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Hegel, Comparative Religion and Religious Pluralism

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Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* played an important role in the development of the concept of world religions. Writing at the time of a great wave of interest in non-European cultures in the first half of the 19th century, Hegel was among the first to realize the reality of religious pluralism. He saw that a philosophy of religion that wanted to favor Christianity must at a minimum have some story to tell about the other religions of the world. Today scholars are rightly skeptical of Hegel's attempt to establish a hierarchy of world religions and to tell a narrative of how the one religion replaces the other in a teleological manner, with some religions occupying a higher stage of development than others. If we reject Hegel's teleology and evolutionary view, is there anything meaningful left that we can work with? While we want to resist the idea that one religion sublates the next in Hegel's sense, historians of religion are keen to suggest the many ways in which religious traditions have developed. In many cases religions seem to have overlapped and borrowed ideas from one another. If one focuses on these points of similarity among the world religions, a new approach to plurality presents itself. In this paper I wish to explore this approach, which has been designated as "Comparative Theology".

Keywords: Hegel, philosophy of religion, religious pluralism, Christianity, Comparative Theology, comparative religion

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Together with thinkers such as Kant, Kierkegaard and Feuerbach, Hegel is one of the towering figures in the philosophy of religion of the first half of the 19th century¹.

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Ever since the posthumous publication of his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* in 1832 [Hegel, 1832], his approach has been both appreciated and reviled. In this article I wish to explore Hegel's contributions in connection with the issue of philosophy of religion in a pluralistic world. Does Hegel have something meaningful to add to this topic? Or can he be safely dismissed so we can move on to more recent figures who have a better understanding of religion in our multicultural and pluralistic 21st century?

Writing at the time of a great wave of interest in non-European cultures in the first half of the 19th century, Hegel was among the first to realize the reality of religious pluralism. He saw that a philosophy of religion that wanted to favor Christianity must at a minimum have some story to tell about the other religions of the world. This might bode well for the undertaking, but there are good reasons to proceed with caution since Hegel has also been criticized as a supporter of a pro-European colonial agenda, which would of course undermine any meaningful respect for pluralism. These criticisms need to be acknowledged and taken seriously. However, we also need to recognize that Hegel's thought is not a simple, one-dimensional matter. It developed over time and has many nuances and angles that can be emphasized. Depending on which aspect one chooses to focus on, a different picture emerges. Indeed, it is not wrong to talk about many different Hegels in this sense [Kangas, 2004]. This fact has presumably played an important role in the radical split of opinion on Hegel's philosophy, which has evoked passions both positive and negative. While I do not want to dismiss or play down the criticisms, I wish to draw attention to a side of Hegel that indeed looks rather progressive and that welcomes religious pluralism.

I. Traditional Criticisms of Hegel as an Intolerant Thinker Opposed to Religious Pluralism

Initially the goal of my article might seem to be a task destined to failure at the outset, first, since Hegel has frequently been criticized as a straightforward reactionary apologist for Christianity and specifically Protestantism. These criticisms are understandable when one sees that Hegel himself states rather clearly at the outset of the work that his goal is to vindicate the truth of Christianity by restoring its key doctrines, which, he believes, in his time have been largely abandoned, even by those who claim to be defenders of the faith [Hegel, 1984–1987, vol. 1, p. 121–128; Hegel, 1993–1995, vol. 1, p. 38–44].

Second, Hegel's teleology or evolutionary theory seems to undermine a genuinely pluralistic approach. As is well known, in his account in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel argues that one historical people replaces the next in the development of history. What he calls "spirit" (*Geist*) moves successively from China to India, Persia, Egypt, Greece and Rome and then culminates in what he refers to as the Germanic world, that is, roughly, Prussia, the German

states and Northern Europe. In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, he follows this same general scheme and attempts to apply it to his understanding of the history of the religions of the world². Thus, the various religions represent the different peoples of the world and succeed one another in a similar way. Hegel thus arranges the religions of the world in a more or less rigid ascending teleological order that culminates in Christianity³. He carefully traces the changes in the different conceptions of the divine as they appear in the different world religions. This would seem to imply that the other religions of the world are simply flawed or inadequate and for this reason are passé or, to use his language, *aufgehoben*. The approach would seem to take a dismissive stance towards all of the different world religions with the exception of Christianity and thus would seem to undermine religious tolerance and an appreciation for religious pluralism.

