

Hegel's Treatment of the Development of Religion after Christianity: Islam

Jon Stewart (U.S.A. / Denmark)

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was in Europe a growing awareness of the importance of Islam. In the German tradition, with which Kierkegaard was intimately familiar, leading figures such as Leibniz, Kant, Herder, Goethe, Friedrich Schlegel and Hegel all treated different aspects of this religion.¹ Despite his intensive reading and frequent use of these authors, Kierkegaard seems entirely indifferent to the issues surrounding Islam that exercised these German thinkers. One looks in vain in his published authorship and extensive journals for treatments of Islam.² There might be many possible explanations for this. Despite his famous distinction between religiousness A and B, Kierkegaard was a thinker profoundly exercised by Christianity, virtually to the exclusion of all other religions. Moreover, he differs from some of the German thinkers listed here in his general rejection of any historical approach to religion, as is evidenced by his rabid polemic against Grundtvig. This rejection explains his fundamental disagreement with Hegel's understanding of religion as a single, developing historical phenomenon. But precisely here there is a complex problem concerning Hegel's treatment of Islam.³

According to the standard reading, Hegel's philosophy of religion ends with Christianity as the pinnacle of religious development. This is true if

one confines one's interpretation to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. As has been seen, these lectures work their way through the different world religions and culminate in Christianity. However, if one looks at Hegel's other lectures, the story is somewhat different. There Hegel cannot very well stop with early Christianity since he has a much larger story to tell about the development of culture and spirit as it traverses several centuries and leads up to his own time. The history of religion likewise continues to develop, and new religions arise after Christianity, the most important of which is Islam.

Hegel treats different aspects of Islam in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*⁴ and his *Lectures on Aesthetics*,⁵ but his most extensive treatment comes in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*.⁶ Here, in his account of the Middle Ages, Hegel devotes a short section to the rise of Islam as a religion and the Arab world as an important political power. What is surprising for some readers is the ambiguously sympathetic treatment that he gives. Despite his many references and treatments of Islam, this has been a neglected topic in the secondary literature.⁷

While his treatment of Islam might seem homogeneous or even one-sided, in fact under this rubric he treats at least three distinct historical peoples: the Turks, the Persians and the Arabs. This fact explains what some commentators have regarded as inconsistencies in his accounts.⁸ Since he is more favorably disposed towards the Turks and the Persians than the Arabs, his accounts of the former seem more positive than those of the latter.⁹

¹ See Ian Almond, *History of Islam in German Thought from Leibniz to Nietzsche* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

² Having said this, there are a few scattered references: CUP1, 47, 434. See also the journal entries on Mohammed: JP, 1: 124; JP, 1: 412; JP, 1: 413; JP, 2: 1709; JP, 3: 2738; JP, 5: 5212; JP, 5: 5410; JP, 6: 6353; and on Mohammedanism: JP, 1: 447; JP, 3: 2734; JP, 3: 2736; JP, 5: 5071.

³ I quote Hegel's primary texts using the following abbreviations: *Aesthetics* = *Hegel's Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, vols. 1-2, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, 1998); *EL* = *The Encyclopedia Logic. Part One of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991); *Hist. of Phil.* = *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vols. 1-3, trans. E. S. Haldane (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1892-96 / Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); *Jub.* = *Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe in 20 Bänden*, ed. Hermann Glockner (Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1928-41); *Phil. of Hist.* = *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Wiley Book Co., 1944); *Phil. of Mind* = *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*, trans. William Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); *Phil. of Religion* = *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vols. 1-3, trans. E. B. Speirs and J. Burdon Sanderson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul / New York: The Humanities Press 1962, 1968, 1972).

⁴ Hegel, *Hist. of Phil.*, vol. 3, 26-35 / *Jub.*, vol. 19, 121-131.

⁵ Instead of a single continuous treatment of Arabic art, Hegel gives numerous sporadic remarks about it throughout his *Lectures on Aesthetics*. See especially *Aesthetics*, vol. 2, 1096-1098 / *Jub.*, vol. 14, 401-403. *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 368-371 / *Jub.*, vol. 12, 489-492. Other references can be readily located with the help of Hermann Glockner's *Hegel-Lexikon*, vols. 25-26 of *Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Hermann Glockner, Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1928-41) or the index to the English translation, *Hegel's Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, vols. 1-2, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, 1998).

