

The (Dim) Future of Theism: Insights from the Hegelian Left

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It is my contention that the social form that we call religion (as defined in the social sciences) is an evolved part of the human being. I have argued this in detail in other places.¹ Here I would like to discuss one feature of that view. The ideas that inform religion, like all of reality, are an evolving phenomenon, a becoming if you will. We see this in the global development of religion from the magical thinking of so-called Basic Religion through the sophisticated developments of Western monism (its monotheism) and Eastern oneness or nothingness and on to post-theistic forms of theology.² These are incredible intellectual developments, but what is the future? I maintain it will be monistic and naturalistic. I personally hope to contribute theology in which the Dialectic of Hegelian philosophy replaces the divine, but the religion of the future will have many forms with converging metaphysics, converging on post-theism. The outline of how and why I predict this (dim) future for theism is what follows. It is an argument I am offering with great hopefulness, here illustrating it via an argument using a conventional understanding of G.F.W. Hegel but arguing a more specific conclusion. The vision is one of human community in which a converging religious vision is the great facilitator. It was arguably Hegel's vision, just not in its specific details.

The wonderful scholar who translated Hegel's *History* offered this starting point for my voyage into Hegel:

Some thinkers accepted the content of his [Hegel's] philosophy and opposed its form. They became conservatives and so-called "Hegelians of the Right." Other thinkers accepted the form of his philosophy and opposed its content. They

¹ Richard Curtis, *What is Religion? On the Nature of the Human Mind and the Role of Religion (With or Without God)*, (Seattle: Dialectical Publishers, 2007).

² The most influential early form was probably that of Thomas J.J. Altizer's "Death of God Theology."

became revolutionaries and “Hegelians of the Left.” The power of Hegel's philosophy lies in its form rather than its content.³

Part One (Universality): Hegel's Freedom and Universal Freedom

The original goal of this paper was to find the necessary conditions for human freedom and it seemed, “Universal Freedom,” as G.W.F. Hegel used the term was a useful place to start. Where I ended was with the perhaps surprising conclusion that Universal Freedom, which actually is a reasonable understanding of what it means for all humans to be free, entails atheism. I was surprised, though it may not be surprising that I am an atheist (just interested in theology). Not everyone finds Hegel compelling, but this argument is intriguing, nonetheless, I hope. I will explore Hegel’s ideas about history and religion as a way of arguing that full human freedom requires a construction of religion that has transcended theism (as a power over and above humans that is contradictory with the notion of freedom, as Hegel himself argued). I start with Hegel’s understanding of history, which perhaps requires us to start with Hegel himself and ask why Hegel and Hegelian philosophy. One enthusiast offered this:

Indeed, such are the crises which have befallen the Christian West in the last half century that it may safely be said that, were he alive today, so realistic a philosopher as Hegel would not be a Hegelian. What contemporary significance, then, attaches to the Hegelian philosophy? One possible answer is: no significance.⁴

Even though Emil Fackenheim may have acknowledged that one option for a current understanding of Hegel's work is that we need not bother, this is clearly not the option he chose before writing his celebrated book. There is a power to Hegelian philosophy that encourages people to continue to read Hegel, to argue over interpretations, and to make use of his

³ Robert S. Hartman, "Introduction," to *Reason in History: A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History* by G.W.F. Hegel, trans. Robert S. Hartman (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1953), xi.

philosophical and historical insights. In this paper I would like to make specific use of Hegel's Philosophy of Religion. I will do this in a way that Hegel himself might have perceived as an injustice, but it will be in the spirit of his thinking and grounded in his lectures. After all, "... with all this attention focussed on Hegel, his actual synthesis is quite dead. That is no one actually believes his central ontological thesis, that the universe is posited by a Spirit whose essence is rational necessity."⁵ Still he is interesting and compelling, so one must be creative in ways that Hegel could not have anticipated. Another enthusiast claims, "Much, if not most, important religious thought until today is post-Hegelian in essence as well as in time."⁶

How then should Hegel's real and genuinely powerful insights into history and philosophy, into the nature of human religious experience and – most especially – the very human drive for freedom be understood? One traditional answer is as Robert Hartman noted, expropriating the form, which is the most valuable gem in Hegel's vast writings. This form is his celebrated dialectic. If I can safely reject that equally celebrated central ontological thesis, the content, then a new one must be found. For my purposes here I will adopt a naturalist content. But in deference to the subject of religion I will focus on what the Marxist tradition calls “Superstructural” issues, leaving the more detailed analysis of the material history behind this reinterpretation for future endeavors.

This form then that has been so influential is expressed in Hegel's Logic. According to Peter Hodgson, "The logical deep structure is grounded in the dialectic of the syllogism, which is the basic movement of thought itself."⁷ Hegel's Logic is based on two convictions, "One is that

⁴ Emil Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), 224.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 538.

⁶ Fackenheim, 225.

⁷ Peter C. Hodgson, "Editorial Introduction" to *Lectures in the Philosophy of Religion: One-Volume Edition, The Lectures of 1827* by G.W.F. Hegel, trans. R.F. Brown, P.C. Hodgson, J.M. Stewart, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 12.

Reality is dialectical. The other is that the true philosophical thought is dialectical."⁸ Hodgson goes on, "In Hegel's basic philosophical ordering, P [particularity] assumes the middle position so that the sequence is U-P-I [universality, particularity, individuality]."⁹ I take Hodgson to be saying that the thesis is universal, the antithesis particular, and the synthesis is individual (to use the more common language). This is the form that lies behind all of Hegel's thought, and will guide me here as I undertake a speculative understanding of the role of freedom in the philosophy of religion. Hegel himself said, "When man is posited as the highest it follows that he does not respect himself. Only with the consciousness of a higher Being does man reach a standpoint from which he can respect himself truly."¹⁰ What should be clear by now is that I think he was mistaken in that conclusion (indeed he has contradicted himself, as is clear below). To borrow a phrase, I will stand Hegel's Philosophy of Religion on its feet, beginning with freedom.