Even more damaging than this is the fact that the reader does not have to look too hard to find certain racist or ethnocentric elements in Hegel's accounts of the non-European religions. Judged by our modern standards and sensibilities, his language is offensive when he describes, for example, Hindus or followers of the ancient Chinese state religion who venerate the divinity Tian. This has recently evoked a wealth of secondary literature, which rightly condemns this element in Hegel's thought [Tibebu, 2011; Bernasconi, 1998, 2000, 2007; Camara, 2005; Hoffheimer, 2001, 2005]. Racial prejudices of this kind would also clearly appear to undermine a sober and objective assessment of the world religions. Thus once again Hegel does not seem to be a good candidate for a spokesman of modern religious pluralism.

II. Evidence for a More Tolerant, Pluralistic Hegel

I readily acknowledge these criticisms and think that they should indeed be taken very seriously. There is, however, other evidence that suggests that Hegel is more open to religious pluralism than we might initially think. It is to this evidence that I now turn.

First, it will be noted that Hegel's account of the so-called "determinate religions", that is, the religions of the world prior to Christianity, is a profoundly rich part of his lectures [see: Labuschagne and Slootweg, 2012; Stewart, 2018]. Contemporary observers noted how seriously Hegel took the non-European religions and how he was at great pains to read everything he could about the new research being

² This creates a number of problems for him that we cannot enter into here in any detail. For example, Buddhism is not a national religion and thus cannot be geographically pinpointed to a specific people. Moreover, some ancient religions, such as Judaism, are still alive and well today and thus seem to have resisted the force of history to capitulate. It has of course also been noted that there are serious flaws in the very notion of world religions. In Hegel's time complex religious practices and belief systems were categorized under a single general name, but the reality of the phenomena is in fact considerably more complicated.

³ It should be noted that in his lectures he did occasionally change the order of the sequence of the religions from one year to the next. For example, he struggled with the role of Judaism in his system, changing its placement repeatedly. See my recent *Hegel's Interpretation of the Religions of the World: The Logic of the Gods* [Stewart, 2018, p. 200f].

done in the different fields of what we would today call Asian Studies. His first biographer Karl Rosenkranz writes that Hegel developed “an interest for the study of the Orient”, and he “cast himself into the study of oriental cultures with genuine enthusiasm and his usual persistence” [Rosenkranz, 1844, p. 378]. Moreover, Hegel seemed to have had a particular interest in ancient China. Eduard Gans, the first editor of Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, states that Hegel spent an excessive amount of time with this material. Gans uses this as a justification for cutting out a large portion of this in his edition of the work⁴. For whatever the editorial issues involved were, this is clear testimony that Hegel was at pains to learn as much as he could about ancient Chinese history and religion and was not merely doing so in a *pro forma* manner so that he could hasten on to his account of Christianity.

Second, when we compare Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* with then contemporary works in the field, we can see a striking difference. The philosophies of religion of Kant and Fichte are dedicated more or less exclusively to an understanding of Christianity. No historical account of the world religions is given. Neither Kant nor Fichte feels any particular need to make a study of another religion, and certainly not a non-European one. It is only with Hegel that the enormous amount of then new material about Asian culture and religion is first introduced into the field at all. In this sense, Hegel, for better or worse, has clearly played a central role in the introduction of the very idea of world religions.⁵ This would seem to imply that he is in fact keenly aware of the importance of pluralism in his own day. This makes sense given that this was a time when Europe was beginning to discover a number of new cultures in Africa and Asia. One can then say in this regard that he recognized the need to take seriously other religions and to try to understand their history and belief systems.