⁶ Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, 355-360 / *Jub.*, vol. 11, 453-459.

⁷ Notable exceptions are Ian Almond, Chapter 6, "Hegel and the Disappearance of Islam," in his *History of Islam in German Thought from Leibniz to Nietzsche* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 108-134. Ernst Schulin, "Der Mohammedanismus" in his *Die weltgeschichtliche Erfassung des Orients bei Hegel und Ranke* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1958), 115-124.

⁸ This is particularly underscored in Ian Almond's account. See his *History of Islam in German Thought from Leibniz to Nietzsche*, 108-134.

⁹ See Ian Almond, *History of Islam in German Thought from Leibniz to Nietzsche*, 117: "Hegel's writings may well have been largely Turk-free, but the specter of an established, sophisticated and distinctly unbarbaric Muslim culture next door to Europe would forever cause problems for the Christian and European bias of his teleology."

In the context of his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, it is obvious and reasonable to expect that religion will continue to develop beyond the account of early Christianity that Hegel provided in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. Thus, Islam represents a part of the story that he wants to tell about the continued development of religion and culture. As has been seen, Hegel believes that the historical movement of the different world religions represents a developmental process, with more adequate conceptions of the divine replacing less adequate ones. Thus, just as human culture in general progresses through time, so also there is a progression in the different world religions. Given this internal logic of Hegel's lectures, it is not counterintuitive or problematic that he in some ways gives Islam a favorable treatment since it does appear chronologically after Christianity. Indeed, one might even expect him to describe it as a higher form of religion due to the place that it occupies in the historical development.

While Hegel does not go this far, he nonetheless clearly has great respect for Arabic culture at its high point. He states quite clearly that the Arabs in the Middle Ages quickly passed through the various stages of culture and very soon "advanced in culture much farther than the West."¹⁰ His respect for Arabic culture extends from, for example, his appreciation for its poetry and its philosophy. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics* Hegel also speaks highly of Arabic epic poetry, which he admires for its ability to focus on its object with a single-minded passion.¹¹ With regard to philosophy, he regards Arabic philosophy, which was profoundly shaped by the religious investments of Islam, as following a continuous line that began in the Greek world: "In the Arabic philosophy, which shows a free, brilliant and profound power of imagination, philosophy and the sciences took the same bent that they had taken earlier among the Greeks."¹² Although Hegel claims that Arabic philosophy does not represent its own independent stage in the history of philosophy and did not develop its own particular principle,¹³ he does nonetheless have laudatory words for some parts of it: "in Mohammedanism...philosophy, along with all the other arts and sciences, flourished to an extraordinary degree."¹⁴

¹⁰ Hegel, *Hist. of Phil.*, vol. 3, 27 / *Jub.*, vol. 19, 121.

¹¹ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 2, 1096f. / *Jub.*, vol. 14, 401.

¹² Hegel, *Hist. of Phil.*, vol. 3, 29 / *Jub.*, vol. 19, 124.

¹³ Hegel, *Hist. of Phil.*, vol. 3, 29f. / *Jub.*, vol. 19, 125.

¹⁴ Hegel, *Hist. of Phil.*, vol. 3, 26 / *Jub.*, vol. 19, 121.

With regard to its historical origins, Hegel understands the rise of Islam as the natural result of the rise of its opposite principle. According to his dialectic of opposites, when one principle appears, its opposite necessarily follows. In the wake of the fall of the Roman Empire, the West, during the Middle Ages, was breaking up into a series of small units and contingent alliances. Daily affairs were regulated in a myriad of accidental ways. Its principle was that of particularity. Hegel explains that one saw the West "bringing all social relations under the form of particularity—without dull and narrow intelligence splitting that which in its nature is generic and normal, into a multitude of chance contingencies; rendering that which ought to be simple principle and law, a tangled web of convention."¹⁵ In a different account he gives an even more positive assessment of the origins of the Arab world as a world-historical force in contrast to what appeared to be the declining state of Europe:

In the West the Germanic tribes had obtained possession of what had hitherto formed a section of the Roman Empire, and their conquests were attaining to shape and solidity, when another religion dawned in the East, namely the Mohammedan. The East purified itself of all that was individual and definite, while the West descended into the depths and actual presence of spirit.¹⁶

The derogatory mention of the Germanic tribes is particularly significant here since Hegel is often reproached for a latent pro-Germanic nationalism in both his political philosophy and his philosophy of history. In any case, this principle of particularity that came to dominate the West at this time necessarily produced its opposite: universality. This is the principle of Islam.