Another expert scholar tells us, "No concept is more central to Hegel's philosophy than his concept of freedom."¹¹ It is Spirit's developing consciousness of freedom (discussed in more detail below) that provides the engine of all history. This freedom is manifest in human and religious history, the standpoint of this discussion, even though for Hegel it is Spirit's freedom that is really at issue. These are interrelated for him: "But Hegel is suggesting that we should see the evolution of religion in human society as more than just the evolution of human consciousness."¹² The evolution, according to Hegel, is Spirit's even though it takes place in human history, in human communities. Another scholar adds, "The wholly universal vocation of

⁸ Fackenheim, 27.

⁹ Hodgson, *Lectures*, 13.

¹⁰ Fackenheim, 120n.

¹¹ Richard L. Schacht, "Hegel on Freedom" in *Hegel: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 289.

¹² Taylor, 197.

the community in which Spirit is present is to realize the freedom and rationality of the self-conscious subjects who make up the community."¹³ Hegel thus offers the tools for understanding not just his Absolute Idealist version of this history, but very real and material human history as well.

Freedom itself is a slippery term and Hegel's own use is not always helpful, but we can make note of a few observations. First, from Hegel himself, "But this, precisely, is Freedom. For when I am dependent, I refer myself to something else which I am not; I cannot exist independently of something external. I am free when I am within myself."¹⁴ Second, Fackenheim explained that Hegel meant that, "Since the self is a self-constituting process the self's recognition of its freedom and its production of that freedom are mutually inseparable."¹⁵ Thus freedom is a state of mind, a relation to society and the world, and an activity that requires actualization in history.¹⁶ Freedom is free self-determining activity, free from external constraints. One of Hegel's important thoughts in this regard is that that which constrains us externally can itself be real or imagined. An imagined external constraint is superstition. Hegel said, "The consequence is an indeterminable dependence on everything external, the highest and most contingent kind of superstition."¹⁷

Hegel's general view was pedagogical. We learn from religion over time. According to Louis Dupré:

¹³ Michael Vater, "Religion, Worldliness, and Sittlichkeit" in *New Perspectives on Hegel's Philosophy of Religion*, ed. David Kolb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 210.

¹⁴ Hegel, *Reason in History*, 23.

¹⁵ Fackenheim, 38.

¹⁶ I personally am a "Hard Determinist," but I think many people misunderstand what this really means. I think a human free will is demonstrably impossible for metaphysical (deterministic universe), physical (time is an illusion) and psychological (no one is in control) reasons. Any one of these might be mistaken but I take it as highly unlikely that all three are. Free Will is an illusion, but a necessary one. So we live with and inside the myth of free will. We experience ourselves as free, and it is in this sense of experienced freedom that I hope to be understood.

¹⁷ Hegel, *Lectures*, 249

Both the idea and the metaphor [of the Notion of Religion] evoke a comparison with [Gotthold] Lessing's development of religion as a gradual 'education of the human race'; except that for Hegel the Christian faith functions as the final goal of that process rather than, as for Lessing, being a part of it.¹⁸

In what follows I will argue that Hegel's understanding of Christianity as the ultimate religion of freedom misses the point, my own point, about human freedom. Hegel's most important observation for this paper is that:

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 correlates spirit that is free and spiritual, that actually knows God.¹⁹

This concept will guide the rest of what follows.

However, taking my cue from Hegel himself I will argue that knowing God is not actually the goal, the truly human goal is real freedom for all people. To get to the heart of this issue I will take Hegel's observations about a people's understanding of God seriously. *Which is to say that to the degree a people understands there to be any power over their lives that is external to them they are not free.* By this definition even Hegel's Christianity cannot be the consummate religion as it still involves a power, which is called God, external to human society, over and above it and determining it. By this definition, his society, and ours still, is not free. Obviously this is where my interpretation parts company with Hegel's own claims, but I think I am still being fair to his "spirit" if not his word. As I commented above there is a sense in which, "Contemporary theologies of 'the death of God' are his spiritual grandchildren."²⁰ In his own lectures there is some support for looking to a post-theistic future for real freedom. Hegel remarked, "There is indeed a fear present here [in nature religions], a consciousness of negation,

¹⁸ Louis Dupré, "Transition and tensions in Hegel's treatment of Determinate Religion" in *New Perspectives*, 82.

¹⁹ Hegel, *Lectures*, 203.

²⁰ Taylor, 495.

though not yet the fear of the Lord; it is instead the fear of contingency, of the forces of nature, which display themselves as mighty powers over against humanity."²¹ It is his own conception of the Christian "Lord" as the proper object of fear (isn't fear a force over against humanity?) that calls his stated position into question.

My central thesis, then, is that one of the things Hegel's Philosophy of Religion teaches us, understood without the Idealist metaphysic, is that our history is indeed the struggle for freedom. However, the historical movement is not that of Spirit relating to itself, rather the movement is the dialectical interaction of the very human drives – concretely acted out in class struggle – for comfort/security and justice/equality which finds synthesis over time in ever greater human freedom. What Hegel would seem to hold is that it is the aesthetic expression of this dialectic in every culture that defines our religions in general and our understandings of metaphysics (including the divine) in particular.

Part Two (Particularity): Overview of Hegel's Philosophy of Religion Applied to Freedom

In keeping with the form discussed earlier, in this section I would like to review Hegel's ideas about freedom in three moments, the universal, the particular and the individual. These are the moments of Spirit, History, and Religion. I believe this approach will offer an understanding of this very complex material in a way that is useful for my particular reinterpretation while doing justice to Hegel's original ideas. These ideas are historical themselves and developed over time. In fact the text we call his "Philosophy of Religion" itself is a compilation of student lecture notes from three different years that skillfully traces Hegel's own evolving ideas on the subject. Here I begin even farther back, in his young adulthood.

²¹ Hegel, *Lectures*, 225.

