the prototype which we see embedded in this apparition must be sought in us as well” (Kant 1996: 106).

To orthodox believers this seemed dangerously close to reducing God to the status of a *mere* psychological or subjective idea. Indeed, the very project of interpreting the nature of religious belief from within a rationalistic philosophical perspective had been famously attacked by F. H. Jacobi, who had insisted that faith

should not be exposed to the corrosive effects of reflective reason. The rationalistic philosophical attitude to such normative beliefs would always lead to “nihilism”, he claimed, because the enlightenment demand to find rational grounds for any belief would always result in an endless regress of reason-giving. To avoid such regress one needed something like a “leap” of faith or belief [*Glauben*], a notion to which he gave a Humean, empiricist gloss. Since ungrounded faith/belief was required in order any belief in the objective world at all, one was thereby justified in maintaining an ungrounded belief in a personal God, who could be known immediately and intuitively in a type of immediately felt conviction. In fact, Jacobi’s critique of Kant’s rationalism appeared in the context of his critique of the doctrine of *another* philosopher whose influence would be deeply felt in Hegel’s philosophy of religion: Spinoza.

#### Spinoza and pantheism

Jacobi’s attack on Kant was made in the second (1789) edition of a book, *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn*, first published in 1785, in which he had initiated within German letters what came to be known as the “pantheism-dispute”. There he related how Lessing, one of the culture’s most respected figures, had professed to him his belief in pantheism not long before his death. Not only had Lessing affirmed the pantheist doctrine of “*Hen kai Pan*” (identifying God as the “one and all”), he had even claimed that Leibniz had been “a Spinozist at heart” (Jacobi 2005: 243 and 247). Jacobi had intended this as a warning: philosophical thought when practiced free from the constraints of religion would lead to the “atheistic” materialism that Spinoza was thought to exemplify, but he inadvertently succeeded in attracting many of Hegel’s generation to Spinozism itself.

The “Spinoza-dispute” had raged in the years (1788–93) during which Hegel was a student of theology at the Tübingen seminary. For Hegel, this was a period of close friendship with fellow seminarians Friedrich Schelling and Friedrich Hölderlin, and in the 1790s all three were clearly attracted to Spinozistic pantheism (Pinkard 2000: 31–2). Spinozist ideas would be developed by Schelling in particular in his precocious philosophical writings from the mid 1790s, but the form of Spinozism

embraced there was meant to be the antithesis of the atheistic materialism of Jacobi's account. Schelling became intent on showing that Spinozism, rather than being *nihilistic* was in fact compatible with the human freedom that Kant had put at the centre of philosophy with his insistence on the primacy of pure *practical*, not theoretical, reason. Schelling also gave to his Spinozism a *neo-platonic* twist, and the philosophy of Schelling and, especially, after him, Hegel, showed clear features of the type of thought found in the Platonism of late antique philosophers like Plotinus and Proclus (Beierwaltes 2004; Vieillard-Baron 1979). Importantly it was these neo-platonist, and especially *Proclean* features, that would be central to Hegel's understanding of Christianity, and especially the doctrine of the trinity, as well as to his criticisms of Spinoza.

#### Neo-Platonism.

The neoplatonistic thought of Plotinus and Proclus had been a recurring feature of German religious and philosophical thought since the late middle ages, having appeared in influential thinkers like Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa and, later, Leibniz and Jacob Böhme. In the 1780s and 90s, there seems to have been a revival of Platonist and Neoplatonist thought in the German states, and this would come to be especially influential on early "romanticism". During the 1790s, the poet-philosopher Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg, 1772–1801) had even claimed to find similarities between the views of Plotinus on the one hand, and Kant and Fichte on the other (Beierwaltes 2004: 87–8). In retrospect, this does not seem too fanciful.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had interpreted Plato's "ideas" as non-empirical ("pure", "transcendental") concepts which while not *constitutive* of any knowledge claims, were nevertheless essential for *regulating* all rational scientific inquiry with its drive to *unify* knowledge. The Platonic conception of the cosmos as a unified whole, he noted, expresses the goal of such explanatory unification: "only the whole of its combination in the *totality of a world* is fully adequate to its idea" (Kant 1998: A318/B374–5, emphasis added). But while Plato had thought of his "ideas" as archetypes for things in themselves, for Kant, Plato's ideas were rightly understood as demands for the unification of the understanding and, in relation to practical reason, the universalization of one's practical maxims.