In his portrayal of this historical development, Hegel uses dramatic terms, referring to the rise of Islam as "*the revolution of the East*."¹⁷ This was a movement that "destroyed all particularity and dependence, and perfectly cleared up and purified the soul and disposition; making the abstract One the absolute object of attention and devotion, and to the same extent, pure subjective consciousness—knowledge of this One alone—the only aim of reality; making the unconditioned the condition of existen-

¹⁵ Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, 355 / *Jub.*, vol. 11, 453.

¹⁶ Hegel, *Hist. of Phil.*, vol. 3, 27 / *Jub.*, vol. 19, 121.

¹⁷ Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, 356 / *Jub.*, vol. 11, 453.

ce."¹⁸ In short, Islam is the principle of universality arising as the opposing principle to the chaotic manifold of particularity that existed in Europe.

1. The Concept of Islam

The basic conception of the divine in Islam is the unitary God. Given this, it is understandable that Hegel is at pains to distinguish Islam conceptually from the two other great monotheistic religions: Judaism and Christianity. Thus, a significant part of his analysis is contrastive, whereby he attempts to demonstrate the concept of the divine in Islam by opposing it to the concept in the other two religions.

With regard to Judaism, Hegel sees a certain family resemblance between the conception of the God of the Jews and Allah. He explains, "It was first in the Jewish and then later in the Mohammedan religions that God was interpreted as the Lord and essentially *only* as the Lord."¹⁹ Both religions take their God to be one and absolute, and this constitutes an important point of similarity.

However, Hegel understands Islam as a further development and specifically as a movement away from what he perceives as a form of particularity found in Judaism: "Jehovah was only the God of that one people—the God of Abraham, of Isaac and Jacob; only with the Jews had this God made a covenant; only to this people had he revealed himself. That speciality of religion was done away with in Mohammedanism."²⁰ While Judaism is fundamentally a national religion reserved for the chosen people, Islam eliminates this element and makes a claim to people of all nations. In the *Encyclopedia*, this is put in very general terms: "In Mohammedanism the limited principle of the Jews is expanded into universality and thereby overcome."²¹ He explains this in more detail in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*:

This religion has the same objective content as the Jewish religion, but the relation in which men stand to one another is broadened; there is no particularity left in it, the Jewish idea of national value which establishes the relation in which man stands to the One, is wanting here.

¹⁸ Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, 356 / *Jub.*, vol. 11, 453.

¹⁹ Hegel, *EL*, § 112, Addition, 177 / *Jub.*, vol. 8, 265. See also *EL*, § 151, Addition, 226 / *Jub.*, vol. 8, 340.

²⁰ Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, 356 / *Jub.*, vol. 11, 454.

²¹ Hegel, *Phil. of Mind*, § 393, Addition, 44 / *Jub.*, vol. 10, 76.

re. Here there is no limitation, man is related to this One as a purely abstract self-consciousness.²²

In contrast to Jehovah, Allah is an inclusive, universal God who has a relation to all human beings not just a specific group. In Islam, "all limits, all national and caste distinctions vanish; no particular race, political claim of birth or possession is regarded—only *man* as a *believer*."²³ This can be regarded as a socially progressive movement in that it undermines repressive institutions such as slavery or rigid class distinctions. Further, it overcomes a degree of the alienation that is found in Judaism. He writes,

There is no recognition of the existence of any wall of partition between believers themselves or between them and God. Before God all specific distinction of the subject according to his standing or rank is done away with; rank may exist, there may be slaves, but this is to be regarded as merely accidental.²⁴

Islam thus overcomes the differences of nationality, and this is, for Hegel, clearly a positive movement.