2(a) Spirit

"In Frankfurt [the young] Hegel began to develop a theory of the divine as the unification of nature and freedom, finite and infinite, but he had not yet arrived at the decisive category of Geist (spirit) to describe it."²² Spirit became the foundation for his entire system (which Hegel would refer to in generic terms like "philosophical thought" or "science"). Fackenheim explains, "Philosophical thought claims to be infinite Spirit in its ultimate form, and it does not confront Reality but rather is one with it."²³ And Spirit is the culmination of his system, and his system is a culmination of Spirit. "Therefore, the content of religion proclaims earlier in time than does Science, what Spirit is, but only Science is its true knowledge of itself," Hegel remarked.²⁴

Spirit should be understood as a becoming not a being, which is the way Hegel understood everything. Reality as a dialectical process is a becoming. Spirit creates our reality as part of its becoming. From Hegel, "It is the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning; and only by being worked out to its end, is it actual."²⁵ This becoming of Spirit is historical and religious. Understood by Hegel as manifesting, as having become, most complete in his philosophy as the speculative version of what Lutheran Protestantism accomplished religiously. According to Fackenheim:

Understood in the light of the new philosophical category of infinite Spirit, however, religion becomes a divine self-activity in finite humanity; and in order to grasp it Hegelian thought must have done nothing less than rise above a self-active thought confined to human finitude in order to become a self-active thought which is infinite and divine.²⁶

²² J.N. Findlay, "Forward" to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, by G.W.F. Hegel, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 5.

²³ Fackenheim, 29.

²⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 488.

²⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 10.

²⁶ Fackenheim, p. 58.

Hegel wrote, "The necessary progression and interconnection of the forms of the unreal consciousness will by itself bring to pass the completion of the series."²⁷ These forms of consciousness are Spirit's consciousness manifest in human consciousness. Peter Hodgson explains, "The whole spirit, the spirit of religion as such, is a movement away from immediacy toward the knowledge of what spirit is in and for itself, toward a shape that is perfectly identical with its essence."²⁸ This is spirit's objective, to come to know itself perfectly – in form and content – and this knowing even while being self-knowing requires an other, an other that is humanity in general and human religion in particular. Fackenheim explains:

"The relation between the Divine and the human must preserve its tension even while it does its relating, and it can do so only by acting it out, in a labor which so thoroughly permeates the whole length and breadth of existence as to cause it not merely to feel transformed but actually to be transformed. This labor is religious cult."²⁹

The process of development, the process of Spirit coming to know itself, is expressed in what Hegel called "being-for-itself." He said, "But we distinguish this being-for-another from being-for-itself; whatever is related to knowledge or knowing is also distinguished from it, and posited as existing outside of this relationship; this being-for-itself is called truth."³⁰ Spirit's goal is truth, true and objective understanding. And, "The need inherent in spirit as it again seeks after religion is therefore more specifically characterized by the fact that it demands an import that exists in and for itself, a truth that does not pertain to the opinions and conceits of the understanding, but is objective."³¹

²⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 50.

²⁸ Peter C. Hodgson, "Introduction" in *G.W.F. Hegel: Theologian of the Spirit*, by G.W.F. Hegel, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 19.

²⁹ Fackenheim, 123.

³⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 52-53.

³¹ Hegel, *Theologian of the Spirit*, 160.

The working out of this objective knowledge happens in religions over time and the particular form or shape that Spirit has in that period of time then determines the nature of the society – thus the relationship between a people's self understanding and ideas about God. He said, "From the 'shapes' belonging to each of its moments, the specific 'shape' of religion picks out the one appropriate to it for its actual Spirit. The one distinctive feature which characterizes the religion penetrates every aspect of its actual existence and stamps them with this common character."³²

2(b) History

Hegel said, "World history, as already shown, represents the development of the spirit's consciousness of freedom and the consequent realization of that freedom."³³ Hartman explains, "History, thus, is the progressing self-determination of the Idea, the progressing self-development of Spirit. In addition, since Spirit by its inner nature is free, History is the progress of Freedom."³⁴ Or in Hegel's own words, "World history is the progress of the consciousness of freedom – a progress whose necessity we have to investigate."³⁵ This history proceeds dialectically, in the form introduced earlier. Hegel's point is that Spirit needs something, needs to become something, this end result, free subjectivity or being-for-itself, is what is real. What is, that is what is merely existent, does not have the same ontological standing. Existent merely is, what is ontologically significant is what is essential – Spirit's becoming. Again from Hartman, "The interrelationship between the real and the merely existent, the necessary and the

³² Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 414.

³³ Hegel, *Reason in History*, 78.

³⁴ Hartman, xvii.

³⁵ Hegel, *Reason in History*, 24.

contingent, proceeds dialectically: thesis and antithesis contradict each other, and the synthesis preserves and continues what is worthwhile and necessary in both."³⁶

History as the becoming of Spirit has a necessity because the becoming is the truth of Spirit. In Hegel's Idealist metaphysics, this truth has its own ontological status and by virtue of being true to thought – in his system – truth must be embodied, must be actual in creation. He said, "Because the truth is, it must appear and be apparent; its manifestation belongs to its eternal nature itself, which is inseparable from it, so much so that such separation would destroy it, namely, reduce its content to empty abstraction."³⁷ This truth works both for Spirit and for humans (by virtue of our being spirit in this metaphysic) as eventually self determining entities. He goes on, "When I have an idea I am greatly interested in transforming it into action, into actuality. In its realization through my participation I want to find my own satisfaction."³⁸

The interrelationships between humans becoming free and Spirit becoming free forms history. From Hodgson, "The emergent subjectivity of both individual human beings and the human community are elements in the becoming of the divine (inter)subjectivity."³⁹ And this becoming in history is most directly expressed in religion, which then determines the structure of the rest of social life as we go along. Back to Hegel, "That all these elements in a people's actuality constitute one systematic totality, that one spirit creates and informs them – this is an insight that provides the basis for the further insight that the history of religions coincides with world history."⁴⁰

The progress of history leads us to Hegel's time, as he could not and would not have written about the future. Modernity offers the culmination of this process, if not absolutely then

³⁶ Hartman, xvii.