In the “Transcendental Dialectic” of the first *Critique*, Kant had traced the origin of the illegitimate *metaphysical* concept of God to the desire to grasp the ultimate ground of the unified cosmos. To take the “idea” associated with a particular form of reasoning (based on the use of the disjunctive syllogism) in a *constitutive* rather than regulative way, and to “realize,” “hypostatize” and “personalize” this idea, would result in the traditional theistic concept of God (Kant 1998: A583/B611n). This was all part of Kant’s critique of a metaphysical theology, but with the notion of his regulative “idea” of a unified cosmos, Kant had opened his critical framework to Hegel’s interpretation in which a quite different conception of the logical status of the “idea” would be cashed out in distinctly *Proclean* terms. By criticizing the attribution of “being” to “the one”—Hegel’s “absolute”—Proclus had opposed the *hypostatization* of the totality of finite things in a way *not unlike* that of Kant, but, at least in his own eyes, Hegel had not derived the same *skeptical* conclusions about the human capacity to *know* the absolute.

#### Schleiermacher and the religion of *feeling*

Given Jacobi’s appeal to the “leap of faith” to halt the rationalistic demand for the ground of any claim, it is not surprising that he would appeal to a type of conviction based on the raw immediate *feeling of certainty*. Jacobi himself was not a romantic, but this appeal to felt certainty was something that the romantic generation took seriously, and it was central to the theology of Hegel’s Berlin contemporary and opponent, F. D. E. Schleiermacher.

Schleiermacher, who had been a member of the Berlin circle of “early romantics” and friend and associate of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, had published the widely influential *Speeches on Religion to its Cultural Despisers* in 1800 (Schleiermacher 1996), a text generally directed against the rationalist demand that religious belief be given a ground in *reason*. Schleiermacher’s claim was that religious belief was based in neither theoretical nor moral reason, but in a type of pre-reflective consciousness closer to an aesthetic apprehension of the world. Schleiermacher *too* had been influenced by the Spinozist and Neoplatonic revival of the 1780s and 90s, but had understood this in a more “mystical” than rationalist way.

In religious experience one grasped one's unity with the whole of existence, a unity that was ruptured by the reflective consciousness in which the thinker grasped themselves as a subject standing over against the world as object. What one grasped in religious feeling was a sense of one's "absolute dependence" on the whole of which one had an immediate intuition. Schleiermacher's appeal to *feeling* here thus was a way of moving beyond Kant while agreeing with the limitations of theoretical *reason*.

Hegel was consistently opposed to any such attempts to base a religious or any other orientation on the feelings of the "heart" rather than on the conceptuality of reason, and lashed out at Schleiermacher's theology (Hegel 2002: 347–8). For Hegel, a retreat to feeling was a consequence of Kant's rejection of the idea of *rational* knowledge of God (343–5). However, he was *equally* critical of any *abstract opposing* of cognition to feeling. The immediacy of feeling was to be given a place in reason, and a proper conception of reason itself would show how such feelings could be integrated into a larger, rational whole. Thus, like his romantic contemporaries, Hegel denounced a conception of a distanced dry cognition that conceived itself as the antithesis of feeling—a stance characterized as the finite "understanding" (*der Verstand*), and identified with the approach of the empirical sciences. In contrast to this he appealed to a richer inferential concept of "reason" (*die Vernunft*) which allowed the cognition of the world in its Platonic unity—the concept of reason that Kant had restricted to merely "regulative" status. In this way, then, his way beyond the framework within which Kant had reduced religious ideas to seeming subjective "postulates" had elements in common with that of his romantic opponents.

### The Historicity of Spirit

Another strand Hegel attempted to incorporate into the philosophical system within which he intended to preserve an appropriately normative significance for religion was the one that finally proved to be the undoing of the Hegelian movement after his death. This was a decidedly *genetic* and *historical* form of analysis of cultural phenomena that can be related back to the work of J. G. Herder, a seminal thinker who introduced an "expressivist" or "hermeneutic" philosophical approach to human existence with the idea that different historical communities had to be understood in

terms of the distinct socially based forms of mentality or “spirit” (*Geist*) that characterized their art, institutions, and modes of thought (Taylor 1975: ch 2). Such an expressivist approach was clearly incompatible with dualistic conceptions of mind and body, and Herder was correspondingly attracted to a form of Spinozist pantheism.