Islam also represents a contrastive concept to Christianity. As with its conceptual relation to Judaism, here too there is a dialectic of identity and difference at work. Islam shares some important common features with Christianity, for example, its conception of one absolute God. In the *Encyclopedia*, we read, "Here, God is no longer, as with the Asiatics, contemplated as existent in an immediately sensuous mode but is apprehended as the one infinite sublime power beyond all the multiplicity of the world."²⁵ Hegel thus distinguishes Islam from, for example, Hinduism, since the latter is focused on the particular empirical incarnations of the divine. According to his developmental conception, Islam and Christianity clearly represent a higher conception of the divine based on thought and not the senses. Second, like Christianity, Islam makes a universal claim to all people, regardless of nationality. It "occupies a like sphere with the Christian religion. It is, as it were, the Jewish spiritual religion, but this God exists for self-consciousness in Spirit which has merely abstract

²² Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 3, 142 / *Jub.*, vol. 16, 347.

²³ Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, 357 / *Jub.*, vol. 11, 455.

²⁴ Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 3, 143 / *Jub.*, vol. 16, 348.

²⁵ Hegel, *Phil. of Mind*, § 393, Addition, 44 / *Jub.*, vol. 10, 76.

knowledge, and occupies a stage which is one with that occupied by the Christian religion, inasmuch as in it no kind of particularity is retained."²⁶ This feature was important for Islam having a wide international appeal during the time of the expansion of the Arab peoples in the 7th and 8th centuries.

But, according to Hegel's speculative logic, since Christianity and Islam are similar, they are also different. Since they share certain key features, some key differences between these two forms of monotheism inevitably emerge. In its insistence on the unity of the divine, Islam radically rejects the empirical realm of particularity. The key difference between Christianity and Islam, according to Hegel, lies in the fact that the former recognizes the validity of the particular, without this impinging on or compromising the universal; specifically, through the person of Christ, the truth of the particular is accorded its due. This becomes incorporated into the dogma of the Trinity, which contains a particular element. Hegel explains this as follows: "The contrast between the Christian and the Mohammedan religions consists in the fact that in Christ the spiritual element is developed in a concrete way, and is known as Trinity, i.e., as Spirit."²⁷

The key to the difference between Islam and Christianity thus lies in their varying interpretations of the role and status of Christ. According to Hegel, what is essential is that Islam denies any form of particularity for the divine and thus must interpret Christ not as divine but merely as a prophet:

Thus the manifestation of God in the flesh, the exaltation of Christ to the position of Son of the God, the transfiguration of the finitude of the world and of self-consciousness until they appear as the infinite self-determination of God, have no place here. Christianity is held to be a system of teaching or set of doctrines, and Christ as ambassador from God, a divine teacher, and so a teacher like Socrates, only a still more distinguished teacher since he was without sin.²⁸

Islam cannot grasp the speculative identity of universal and particular that is found in the Christian Trinity. It is thus left to understand Christ as a mere particular, albeit a special one.

²⁶ Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 3, 142f. / *Jub.*, vol. 16, 347f.

²⁷ Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 3, 143 / *Jub.*, vol. 16, 348.

²⁸ Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 3, 144 / *Jub.*, vol. 16, 349.

The other key difference between Islam and Christianity lies in the fact that in the latter "the history of man, the relation in which he stands to the One, is a concrete history."²⁹ The history that Hegel refers to is the Christian account of how individuals are born in sin but through Christ can achieve reconciliation and salvation. Essentially, human beings can have a concrete positive goal that can be realized in history. According to Hegel, this is precisely what Islam denies: "The Mohammedan hates and proscribes everything concrete, God is the absolute One, and as against Him man retains for himself no end, no particularity, no interest of his own."³⁰ Humans as individuals can have no meaningful concrete goals or pursuits since these are always tainted by the realm of particularity and are condemned ahead of time as vain and useless.

2. The Shortcoming of the Concept

According to Hegel, the problem with Islam lies in its abstraction. This has a double effect: the deity remains indeterminate, and the empirical world becomes a matter of arbitrariness. With regard to the first of these, Hegel explains, in Islam "God is in Himself the perfectly undefined."³¹ Islam's insistence on God as one results in pure universality. Allah is not internally differentiated in a speculative manner; instead, he is pure abstraction. Hegel explains, "...this One is deprived of every concrete predicate; so that neither does subjectivity become on its part spiritually free, nor on the other hand is the object of veneration concrete."³²