³⁷ Hegel, *Theologian of the Spirit*, 158.

³⁸ Hegel, *Reason in History*, 28.

³⁹ Hodgson, *Theologian of the Spirit*, 7.

at least as of his now. According to Fackenheim it was a long road that did not end with Christianity but in some ways only began.

According to Hegel's Christian (who thus emerges as both a Protestant and a modern man), this process of transfiguring the actual world (begun with the rise of the Christian faith) has remained in principle arrested throughout the entire Middle Ages, during which the divine image in man was recognized in the sight of God but not in that of the feudal princes, and during which Christian faith was left in Catholic other-worldliness.⁴¹

Therefore, Fackenheim concludes, "The modern world does not destroy Christianity. It produces the Protestant Reformation."⁴²

Michael Vater, quoted earlier tells us, "So, Hegel claims, the end-point of the development of religious consciousness is the ethical life (Sittlichkeit) of modern communities, where moral, social, political concerns as well as religion fuse with the fabric of everyday activities and forms of existence."⁴³ With modernity Hegel sees freedom. "The modern world, Hegel thinks, is free in idea if not (or not yet) in actual fact."⁴⁴ As mentioned above the very fact of being free in idea – to Hegel – is enough, the details will work themselves out shortly. In this way Hegel's freedom is thoroughly bourgeois, he is not looking to the future to find freedom, it is in his mid-capitalist now.

2(c) Religion

Hegel's presentation of the details of how religious history actually transpires developed as his own knowledge grew over time. His final presentation of his ideas on the subject came in

⁴⁰ Hegel, *Theologian of the Spirit*, 141.

⁴¹ Fackenheim, 150.

⁴² Fackenheim, 177.

⁴³ Vater, 211.

⁴⁴ Fackenheim, 37.

lectures in 1831, the year of his death. At that time his sketch of the significant movements of Spirit through human religious history was in four parts:

1. Natural Religions: Deism, Primitive Religion, and Magic
2. Internal rupture of the religious consciousness: Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism
3. Religions of Freedom: Persian, Jewish, Egyptian, Greek, Roman
4. Consummate Religion: Christianity⁴⁵

For my purposes here I will discuss Hegel's insights into what was new in the religions as they arose, their shortcomings, and the transitions as they relate to freedom. The order will be a mix of the 1827 and 1831 lectures so as to follow the actual order of the appearance of the major religions. The continuity and continuing interactions of the world religions, not to mention the creation of Islam after Christianity, present much more complexity than Hegel seemed to be aware of, although – to be fair – his point can clearly be understood even if some of his details were quite mistaken and prejudicial.

He tells us, "The first stage for us is nature religion, i.e., religion defined as the unity of the spiritual and the natural, where the spirit still is in unity with nature. In being this way, spirit is not yet free, is not yet actual as spirit."⁴⁶ Over time "nature" religions move from the form of deism as an unfocused religious awareness, to the more active attempt to understand and control nature through magic. This process develops a sense of a god with a purpose, "...albeit a rather external purpose and not yet a purpose that is purely spiritual."⁴⁷ This spiritual purpose is internal purpose and is necessary for being-for-self.

⁴⁵ Dupré, 84.

⁴⁶ Hegel, *Lectures*, 207.

⁴⁷ Hegel, *Lectures*, 208.

What we would call the Asian religions today were understood by Hegel to involve a rupture in consciousness out of its purely natural state, the beginnings of self-conscious reflection. From the Lectures:

Being-within-self [in his 1827 language] is the essential stage, consisting in the progression from immediate, empirical singularity to the determination of essence, of essentiality; or to the representation or consciousness of substance, i.e. of a substantial power that governs the world, that causes everything to come about and be produced according to a rationally coherent pattern.⁴⁸

The problem with these religions, in brief, is that they are still not a reflective subjectivity, they are not free. Hegel said, "...but here what is spiritual is still in immediate, sensible existence, and this subjectivity is still an immediate subjectivity."⁴⁹

Freedom begins with a "higher" consciousness of God, and that Hegel finds beginning in Persia. "It is the form in which God is known as what truly has being in and for itself, and known truly as this; so God is in truth what is independent, what is inwardly determinate, and hence God is the good."⁵⁰ Good is not yet true as good is only half the story. "God, however, is only one principle, one power, and therefore the finite, and evil as well, have no true independence."⁵¹ What is required as antithesis to the religion of light in Persia is the religion of darkness in Egypt. And so the new religious significance of death and immortality form the next level. "The unifying within self of opposed principles is what subjectivity is – it is the might to endure and resolve this contradiction with itself."⁵² But this unifying within self is still not transparent to the self, "...it is not yet spiritualized to clarity...its features are only signs, only signifiers of the spiritual."⁵³

⁴⁸ Hegel, *Lectures*, 259.

⁴⁹ Hegel, *Lectures*, 267.

⁵⁰ Hegel, *Lectures*, 299.

⁵¹ Hegel, *Lectures*, 301.

⁵² Hegel, *Lectures*, 310.

⁵³ Hegel, *Lectures*, 326.

Jewish religion introduces radically new progress in the definite move away from sensible representation (that is represented to the senses) to real thought. "Every externality, every sensible configuration and sensible image, is sublated in it [Jewish religion]. For this reason God here subsists without shape – he subsists not for sensible representation but only for thought."⁵⁴ God thus comes to be understood as infinite.

The world is grasped as a manifestation of this subject, but as a manifestation that is not affirmative; or one that, to the extent that it is indeed affirmative, still has the primary character that the natural or worldly is negated as unbecoming the subjective, so that God's appearing is at once grasped as sublimity that is superior to appearance in ordinary reality.⁵⁵

However, the Jewish God is not yet really universal, the understanding is tribal. Thus the understood purpose of activity is internal and not God's own.⁵⁶ Or in Hegel's words, "The wisdom and self-determining of God does not yet include God's development."⁵⁷

The next step is found in Greek religion, the religion of art.

