

Kant and Hegel - their religious philosophies compared

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Despite the existence of a Promethean strain in the history of western thought from the Pre-Socratics down to the time of Kant and Hegel, it is fair to say that mankind generally had some kind of belief in the gods or in the one God. Even before recorded history began, people felt surrounded on all sides by superior supernatural beings who inspired terror and who could only be placated by sacrifice – human, animal and plant – the stage of animism. Since the time of Kant and Hegel, despite the rapid and growing secularization of society and the decline of overt acts of religion in European societies which lead the world in freedom and material development, census figures show that a large number of people still hold some kind of religious belief.

The subject of religion in Kant and Hegel is too wide to be dealt with comprehensibly in a paper of this kind, and I shall be looking very briefly at three areas, viz., epistemology where God is presupposed in both systems, freedom through which the religious dimension in human life is expressed, and the possibility of an after-life traditionally treated under the title of the immortality of the soul. These have been the fundamental issues that have engaged the minds of the great system-builders in philosophy from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and Hegel.

It should therefore not come as a surprise to see religion included in a series of topics treating the philosophies of the Plato and Aristotle of the modern world – Kant and Hegel. In the history of western thought over the last two and a half thousand years these areas have been repeatedly researched from slightly different standpoints and varying perspectives. Mankind's relation to its physical, moral, social and religious environments has been explored within the context of rational knowledge – its methods and limits. There were times when serious doubts of an extreme nature were entertained about human existence in the world, and its meaning. One such period occurred after the total philosophies of those two Greek giants of antiquity. There are those who would say that there has been a similar occurrence in the modern world after Kant and Hegel, which came to full expression in this century.

It was the rise of Christianity that breathed new life into the world of thought and action after that period of skepticism that followed Plato and Aristotle, and there are some of us who hope that a renewed Christianity could do the same in the twenty-first century. The value of Kant and Hegel for us today would be to rekindle the fire that they started after the heat of the Enlightenment has decreased. The battle for freedom of thought and expression has been won from the twin agents of repression – Church and State - and reason alone reigns supreme. In the Germany of Kant and Hegel the reaction to this was for faith to take refuge in its own religious world and sustain itself on feeling. The critical philosophy of Kant systematized knowledge of the sensuous world, showing that

it was dependent on the categories of the understanding which were transcendental in character. Reason had its theoretical as well as its practical side. The latter concerned human relationships which reflected the moral law summed up in the principle that one should so act that the maxim of the action is universally recognized as valid – *the Categorical Imperative*. Two worlds were then left facing each other – the world of necessity (nature) and the world of freedom (morality). Both of these worlds need a ground. Despite all that could be known through the categories the thing-in-itself, the absolute ground, could not be known. Kant had been forced to admit of a supersensible reality, but nothing could be known of it. His seminal discovery was the possibility of absolute knowledge. For Kant this Being is God – but only as a postulate for Reason – practical and theoretical. Everything could be explained from this metaphysical postulate.

Hegel had much praise for Kant whom he thought was the first philosopher in the modern world to discover the possibility of absolute knowledge, starting out from an observation of natural phenomena. He felt, however, that Kant's defect was that the categories were static instead of dynamic. They all in their separate ways reached back to a common ground but did not interact with each other. Using those very categories which threw up antinomies, Hegel showed that by energizing them (the term he uses is **Spirit**) they resolved themselves into higher unities as they moved from stage to stage. What seemed to Kant so fixed in their opposition now flow into each other and are sublated (aufgehoben) into a higher synthesis which becomes a new thesis. This is the real force of the word 'dialectic' – from the Greek verb *dialegeomai* 'I think something through'.

The object of the dialectic is to reach a final unity since the human mind cannot rest in a dualism. This final union, Community, is the Absolute Being – God. This is at the heart of Hegel's entire philosophical corpus. I want particularly to emphasise the centrality of God in Hegel's epistemology since it seems to me that because of the secular nature of much of present-day thought, even Neo-Hegelians are ashamed to include this essential dimension in their interpretation of Hegel. In this respect I am pleased to see such an unqualified recognition of this fact in Innwood's recently published *A Hegel's Dictionary*. He states there "In a wide sense, Hegel believes, his whole system (and philosophy in general) is theology, since it (like religion) is concerned with God or the Absolute." P.254. In the introduction to his *Science of Logic* Hegel explicitly states in relation to the content of pure science which is objective thinking leading to absolute truths:

logic is to be understood as the system of pure reason, as the realm of pure thought. This realm is truth as it is without veil and in its own absolute nature. It can therefore be said that this content is the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and a finite mind. *Science of Logic*, p. 50.