The view that God is absolute and one leads to a disdain for the transitory world that we all live in. In Islam, God's "activity is altogether abstract, and hence the particulars produced thereby are perfectly contingent; if we speak of the necessity of things, the term is meaningless and incomprehensible, and no attempt should be made to comprehend it. The activity of God is thus perfectly devoid of reason."³³ All human activities

²⁹ Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 3, 143 / *Jub.*, vol. 16, 348. See also Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 3, 144 / *Jub.*, vol. 16, 349: "This, however, is to go only half way; it is a compromise. Christ was either merely a man, or he was the 'Son of man.' There would thus be nothing left of the divine history, and Christ would be spoken of as he is in the Koran. The difference between this standpoint and Mohammedanism consists merely in the fact that the latter, the conceptions of which are bathed in the ether of illimitableness, and which represents this infinite independence, directly gives up all particular interests, enjoyment, position, individual knowledge, all 'vanity' in short."

³⁰ Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 3, 143 / *Jub.*, vol. 16, 348.

³¹ Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 3, 33 / *Jub.*, vol. 19, 129.

³² Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 3, 33 / *Jub.*, vol. 11, 454.

³³ Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 3, 33 / *Jub.*, vol. 19, 129.

and projects are conceived as vain in comparison with the divine. Hegel thus claims that the work of the Muslims "is rather the dissolution of all that is definite in this substance, with which is associated mere changeableness as the abstract moment of negativity."³⁴

But despite this disdain for the empirical world, the individual cannot help but live and act in it. This then leads to the negative consequence that those actions quickly become arbitrary:

Man as actually existing does undoubtedly particularize himself in his natural inclinations and interest, and these are here all the more savage and unrestrained that reflection is wanting in connection with them, but this again involves something which is the complete opposite, namely, the tendency to let everything take its course, an indifference in respect to every kind of end, absolute fatalism, indifference in respect of life, while no practical end is regarded as having any essential worth.³⁵

This is, according to Hegel, a dangerous constellation since it invariably leads to the undifferentiated destruction of the existing world. An abstraction can be interpreted in a manifold of ways and can be used and applied in a manifold of contexts.

This abstract universality is thus accompanied by a negative and critical conception of the existing secular world. According to Hegel's view, this in turn leads to a form of fanaticism:

Abstraction swayed the minds of the Mohammedans. Their object was to establish an abstract worship, and they struggled for its accomplishment with the greatest enthusiasm. This enthusiasm was fanaticism, that is, an enthusiasm for something abstract—for an abstract thought which sustains a negative position towards the established order of things.³⁶

Hegel frequently repeats this claim that the conception of the divine in Islam leads to fanaticism. He explains elsewhere, "Since, however, man is as a matter of fact practical and active, the end to be pursued can only be to bring about the worship of the One amongst all men, and accordingly

the Mohammedan religion is essentially fanatical."³⁷ Hegel distinguishes Judaism from Islam on this point: the Jews "ought to glorify the Lord, but that they should come to do this is not a real end. The obligation is only ideal and not practical. This real end appears first in Mohammedanism, where the particular end is raised to the rank of a general one, and thus becomes fanatical."³⁸ The problem is that, according to this account, Islam can recognize no other human goal or action as essential or meaningful since it despises all particularity.

This recalls Hegel's criticism of the abstract ideals of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror, which he refers to explicitly here.³⁹ Thus, Allah oddly resembles the abstract god of reason of deism. Hegel points out that the real world has real problems and issues that need to be resolved in practical ways. These cannot be addressed adequately by a view that simply dismisses the world as corrupt, transitory and meaningless. Some recognition must be given to the realm of the finite as well. In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* we read this described as follows:

The activity of God is thus represented as perfectly devoid of reason. This abstract negativity, combined with the permanent unity, is thus a fundamental conception in the Oriental way of looking at things.... Thus the Arabians developed the sciences and philosophy, without further defining the concrete Idea; their work is rather the dissolution of all that is definite in this substance, with which is associated mere changeableness as the abstract moment of negativity.⁴⁰

Hegel portrays the follower of Islam as being driven by a single passion. But since this passion is not guided by any concrete or determinate content, it can be both positive and negative: the follower of Islam "is superlatively cruel, cunning, bold, or generous."⁴¹ According to Hegel, we find this same feature in Arabic literature:

³⁷ Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 3, 143 / *Jub.*, vol. 16, 348.