This involves the further, more profound consideration that the advent of art portends the decline of a religion is still bound to a sensuous externality. At the very time it seems to give religion the highest degree of clarity, expressiveness, and brilliance, it has raised it above its limitedness.⁵⁸

Indeed this new clarity means a new level of freedom. "Fine art involves the characteristic of free subjectivity; spirit must have become free from desire, free from natural life generally, from subjugation by inner and outer nature; it must have become inwardly free, it must have the need to know itself as free, and to be free, as the object of its own consciousness."⁵⁹

However, Greek religion is not complete, not fully actualized freedom. Dupré explains, "Yet such inner purposiveness [in Greek religion] implied an aesthetic necessity that lacked the

⁵⁴ Hegel, *Lectures*, 359

⁵⁵ Dupré, 86.

⁵⁶ Dupré, 88.

⁵⁷ Hegel, *Lectures*, 371.

⁵⁸ Hegel, *Theologian of the Spirit*, 142.

reflective distance required for genuine freedom."⁶⁰ As a result, Hegel claimed, "The Greeks are not free in the sense that we are free, i.e., in their self-consciousness; they let themselves be determined from without."⁶¹ He goes on, "The third form of the determinate religions [or religions of freedom in the 1831 language] is that of purposiveness, the totality of this domain, being primarily the unification of the religions of beauty [Greek] and of sublimity [Jewish]."⁶²

He then comes to Rome, "In the religion of expediency [Roman] the purpose is this comprehensive, but one that is external and therefore falls within the human sphere. This human purpose is to be realized, and the deity is the power for realizing it."⁶³ This is obviously backwards from Hegel's point of view. Again from Dupré, "The universality of the Roman purposiveness, then, is not a spiritual one, but consists in an abstract consenting to particular, finite purposes [e.g. the state]."⁶⁴ This finite purpose in the state is an important one for Hegel, but the form of the Roman State is not free, but left to the caprice of the Emperor. "[Roman] purposiveness, especially purposiveness without necessity, random and arbitrary, definitely severs the last tie of natural necessity that obstructed the coming of the realm of freedom."⁶⁵ From Walter Jaeschke, "In such religion [prior to the consummate one] self-consciousness is not at home with itself in the idea of God, it is not free."⁶⁶

The world historical role of Roman religion was to act as the synthesis of the sublime and beautiful, to combine the infinite purpose of the Jewish God with the finite human purpose of Greek religion. "In short, as Jewish East mingles with Greek-Roman West there arises what may

⁵⁹ Hegel, *Lectures*, 322-323.

⁶⁰ Dupré, 86.

⁶¹ Hegel, *Lectures*, 356.

⁶² Hegel, *Lectures*, 375.

⁶³ Hegel, *Lectures*, 377.

⁶⁴ Dupré, 86.

⁶⁵ Dupré, 88.

⁶⁶ Walter Jaeschke, "Philosophical Theology and Philosophy of Religion" in *New Perspectives*, 12.

be called a proto-Christian consciousness which develops a criterion for the needed redemption," Fackenheim explains.⁶⁷ Going on he adds:

The Jewish commanding Lord remains other than and over against, an obedience which, human only, remains unfree. Greek worship is free because it is more than human, but remains limited in that it accepts, as other, gods on which it has itself conferred this otherness. Christian Grace is at once actual other than human freedom which receives it, and yet it is in this freedom because it is grace.⁶⁸

So Fackenheim notes, "Thus in the view of Hegel's Christian, the Jew has but an inadequate knowledge of the creation and the fall, and the pagan (whether Greek, Roman, or philosopher) has no knowledge of it at all."⁶⁹ And, "The divine redemptive act [in order to preserve the human and divine realms], then, must unite the Jewish transcendent Lord with the immanence and humanity of the gods of Greece."⁷⁰

Again from Fackenheim, "If for Hegel the truth of Spirit is already disclosed in life the disclosure is found – or found decisively – in religious life, reaching its fullness in modern Protestant Christianity."⁷¹ And according to Jaeschke, "It [Christianity] is consummate because in it the three moments of the concept of religion – spirit's substantial unity, and its division into itself and into knowledge – are not only factually present and foreshadowed in the sphere of representation (as they are in the preceding religions) but here, and only here, constitute the central dogmatic content."⁷² In true Hegelian form Hegel also explains why it is not just Christianity that is consummate, but his modern Lutheranism that is consummate (which was hinted at above). Charles Taylor tell us, "Hence to the first stage of Church opposition to the

⁶⁷ Fackenheim, 138.

⁶⁸ Fackenheim, 188.

⁶⁹ Fackenheim, 138.

⁷⁰ Fackenheim, 140.

⁷¹ Fackenheim, 22.

⁷² Jaeschke, 12.

world and the second stage of worldly power, must succeed a third stage in which the message becomes spiritualized again. This we have seen is the Protestant Reformation."⁷³

Part Three (Individuality): The Materialist Understanding

Having reviewed the basic development of religion over time and some of Hegel's arguments in support of that flow it may be appropriate to revisit his central point as regards my analysis of freedom. And that point, quoted now from the 1831 Lectures is:

The morality and political constitution of the people must have the same character as its religion; for morality and the political constitution are governed wholly by whether a people has only grasped a limited representation of freedom of spirit, or has attained to the true consciousness of freedom.⁷⁴

My argument here is that Hegel does not have sufficient grounds to claim that the religion actually determines the politics, or as he put it, that, "The nature of its religion, therefore, determines that of the State and its constitution."⁷⁵ But I do agree wholeheartedly that religion and politics share an identity. This identity is about freedom and how we understand ourselves becoming free. He said and I agree, "Religion is the sphere where a people gives itself the definition of what it regards as the True."⁷⁶

From Fackenheim, "The Christian truth, which is the essential 'content' of 'science', has been actual in human history for nearly two millennia. And self-activity has reached in modern moral life as ultimate a 'form' as it can ever reach in life."⁷⁷ Hegel believed that the Christianity of his time, and his interpretation of it particularly, represent the highest development of freedom, both individually and for Spirit. Hodgson explains:

⁷³ Taylor, 504.