It is easy to see how such a conception of history might engender ambiguities that sit uneasily with Hegel’s more systematic thought. Already in Herder there seems to be a tension between the more “enlightenment” conception of history as a narrative in which “reason” and “humanity” are progressively realized—a conception of history inherited by Hegel—and a more relativistic one in which history presents a panorama of distinct and incommensurable forms of human life and mentality (Forster 2002: xxvi–xxviii). Such relativistic reflection can easily lead to the idea that one’s own defining culture and religion is, at best, *just another* perspectival realization of some eternal truth to which *all* rival cultures and religions give equal expression, and it can extend to the idea that one’s religion is *merely* an historical product illegitimately claiming universal status. Hegel argued that such a reduction of religion to finite historical events was *itself* a result of reducing reason to the finite understanding. However, if he succeeded in reconciling these distinct attitudes to history, it is clear that his followers did not.

Hegel was confident that his *logic* provided a framework within which such disparate elements could be ultimately reconciled. The key to understanding the way he purported to do this is to examine his conception of religion within the framework that he generated by generalizing Herder’s account of “spirit”.

### *The Place of Religion within Hegel’s System of Spirit*

Hegel had apparently been interested in the history of religions from his schooldays, and his first writings after leaving the Tübingen seminary were concerned with the contrast between the naturalness of the folk religions of ancient Greece and the “positivity” of the succeeding Christianity in which an “external” doctrinal form was imposed upon the religious community (Hegel 1948). While containing elements of Hegel’s distinctive approach, such works belong to the pre-history of Hegel’s mature philosophy commencing with the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, completed in Jena in

1807, in which the basic structure of Hegel's characteristic thought emerge. To get the clearest picture of the framework of "spirit" within which religious thought is assigned its distinctive role, however, we must consider Hegel's systematic thought to which the *Phenomenology* was meant to be an introduction. This was the system presented in Hegel's *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*.

It is no coincidence that the three parts of the *Encyclopaedia*—*Logic*, *Philosophy of Nature*, and *Philosophy of Spirit*—correspond to the structure of the trinity, as in Hegel's system, the myths of Christianity, the most developed form of religion, are meant to give symbolic expression to the conceptual architectonic from which Hegel's own system is constructed. It is within the *Philosophy of Spirit* that Hegel's explicit account of religion is to be found.

The triadic structure of the *Encyclopaedia* is reproduced within the structure of the *Philosophy of Spirit* itself, with spirit being divided into "subjective", "objective" and "absolute" spirit (Hegel 1971). The philosophy of *subjective spirit* is effectively Hegel's philosophy of mind, while the "spirit" of *objective spirit* is closer to that of Herderian historicist hermeneutics. The objective spirit of a culture is characterized by those action-guiding world interpretations and forms of life that can be sedimented and institutionalized into the "ethical substance [*Sittlichkeit*]" into which an individual has their "second birth" and from which they acquire their "second nature". That is, these normative structures form the conditions under which living individuals acquire "self-consciousness" (or what would now be called "intentionality") and in turn they need to be embodied within the self-consciously lived lives of such individuals. Subjective and objective mind are then, we might say, mutually presupposing. Where Hegel's account of spirit departs from the more hermeneutic approaches deriving from Herder, however, is his account of "absolute spirit", and it is to *absolute* rather than objective spirit that religion properly belongs.

In Hegel's mature account, "art", "religion" and "philosophy" make up "absolute spirit", and while each presents to human experience and knowledge the same *content*, which will variously be called "God" or "the Idea" depending on which of the realms this content is cognized from, each presents it in a different *medium*. Reflecting both historical and conceptual forms of progression, the development is

one from a form of culture such as that found in ancient Greece, where the felt normativity of the aesthetic sensuous properties of perceivable things (as with the beauty of a statue of Apollo, for example) helps in securing their normative status, to modern “enlightened” culture, where normative status is meant to be secured entirely *rationally* through argumentative, conceptual means.