³⁸ Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, 198 / *Jub.*, vol. 16, 71. See also *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 2, 212f. / *Jub.*, vol. 16, 85: "Closely connected with the representation of God as the Lord is the fact that the Jewish people gave themselves wholly up to His service. It is this which explains, too, that marvelous steadfastness which was not a fanaticism of conversion like Mohammedanism, which is already purified from the idea of nationality and recognizes believers only, but a fanaticism of stubbornness."

³⁹ Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, 358 / *Jub.*, vol. 11, 456.

⁴⁰ Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 3, 33 / *Jub.*, vol. 19, 129.

⁴¹ Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, 358 / *Jub.*, vol. 11, 457.

³⁴ Hegel, *Hist of Phil.*, vol. 3, 33 / *Jub.*, vol. 19, 129.

³⁵ Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 3, 143 / *Jub.*, vol. 16, 348.

³⁶ Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, 358 / *Jub.*, vol. 11, 456.

there arises the more inflexible independence of personal character, and objects too are allowed to possess their circumscribed and definitely fixed immediate reality. With these beginnings of the independence of individuality there are then bound up at the same time true friendship, hospitality, sublime generosity, but all the same an infinite thirst for revenge, an inextinguishable memory of a hatred which makes room and satisfaction for itself by pitiless passion and absolute unfeeling cruelty. But what happens on this soil appears as human, within the sphere of human affairs; there are deeds of revenge, relations of love, traits of self-sacrificing generosity from which the fantastic and wonderful have vanished, so that everything is presented fixedly and definitely in accordance with the necessary connection of things.⁴²

With this arbitrariness Islam is able to reach both the heights and the depths of the human spirit.⁴³ This universal passion for the indeterminate one is, according to Hegel, the reason that the Arab political power could not sustain itself for long. "Never has enthusiasm, as such, performed greater deeds. Individuals may be enthusiastic for what is noble and exalted in various particular forms. The enthusiasm of a people for its independence has also a definite aim. But abstract and therefore all-comprehensive enthusiasm—restrained by nothing, finding its limits nowhere, and absolutely indifferent to all beside—is that of the Mohammedan East."⁴⁴ Hegel sums up the problem as follows: "The defect of [Islam] consists generally in [its] not giving the finite its due."⁴⁵

3. The Positive Role of Islam in History

Nevertheless Islam has an important role to play in the development of history, according to Hegel's understanding. Together with Judaism and Christianity, Islam defeats the Eastern religions, which base their conceptions of the divine on the senses. Islam is a religion for thought

and not for picture-thinking. For this reason Islam forbids the portrayal of the God or the prophet.⁴⁶ The point is that one should not see them but think them.

...the Divine, explicitly regarded as unity and universality, is essentially only present to thinking and, as in itself imageless, is not susceptible to being imaged and shaped by imagination; for which reason, after all, the Jews and Mohammedans are forbidden to sketch a picture of God in order to bring him nearer to the vision which looks around in the sensuous field. For visual art, which always requires the most concrete vitality of form, there is therefore no room here.⁴⁷

This is to prevent God from becoming anthropomorphic. God is beyond our ability to imagine. This squares well with Hegel's idea that philosophical cognition is higher than sense experience. Both Islam and Judaism are conceptually higher than the religions of the East that are fixated on the empirical particulars.

Hegel sees in Islam a movement toward the modern principle of subjective freedom, something which one usually associates with his treatment of Western history and culture:

In the Orient it is in general the Mohammedan religion which has as it were cleared the ground by expelling all the idolatry of a finite and imaginative outlook, but has given to the heart the subjective freedom which entirely fills it. The result is that worldly things do not constitute a merely different province, but blossom into a realm of universal freedom where heart and spirit, without framing for themselves an objective embodiment of their god, live cheerfully at peace with themselves; they are like beggars, happy in eating and loving, satisfied and blissful in contemplating and glorifying their objects.⁴⁸

Hegel clearly regards Islam as an advance over the other religions of the East, which remain caught in the empirical and have not worked their way forward to grasping the divine in terms of a concept.

⁴² Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 430 / *Jub.*, vol. 13, 7.