⁷⁴ Hegel, *Lectures*, 107n.

⁷⁵ Hegel, *Reason in History*, 65.

⁷⁶ Hegel, *Reason in History*, 64.

⁷⁷ Fackenheim, 67.

Finally, this is the religion of truth and freedom. 'Truth' means that in what is objective and different spirit is related not to something that is utterly alien but to another form of spirit itself. 'Freedom' expresses the same thing but with the emphasis on the overcoming of the estrangement in difference; hence freedom appears as reconciliation (recognition of self in other), and reconciliation appears as freedom (an activity or movement that makes estrangement disappear).⁷⁸

To be sure, Hegel's freedom is spiritual and it is Spirit's:

Let us only repeat here that the first stage is the immersion of Spirit in natural life, the second its stepping out into the consciousness of its freedom. ... The third stage is the rising out of this still particular form of freedom into pure universality of freedom, where the spiritual essence attains the consciousness and feeling of itself.⁷⁹

His understanding is that, "The more man develops spiritually, the more he becomes conscious of himself; and the more he becomes conscious of himself, the more he becomes himself, that is, free."⁸⁰ But my interest is material and human, what of the people? According to Taylor:

What Hegel seems to be saying here [in the Lectures on the Philosophy of History] is that the continuing necessity of religion is contingent on the fact that not all men can attain to full rationality. And this might tempt us to see religion as a kind of poor man's (or uneducated man's) substitute for philosophy, designed to keep the allegiance of those who cannot really understand.⁸¹

It is this view that materialist critics have focused on for a century and a half. But there is more going on in religious happenings than just keeping the rabble in line.

In Hegel's view the theology of his day had actually abandoned his views – which is exactly the historical course I am suggesting had to happen – and he took special exception to the then new idea that religious experience is primarily a question of feeling. He said, "The evil into which the Enlightenment has brought religion and theology can accordingly be defined as the

⁷⁸ Hodgson, *Theologian of the Spirit*, 32.

⁷⁹ Hegel, *Reason in History*, 71.

⁸⁰ Hartman, xxv.

⁸¹ Taylor, 487.

lack of a known truth, an objective content, a doctrine of faith."⁸² Because of this abdication of thought, in Hegel's view, philosophy had also abdicated truth.

The fixed standpoint with the all-powerful culture of our time has established for philosophy is that of a reason affected by sensibility. In this situation philosophy cannot aim at the cognition of God, but only at what is called the cognition of human being.⁸³

This is, however, exactly my point: in moving away from trying to understand God and instead trying to understand ourselves humanity is taking a giant step forward in becoming a self-conscious historical subject – humanity is finally becoming a "being-for-itself." Though perhaps I am getting ahead of myself, and this statement requires some background.

Hegel, and the tradition that comes after him, certainly understands humanity to have a cohesive wholeness to it. As we look at history it is possible to discern patterns and movements that are best understood as meta-individual. That is the collection of people that defines humanity participate in a group which itself changes – develops and grows – over time. For Hegel this was because of the mutual relationship to Spirit that we all share, as well as the more mundane (though obviously vital to the Marxist tradition) material details of our social/historical context and conditioning. We can therefore understand and discuss the development of humanity using the analogy of individual development in addition to the cumulative adding together of individuals, which results in humanity (the Dialectic of quantity turning into new quality).

For Hegel, and for my purposes as well, individual development is not just individual but historical. The way freedom is understood must include these same historical categories, and this is why Hegel discusses the development of religion using freedom – because it is individual and social/historical. Thus our collective understanding of freedom, and most especially our expectations of it, develops over time. It starts with the person.

⁸² Hegel, *Theologian of the Spirit*, 161.

Schacht explained, "A person is free, for Hegel as for Kant, if and only if the 'determining ground' of his practical decisions is nothing external to reason, but rather reason itself."⁸⁴ Or from Fackenheim:

Selfhood becomes 'rational' when, rather than assert its individuality against the other, it asserts itself as a universality ideally inclusive of all otherness, and as in fact aiming at an actual inclusion in an infinite process of conquest.⁸⁵

The person is a person when she or he is rational and in relation. Schacht goes on, "More remains to be said, however: Hegel holds that action is truly free only if it involves self-determination that is not only rational but also self-conscious."⁸⁶ Therefore freedom requires that we be rational, related to each other, and self-conscious. In this way Hegel's own understanding supports the radical understanding of freedom in socialism, against the merely individualist understanding of capitalism.⁸⁷ He says quite forcefully, "The caprice of the individual is not freedom."⁸⁸ The relationships are key, Schacht explains:

Though once again it must be added that he is truly free, according to Hegel, only if he apprehends that in determining his actions in accordance with these laws and institutions [of the genuinely organized state] he is determining them in accordance with the very reason that constitutes his essential nature, rather than something alien and external to him.⁸⁹

This relationship to the state is vital to Hegel, but for my purposes is an example rather than a defining characteristic. The underlying concept of the essential corporate nature of humanity – of human sociality – is the important part. I would suggest that Hegel's understanding of the role of the state should be understood as metaphorical rather than literal, and this in keeping with my valuation of his form over the content; this includes Hegel's opinions

⁸³ Hegel, *Theologian of the Spirit*, 81.

⁸⁴ Schacht, 298.

⁸⁵ Fackenheim, 60.

⁸⁶ Schacht, 299.

⁸⁷ See for example: Bertell Ollman's essay on Marx's vision of real freedom in Communist society: http://www.nyu.edu/projects/ollman/docs/vision_of_communism.php

⁸⁸ Hegel, *Reason in History*, 50.

on all aspects of the state, the particular content of its laws, class relations, and his very class biased understanding of the connection between private property and freedom.