“Religion” presents its content in a type of imagistic, or story telling discourse (Hegel’s term “*Vorstellung*” is here generally translated as “picture-language”), a form of representation that is located between the sort of immediately effective beauty of sensuous “art” and the mediated nature of “philosophy”. Under “art” Hegel includes the types of folk religion of the ancient world in which art and religion are not conceived as separate realms as in the modern world, while the prototype of “religion” is effectively Christianity in which the vehicle within which the divine has been revealed in the world is no longer a direct sensuous presence, but has to be actively recalled and recounted within the memory of the community. Hegel links the representational *medium* of religion thus conceived to the *mode* in which this content is maintained—that of “‘faith’ ... something subjective, as opposed to which the knowledge of necessity is termed objective” (Hegel 1988: 136). The only *ground* of faith can be that of “*authority*, the fact that others—those who matter to me, those whom I revere and in whom I have confidence that they know what is true—believe it, they are in possession of this knowledge” (Hegel 1988: 137). In contrast, genuine knowledge has *objective* grounds: the conceptual medium of thought allows its contents to be mediated, and “to mediated knowledge belongs conclusion from one thing to another, dependence, conditionality of one determination upon another, i.e., the form of reflection” (156). Thus the characteristics of conceptual thought for Hegel said something about the type of community that allows its members to live rationally in this way: it must be one that foregoes ungrounded authority in the regulation of belief and action.

For Hegel, this “reflected” or “mediated” form of knowledge was particularly at home in modern life: modern society was undergoing radical changes such that appeals to human reason and freedom were replacing traditional appeals to authority, and this had to imply that orthodox Christianity, itself a religion which had taken this imagistic, allegorical form of thought to its limits, was by necessity transformed into a

more rational form. Whether this newly emerging way of life represented the full development of Christianity or the transition to a distinctly *post-religious* form of life would be the question that divided Hegel's followers after his death. While Hegel seemed himself intent on *reconciling* faith and reason, he was unambiguous as to which form of representation was afforded ultimate authority.

By thinking in terms of the Concept and grasping this content in thought, philosophy has this advantage over the pictorial thinking of religion, that it understands both, for it understands religion and can do justice to it ... and it understands itself too. But the reverse is not true. By taking its stand on pictorial thinking, religion as such knows itself only in thinking of that kind, not in philosophy, i.e., not in concepts, in universal categories of thought.  
(Hegel 1985: 141–2)

### *A Religion of the Philosophers*

The dominant role played by conceptual thought in defining the status of religion means that Hegel's "God" exemplifies that to which Pascal had referred negatively as the "God of the philosophers", and while it is important that Hegel thought of his God as the Christian God, his version of this God can only be understood against the background of *Greek* philosophical theology. Crucially, Hegel's *Philosophy of Spirit* concludes with a quote from Aristotle's account of divine thinking in the *Metaphysics*, book 12 chapter 9 (Hegel 1971: § 577) in which "*theos*" is characterized as a process of pure thinking that is directed to no object independent of itself, but which is, somehow, its *own* content. Divine thinking is just the thinking *of* thinking itself "*noesis noeseos noesis*" (Aristotle 1960: 1074b 33–35). What Aristotle's conception of the pure activity, *energia*, of divine thought had seemingly provided to Hegel was an alternative to *Plato's* static version of "the idea" which he saw as lacking the principles of "life" and "subjectivity" (Hegel 1995: vol II, 139). "While, therefore, with Plato ... the Idea as only abstractly identical with itself, in Aristotle there is added and made conspicuous the moment of negativity, not as change, nor yet as nullity, but as difference or determination" (140). In fact, what is seen here in Aristotle's conception of God is effectively that to which Hegel had appealed in the *Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit* in criticism of Spinoza's pantheism, "the

living Substance ... being which is in truth *Subject*. ... pure, *simple negativity*” (Hegel 1975: § 18).