Throughout most of the *Smaller Logic* (the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences – Part 1*) Hegel saw the need to refer to God and religion in explicit terms. There are far too many references to list, but I would like you to get the feel of those lectures:

Religion is the mode, the type of consciousness, in which the truth is present for all men, or for all levels of education; but scientific cognition is a particular consciousness of truth, and not everyone, indeed only a few men, undertake the labour of it. **The basic import is the same**, but just as Homer says about certain things that they have two names, one in the language of the Gods, and the other on the tongues of us men, the creatures of a day, so, too, there are two tongues for that import. The tongue of feeling of representation, and of the thinking that rests in the finite categories and one-sided abstractions of understanding, and the tongue of the concrete Concept. The foundation of scientific cognition is the inner basic import, the Idea that dwells in it, and the vitality of that Idea which is stirring in the spirit; just as religion involves no less a thoroughly disciplined heart and mind, a spirit awakened to awareness, and a fully formed import.

As long as religion has a creed, a doctrine, and a dogmatics, philosophy can concern itself with that, and can in that way unite itself as such with religion. But here again (the first caveat referred to the fact that religion had withdrawn itself into the area of piety as feeling whose import was impoverished or barren) – here again, this is not to be taken up in the manner of the wrongly separative understanding in which our modern religious attitude is caught up. This attitude represents religion and philosophy as mutually exclusive; or as being generally separate to such a degree that they consequently only link up in an external way. Instead, what is implied by all that we have said so far is that there may be religion without philosophy, but there cannot be philosophy without religion, because philosophy includes religion within it. *Smaller Logic*, pp. 11, 12

In the very opening paragraphs of the Introduction to the work, Hegel says that both philosophy and religion:

have the **truth** in the historical sense of the word as their object, for both hold that **God** and **God alone** is the truth. Both of them also go on to deal with the realms of the finite, with **nature** and the **human spirit**, and with their relation to each other and to God as their truth. p. 24

In epistemological terms there is a very important job for both Kant and Hegel scholars to do. It is not enough to say with Kant that Ultimate Reality is unknowable. What would be the point of assuming a God about whom one can know nothing? And what about the truth of reality? The Greek language has the same word for both truth and reality – *aletheia*. It is also not enough to say that God can neither be proved nor disproved, so either choice is safe. This stark dualism is healthy neither for the intellect nor for the emotions. If Hegel is right in seeing God as Spirit unfolding Himself through the world of nature and also the freedom of self-consciousness, uniting experiences of every kind; if the necessary Ground of all knowledge and activity is demonstrable to human reason, a way must be found to communicate this assurance to the millions who are in doubt. The chasm that exists between faith and knowledge, science and religion, reason and revelation still needs to be bridged. A leap of faith with Kierkegaard still leaves us with

two separate worlds. The abandonment of the search for universals, for truth, with Nietzsche is unacceptable.

There is another epistemological problem, less so with Kant than with Hegel since for Kant God is only a postulate and so, even though necessary, can be replaced without the whole moral edifice collapsing. Not so with Hegel. From start to finish God – the Absolute Spirit – is developing and returning into Himself in a circular fashion. Like Marx many find the transitions in Hegel difficult to follow or accept, but Hegel maintains this dynamism and circularity of the *Ens Realissimum*. If today Hegelian philosophers can make no use of the Concept, God, in their search for truth and meaning, with what will it be replaced if Hegel's theory of knowledge is to be built on? In other words, can Hegel's epistemology survive the removal of God from it?

Because of the history of the Caribbean region the influence of western thought has permeated our societies to an almost total degree despite the racial origin of most of our people. There are isolated resonances of the African ancestry and a more pronounced but less direct involvement with the Indian continent. While welcoming the efforts being made to re-awaken consciousness of their ancestral homes among those of African and Indian descent, I fear that time will overtake us, if it has not already done so, because of ever-increasing rapid communications in a global environment. There is need, therefore, of a two-pronged approach: a study of the history of Philosophy (including oriental philosophy), and contemporary philosophies.

Arising from the contributions of Kant and Hegel to the Philosophy of Religion, it is not difficult to notice a parallel situation in the present state of religious belief. The emotional aspect has outstripped the cognitive, and religion is being asked to provide entertainment in an ever-increasing hedonist age. St. Anselm's dicta "fides quarens intellectum" (faith seeking understanding) and "credo ut intelligam" (I believe in order that I might understand) would find no place in today's search for God, if indeed there is a search. Caribbean life, generally speaking, is conducted for the most part on the basis of feeling. It would therefore be unrealistic to expect to find much thought in the sphere of religion. Much that passes for religion is mere religiosity, out of which it is hoped, will come something authentic. There ought to be a genuine search for God.