As Schacht points out:

Hegel begins by observing that freedom is nothing in the absence of the opportunity to act without let or hindrance by others; and that it is the existence of things, together with the establishment of property rights in relation to them that first of all affords us and secures for us this opportunity.⁹⁰

He was writing, after all, in a time when the role of property rights was a bit radical, so the important point is that the state, the collection of people organized in governments, has a vital role in establishing, protecting, and extending freedom. Schacht tells us that Hegel's point was that the state is what makes possible both the maximum satisfaction of the individual's particular wants and needs and the realization of her or his essential nature and true freedom, and further that the citizen therefore must be prepared to make sacrifices that preserve the state upon which the citizen's own interests depend.⁹¹ Some might read an extreme nationalism into this kind of remark, but that is not Schacht's understanding. It is also true that Hegel has a means for evaluating states, and did not suggest that every state in and of itself was worth defending. The state worth defending was, in Hegel's terminology, one that is "genuinely organized." In Schacht's words, "In a 'genuinely organized' state, certain matters are governed by laws and institutions, and others are not."⁹² But issues of freedom certainly should be supported by the institutions of the state, including human and civil rights, if not property rights per se.

⁸⁹ Schacht, 303.

⁹⁰ Schacht, 312-313.

⁹¹ Schacht, 322.

⁹² Schacht, 320.

In Hegel's understanding humans are essential religious and for this reason the state as well should be religious. My point herein is in substantial agreement on this point,⁹³ but where Hegel sees religious obligations, some see domination, and thus my point is to push beyond Hegel's colloquial view of freedom to an actually universal vision of human freedom. His early view was, "The need to unite subject with object, to unite feeling, and feeling's demand for objects, with the intellect, to unite them in something beautiful, in a god, by means of fancy, is the supreme need of the human spirit and the urge to religion."⁹⁴ Some might argue this is a basic aesthetic drive⁹⁵, and to that degree helps us understand Hegel's argument about the transition from Egyptian to Greek religion. Beyond that, it is the universal nature of his claim that I am pointing towards. Humans need religion to facilitate that corporate being-for-itself that we are becoming. This is why religion is so pervasive and powerful, thus liberating and enslaving. Hegel said,

For this reason the State is based on religion. We hear this often repeated in our time. But mostly nothing more is meant than those individuals should be pious in order to be more willing and prepared to do their duty; for obedience to prince and law is so easily connected with reverence toward God.⁹⁶

And not just pious feelings in general, he earlier suggested that he meant Christian ones in particular.

But Jesus makes a general demand on his hearers to surrender their rights, to lift themselves above the whole sphere of justice or injustice by love, for in love there

⁹³ One introduction to my own definition of religion was published as: "The Evolution of Consciousness and the Role of Religion," in *Social Theory, Religion and Critical Discourses: Critical Theory in the Postmodern Globe*, edited by Seyed Javad Miri (Koln, Germany: Lambert Academic Press, 2011), 479-498. The full treatment is my *What is Religion?*.

⁹⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 289.

⁹⁵ See: Dennis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure and Human Evolution* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), for an interesting but (I would argue) flawed account (the flaw is due to the author's tenacious hold on an extreme and confused Libertarian ideology, which leads him to misconstrue the nature of this evolution).

⁹⁶ Hegel, *Reason in History*, 64.

vanishes not only rights but also the feeling of inequality and the hatred of enemies which this feeling's imperative demand for equality implies.⁹⁷

Giving up rights and feelings of inequality has been central to the standard critiques of Hegel; Marx thus described religion as an opiate. The point here however is the move beyond this, the move to universal freedom. Hegel points that way as well, "On the contrary it is the essence of religion that spirit is not ashamed of any of its individuals; it does not refuse to appear to anyone, and everyone has power over it, power to conjure it up."⁹⁸ Here we may find the heart of a democrat. "The special interest of passion is thus inseparable from the actualization of the universal; for the universal results from the particular and definite and its negation. It is the particular which exhausts itself in the struggle and part of which is destroyed."⁹⁹ It is important to note that Hegel's use of "universal" is not in the same sense of "universality" and "particular" is not "particularity," here the language is not that of the syllogism of the dialectic. As such, I am arguing that we should understand the "universal" that is actualized to be the proletariat and the "particular" to be the bourgeoisie, and that from this point of view we can see universal freedom (which is his sense here) developing along the lines of the form of his argument introduced above. Fackenheim explains:

Philosophical knowledge of God and wisdom of the world both arise from non-philosophical human life. The first arises from religious representational existence, and in its complete form Christian existence. The second presupposes 'the awakening of the wisdom of the world in the spirit of governments and nations, i.e. wisdom concerning what is ... right and rational in the actual world' (Encyclopedia, Section 152). Such wisdom is manifest wherever there is right and law, and hence recognition of human freedom, and it is at least in principle completely manifest in the modern secular idea that all men are free, simply because they are human.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, 218.

⁹⁸ Hegel, *Theologian of the Spirit*, 86.

⁹⁹ Hegel, *Reason in History*, 43.

¹⁰⁰ Fackenheim, 214.

This is the universality, which leads through bourgeois particularity to the individuality of universal freedom (to put it back into the language of the syllogism). Vater said:

"For Hegel, the history of developed or Christian religious consciousness embodies three central moments of philosophy: (a) the transition from representation to thought, (b) the invalidation of finite categories in the infinitizing process of thought, (c) the emergence of concrete universality of ethical life from the opposition of the bare universality of the God-concept and the singularity of the human individual."¹⁰¹

Hartman put it this way, "The main fact, which seems to confirm his thesis, is that in past oriental civilizations [e.g., imperial China] one was free; in classic antiquity, Greece and Rome, some were free; and in modern Germanic and Anglo-Saxon civilizations, all are free."¹⁰² Well, to be honest, we know that capitalist society is not really about all people being free, but rather it is about capital being free. There is the form of universal individual freedom, but the real content lies in the future. The religious development that anticipates universal freedom, I am arguing, is the distance we move from our ideas of God. Hegel, as mentioned above, condemned this distance as the abdication of thought. Which point of view one takes depends on how one constructs this notion of being-for-itself. I am arguing that for humanity to truly be-for-itself it must arrive at the knowledge and experience of itself – in its democratic majority – as historical subject. The ruling class has always understood itself as historical subject, the emperors, princes, and today the capitalists. We have yet to arrive at the place (in time) where all people have that feeling of their own role in history, historical subjectivity or being-for-self.