⁴³ Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, 358 / *Jub.*, vol. 11, 456: "It is the essence of fanaticism to bear only a desolating destructive relation to the concrete; but that of Mohammedism was, at the same time, capable of the greatest elevation—an elevation free from all petty interests, and united with all the virtues that appertain to magnanimity and valor."

⁴⁴ Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, 359 / *Jub.*, vol. 11, 457.

⁴⁵ Hegel, *EL*, § 112, Addition, 176 / *Jub.*, vol. 8, 265. See also *EL*, § 151, Addition, 226 / *Jub.*, vol. 8, 340.

⁴⁶ Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, 357 / *Jub.*, vol. 11, 454: "The object of Mohammedan worship is purely intellectual; no image, no representation of Allah is tolerated."

⁴⁷ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 175 / *Jub.*, vol. 12, 241. See also *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 103 / *Jub.*, vol. 12, 150. *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 42 / *Jub.*, vol. 12, 72.

⁴⁸ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 557 / *Jub.*, vol. 13, 171f.

While Islam represents an advance over, for example, Hinduism, it has still not yet attained the level of Christianity. While it has successfully defeated the cult of empirical idolatry and replaced it with an abstract concept, it has not advanced to give its abstract concept any determinate content. In the *Encyclopedia*, we read,

But the western Asiatic mind which clings to the abstract One does not get as far as the determination, the particularization, of the universal and consequently does not attain to a concrete formation. Here, it is true, this mind destroys the caste system and all its works which prevail in India, and every Mohammedan is free; despotism in the strict meaning of the word does not exist among them. Political life, however, does not yet achieve the form of a rationally organized whole, of a differentiation into special governmental powers.⁴⁹

Islam thus brings with it certain important political advances since it celebrated the equality of all human beings before God. Hegel celebrates the egalitarian nature of Muslim society:

At first the Caliphs still maintained entire that simplicity and plainness which characterized the Arabs of the desert...and which acknowledged no distinction of station and culture. The meanest Saracen, the most insignificant old woman approached the Caliph as his equals. Unreflecting naïveté does not stand in need of culture; and in virtue of the freedom of Spirit, each one sustains a relation of equality to the ruler.⁵⁰

His praise here is especially striking when one recalls his sharp criticisms of the tyranny and despotism of China and India.

But although it serves the negative function of destroying certain repressive institutions such as slavery or the caste system, Islam is not able to construct anything positive since it does not have the conceptual content to do so. There is nothing determinate with which something new can be constructed. The political problem of the lack of internal differentiation is also the problem in the conception of the divine:

The Christian God is not merely the differenceless One, but the triune God who contains difference within himself, who has become man and who reveals himself. In this religious conception the opposition of universal and particular, of thought and being, is present in its most developed form and yet has been brought back again to unity. Here, then, the particular is not left so quiescent in its immediacy as in Mohammedanism.⁵¹

Unlike Islam, Christianity recognizes the importance and value of the individual and individual action. It is thus able to go on to produce customs, institutions and social structures that reflect this.

What is particularly intriguing about Hegel's treatment of Islam is that he associates its concept with what he regards as the confused and overly zealous views about religion that one finds in the Enlightenment. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, the only two religions that he treats after Christianity are Islam and Enlightenment deism. Similarly, at the end of his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, he mentions only very briefly the continued development of the concept of religion,⁵² and here too he discusses both of these as confused concepts. In the *Encyclopedia*, immediately after giving a thumbnail description of the notion of the divine in Islam, Hegel sketches the related notion from the Enlightenment: "Another position that has frequently been maintained is that there can be no cognition of God as the 'highest essence.' This is the general statement of the modern Enlightenment, which is content to say, *'Il y a un être suprême'*, and lets the matter rest there."⁵³ This is truly astonishing since these represent two radically different movements, which are separated by several centuries.

4. The Crisis of Religion Then and Now

The importance of this topic for what we have designated here as the "crisis of religion then and now" should be obvious. Hegel's analysis takes on particular relevance in our world today when tensions between Jews, Muslims and Christians are running high. The ongoing conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, the constant threat of terrorism against Western targets by the religious fundamentalists, the invasion and occu-

⁵¹ Hegel, *Phil. of Mind*, § 393, Addition, 44f. / *Jub.*, vol. 10, 77.

⁵² Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 3, 134-151 / *Jub.*, vol. 16, 340-356.