We need not concern ourselves with the interpretative adequacy of Hegel’s reading of Aristotle’s *noesis noeseos* doctrine, but simply note how it is this allegedly “speculative” dimension of Aristotle that allows Hegel to link Aristotle to subsequent forms of thought. First, it is linked to what for Hegel was the most developed form of Greek philosophy, late-antique neo-platonism, which could equally be considered a form of neo-*aristotelianism* (Hegel 1995: vol II, 381), especially in its Proclean form (438), and thereby to the *trinitarianism* of the succeeding Christian theology (440–9) which neo-platonism had influenced. Next, Aristotle is linked to *post-Kantian* views about the nature of individual subjectivity developed, especially, by Fichte, in which the thinking subject is no longer thought of as a “substance”, but as an activity in which the “positing” of a plurality of objects of consciousness is at the same time the positing of itself as the unitary subject *for whom* those objects exist. With Proclus this dialectic of the one and the many had reached the most developed phase capable of antique thought, but with Fichte, this neo-platonic dialectic was now reproduced at the level of individual, *actual* consciousnesses.<sup>1</sup>

In the earliest of his post-Tübingen theological writings, Hegel had been attracted to the “natural” folk religions of Greece in contrast to the “positivity” of Christianity, but he soon moved to an attitude more favourable to Christianity, and the passage from Aristotle’s “*theos*” to the Christian God is significant in this regard.

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<sup>1</sup> Ultimately with Proclus the process of the self-differentiation of “the one” into the many that are then reunited with the one, is such that the *independence* of the plurality of individual substances—that which is an important truth for the modern standpoint of individual consciousness—is lost (Hegel 1995: vol II, 436–7). Intimations of the role of individual consciousness are found in Proclus’ account of the role of magic and theurgy (449), but the development of such ideas was only possible in the context of the transition to *Christianity* in which divine consciousness was given a finite individual form.

Aristotle's *theos* is the pure activity of thinking,<sup>2</sup> but the *christian* God had to forego this joyous self-sufficiency. While the neo-platonists had developed the idea of God's self-differentiating egress and return, the christian God had externalized himself into the painful and *finite* sphere of objectivity—he had *become man* and this, for Hegel, had enabled God *to achieve* the self-consciousness that was fitting *for* God. The thinking behind this seems to be the account of the conditions of self-consciousness that Hegel had first given in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged” (Hegel 1975: § 178). To fully *become* God, God had to become *man* capable of *recognizing* God. As Hegel bluntly puts it in the *Philosophy of Spirit*: “God is God only in so far as he knows himself: his self-consciousness is, further, a self-consciousness in man and man's knowledge *of* God, which proceeds to man's self-knowledge *in* God”, (Hegel 1971: § 564). But on becoming a man God is condemned to *die*, and the death of the God-man Jesus means that God then can only live on as the third “person” of the trinity, the holy “spirit”. But this spirit is just that which is expressed in the forms of consciousness and the practices of the Christian community.

Again, here we see the ambiguity of Hegel's theology. Given the symbolic meaning of the biblical narratives, is the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus to be understood simply as affirming the conditions under which the “divine” element of Aristotelian *nous* in humans can historically develop? That is, is what is at issue simply Hegel's innovative theory of the *socially recognitive* conditions of self-consciousness and reason? On such a reading, the path to the left-Hegelians seems clear. On the other hand, while Hegel's God is clearly an immanent *this-worldly* one, dependent on human recognition, it is also clear that he cannot be reduced to any type of anthropocentric projection. The recognitive practices within which God dwells—practices like those of confession and forgiveness, for example (Hegel 1975: § 670)—seemingly could not exist *without* the acknowledgement *by* the members of community of the “divine” spirit of those practices, that is, their normative status.

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<sup>2</sup> Hegel effectively equates Aristotle's *noesis noeseos* with the first person of the trinity: “Thought, as the object of thought, is nothing else than the absolute Idea regarded as in itself, the Father.” Hegel 1995: vol. II, p. 149.

That God's mind is, as it were, distributed across the minds of finite human beings, and is reliant on the acts of those finite beings, does not *disqualify* it from being a mind in its own right, nor reduce it to the status of a *mere* fiction. The complex and controversial interpretative questions about Hegel's philosophical theology thus become inextricably tied up with equally complex and controversial questions about the nature of Hegel's philosophy in general.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I wish to thank Paolo Diego Bubbio for helpful discussions on Hegel's philosophy of religion.

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