Hegel said:

To explain history means to reveal the passions of men, their genius, their active powers. This definiteness of Providence is usually called its plan. Yet this very plan is supposed to be hidden from our view; indeed, the wish to recognize it is deemed presumption."¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Vater, 202.

¹⁰² Hartman, xvii.

¹⁰³ Hegel, *Reason in History*, 15.

The content of that presumption is known in Christian circles as hubris – one of the traditional forms of original sin. Hegel explains:

On it rests the divorce between on the one hand old-fashioned honesty and faith, genuine religious sentiment and ethical life, which makes God, truth, and duty the prime element, and on the other had the perversity, the conceit, and the absolute selfishness that has arisen in our time and makes one's own will, opinion, and inclination the rule governing religious sentiment and right.¹⁰⁴

The farther we move from God, the more we assert ourselves, and the more some – with Hegel leading the charge – will condemn that move as ignorance, sin, and confusion.

It [Hegel's talk of the "Death of God"] expresses the decline of contemporary philosophy, which affirms its own inability any longer to conceive the idea of God and, what is more, presents the ready acknowledgement of its incapacity as the hallmark of intellectual honesty.¹⁰⁵

The modern death of god, recent theological moves towards understandings of universal salvation, the growth of atheist organizations, etc., all represent the birth pangs of real freedom. But this freedom carries with it the responsibility of self-governance. This responsibility is one that has also been feared throughout time, not just by those who benefit from class exploitation, but also from those who will one day have to see themselves as historical subjects, as being-for-themselves. It is an awesome prospect. More awesome, or fearful, perhaps because it is not yet real – only anticipated. In Hartman's pithy turn of phrase, "It [freedom] is never given it must always be fought for."¹⁰⁶ The reaction can be seen today in the current preponderance of supernatural themes in culture. Our contemporary American corporate media is obsessed with the occult, with ghosts, and demons, angles, and vampires. In various polls, people claim to believe in these supernatural phenomena in disturbing numbers. More people seem to feel compelled to appeal to various saints for intervention – seen most dramatically in the broadening

¹⁰⁴ Hegel, *Theologian of the Spirit*, 167.

¹⁰⁵ Jaeschke, 2.

of the "Cult of the Virgin." One analysis might be that superstition keeps the rabble in line where traditional religion is failing. And that may be true, but the market for these themes seems vast in itself rather than imposed. And the market for it, the fact that people spend their limited and hard earned money on movies – or spend their limited time on TV programs – playing on superstitious themes indicates that these themes speak to our feelings. And this reaction too Hegel helps us understand.

As we are not yet free, our cultural forms reflect the submission to the lack of freedom in the valueless wasteland and ethical relativism of capitalism, as well as reflecting the struggle for greater freedom (though these examples are harder to find in corporate media). In part this is reflecting the Christian understanding of the human as lowly creature. Hegel suggests how this should be understood in other contexts, but his analysis is apt in our time as well. "The creature is something that is not inwardly independent; it may be (or it has being), but it does not have independence. This distinction is essential."¹⁰⁷ And, "Bound up with the fact that human being in this way without freedom and has no inner self-worth, there is a concrete expansion of this unspeakable and endlessly variable superstition, these tremendous fetters and limitations."¹⁰⁸ In remarks on Hinduism Hegel commented on the connection between the lack of freedom and moral depravity, which seem more true of late capitalism, "And just as the superstition arising from this lack of freedom is unbounded, so it also follows that there is no ethics, no right, no duty."¹⁰⁹

Concluding Thought

¹⁰⁶ Hartman, xxvi.

¹⁰⁷ Hegel, *Lectures*, 360n.

¹⁰⁸ Hegel, *Lectures*, 290.

¹⁰⁹ Hegel, *Lectures*, 291.

One might ask why it matters. One answer is offered by Hartman, "The weak ones are those who cannot read the signs of the times. What happens to them is the same as happens to the pedestrian who disregards the traffic signals. Rather than bewail this fact, we should open our eyes to history and help others to do so."¹¹⁰ Hartman was discussing Hegel's idea about who acts in history, which is arrogant in its own way. But Hartman's point is not that Hegel is right or wrong about his "Great Man" theory, it is that people make history and as such we can and must learn to read the signals, to become historical subjects. Those who understand it should tell others about, open our eyes and help others to do so. "The human individual without such insight and energy [to understand and engage history] is the object of history, its victim."¹¹¹ On the speculative side Jaeschke said:

The characteristic premises of the contemporary philosophy of religion not only reject, in vehement opposition to everything metaphysical, the philosophical significance which religion has for Hegel. They also abandon completely the prospect of securing a deeper meaning of religion.¹¹²

This I do not think is true, which is the whole point of my argument in this paper. Rather what history and religion call for is a reinterpretation for us. History is human history, and religion is human religion. They either serve our purposes or we serve the purposes of those who have the ability to dominate both religion and history. Curiously, Jaeschke has also said, "So the only course that remains is either to abandon the content of religion for reason's sake or, with and through reason, to cast it in a new form."¹¹³ I am convinced, with Hegel, that we need religion for our own purposes. As Vater said, "Religious story may mislead qua story, but religious truth is neither world denying nor world duplicating. Religious truth must instead be world

¹¹⁰ Hartman, xxxix.

¹¹¹ Hartman, xxxvii.

¹¹² Jaeschke, 17.

¹¹³ Jaeschke, 5.

embracing, transformative."¹¹⁴ We cannot salvage Hegel's content, for that is not the truth, but we can use his insights and, with and through reason and our experience of the world and each other, cast religion in a new form oriented towards human becoming and human freedom – transformative truth.

¹¹⁴ Vater, 211.