⁵³ Hegel, *EL*, § 112, Addition, 177 / *Jub.*, vol. 8, 265.

⁴⁹ Hegel, *Phil. of Mind*, § 393, Addition, 44 / *Jub.*, vol. 10, 76f.

⁵⁰ Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, 359 / *Jub.*, vol. 11, 458.

pation of Islamic countries by the United States and other Western forces, the establishment of permanent Western military installations in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the printing and reprinting of the Mohammed cartoons, the divisive political struggle between secular and religious forces in countries such as Iran and Turkey, the quite repressive secular governments of many of the Arabic countries bent on crushing any form of political reform—all this can lead one to despair of these religious and political tensions ever being resolved in any positive or satisfying manner.

What does Hegel have to add to the understanding and assessment of this problem in its many forms or indeed its solution? Much of what Hegel has to say about Islam would be regarded as politically incorrect today. On the far-right parties would argue that there is something fundamentally wrong with Islam *per se* that necessarily leads its believers to acts of religious fanaticism. The mainstream for the most part rightly perceives that by far the vast majority of Muslims in the world are not disposed to acts of violence in the name of their religion. Indeed, they repudiate such acts, have suffered terribly from them, and are active in the struggle against them. This is, I submit, one of the reasons that the Mohammed cartoons were perceived as so offensive; the portrayal of the prophet the Mohammed with a bomb in his turban coarsely implies that all of the followers of Islam, without exception, are violent terrorists and that there is something about the nature of the religion itself that inevitably leads to this.

Far-right populists like to indulge in an unqualified celebration of the greatness of Western culture and values (that is, always with the implied contrast of what they perceive as the barbarism of nonwestern cultures). They like to remind us that the West is nothing but peace, beauty and sublimity with representative figures such as Goethe, Voltaire, Shakespeare, Raphael and Beethoven. But what they forget to mention while they paint this idyllic picture is that Europe and the West are also the Holocaust, the Inquisition, the Crusades, the brutal conquests of the New World, centuries of slavery, torture, religious persecution, witch burnings, and on and on. History teaches us that one does not need to be Muslim to commit terrible acts of violence in the name of religion. Christians are every bit as guilty of such acts as Muslims. Indeed, Hegel himself seems to recognize this when he associates the problem of Islam's insistence on universality at the expense of the particularity of the real world with the Deism of the French Enlightenment. Deism also knew only an abstract God, a supreme being, and, according to Hegel's analysis, this too led to a disdain for the actual world and acts of arbitrary terror in the name of an abstraction.

Muhammad Iqbal and Kierkegaard's "Judge William"

Abraham H. Khan (Canada)

Bringing two major religious thinkers together conceptually is a perilous task, especially when the figures were as unfamiliar with each other as Muhammad Iqbal (1873-1938) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). They lived worlds apart; each was a significant religious thinker, but from a different faith tradition, culture, and age. One was a twentieth century Muslim in colonial India, and the other a nineteenth century Christian in Denmark; and there is a span of sixty years between the dates they were born. Like Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), Iqbal worked tirelessly for India to achieve political independence from Britain, and in 1930 he proposed the formation of a Muslim state from out of the territory of colonial India. His political efforts made him a national hero, but he died before he could see the fulfillment of his dream. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, preferred to appeal to individuals, rather than to make use of contemporary political or religious movements, and it was not until the twentieth century that his writings earned the worldwide recognition they receive today.

These differences, however, may obscure similarities between the two "poet-philosophers," as they are sometimes called. For example, both of the men passionately share a common mission: they want, first and foremost, to challenge their readers to become ethically responsible selves. Moreover, although each of them also develops distinctive and important epistemological and metaphysical viewpoints, their philosophies remain fundamentally oriented to their own religious traditions. Since their Muslim and Christian theologies differ on key points, the positions at which they end up differ widely, but those differences do not prevent similarities from arising along the way as well. This study¹ sets out to begin a conversation between the two men by examining a couple of their earliest works that deal with the concept of the responsible self. Whether it might be possible to continue this conversation throughout their full authorships is another question, perhaps for another investigation, but in the conclusion to this study I will suggest an approach that might be tried.

1 I wish to thank the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University for its support of the research for this study during 1997, while I studied there as a Senior Fellow.