Third, this more tolerant and pluralistic Hegel seems to be confirmed by what he actually says to his students at the outset of the lectures themselves. He is attentive to the fact that some of the material that he will be presenting will strike them as odd or even offensive. So he cautions his auditors as follows: “A survey of these religions reveals what supremely marvelous and bizarre flights of fancy the nations have hit upon in their representations of the divine essence... To cast aside these religious representations and usages as superstition, error, and fraud is to take a superficial view of the matter...” [Hegel, 1984–1987, vol. 1, p. 198; 1993–1995, vol. 1,

⁴ “In the first delivery of his lectures on the philosophy of history, Hegel devoted a full third of his time to the Introduction and to China – a part of the work which was elaborated with wearisome prolixity. Although in subsequent deliveries he was less circumstantial in regard to this Empire, the editor was obliged to reduce the description to such proportions as would prevent the Chinese section from encroaching upon, and consequently prejudicing the treatment of, the other parts of the work” [Hegel, 1837, p. XVII]. See the useful reprint of Sibree’s translation of this Preface in [Hoffheimer, 1995, p. 97–106, 104]. See also [Bernasconi, 2000, p. 173]. Note that the later editor Lasson attempted to restore this material: [Hegel, 1923, p. 275–342].

⁵ Of course, the concept of world religions is today a controversial topic since the idea of, for example, a determinate religion called “Hinduism” or “Buddhism” covering a specific set of beliefs and practices has been shown to be problematic. Thomas A. Lewis attempts to avoid this problem by arguing that Hegel’s understanding of the different world religions should not be understood as connected to specific religions in history but rather as general conceptions of religious ideas. See his article: [Lewis, 2015, p. 211–231].

p. 107]⁶. He continues by telling them, “It is easy to say that such a religion is just senseless and irrational. What is not easy is to recognize the necessity and truth of such religious forms, their connection with reason; and seeing that is a more difficult task than declaring something to be senseless” [Hegel 1984–1987, vol. 2, p. 570; 1993–1995, vol. 2, p. 467]⁷. From this it is clear that he sees something true in the different world religions, and he encourages his students to set aside their prejudices, so that they can see it as well. This reveals a perhaps surprising side of Hegel since he appears to advocate the serious study of non-European religions and to confront polemically dismissive views that ridicule them as superstition.

In the so-called “Tübingen Essay”, written long before his Berlin lectures, he also criticizes religious intolerance along the same lines:

...whoever finds that other people’s modes of representation – heathens, as they are called – contain so much absurdity that they cause him to delight in his own higher insights, his understanding, which convinces him that he sees further than the greatest of men saw, does not comprehend the essence of religion. Someone who calls Jehovah Jupiter or Brahma and is truly pious offers his gratitude or his sacrifice in just as childlike a manner as does the true Christian [Hegel, 1984, p. 38; 1907, p. 10].

This passage is particularly striking with its comparison to Christianity. It is not so surprising that he refers to the Roman god Jupiter, but that he also defends the Hindu Brahma bespeaks an openness to non-Western cultures. Here he strikes a considerably more modern and pluralistic tone than one might think. He seems to suggest that there is a general instinct or disposition that unites all religious people across sectarian boundaries, and that this instinct should be the object of respect.

III. The Question of Truth at Earlier Stages of Religious Development

The key question that Hegel’s economy of the world religions raises is what precisely the status is of the different religions that lead up to Christianity. As noted, according to one interpretation, his teleology and hierarchy would seem immediately to undercut a respectful evaluation of these other religions. If Christianity alone is true, then all other religions must be *ipso facto* false. However, I want to ask if this is necessarily true.

As is well known, Hegel often uses images of plants and organic life as analogies in order to illustrate the development of conceptual thinking⁸. The seed,

⁶ See also: [Hegel, 1975, vol. 1, p. 310f.; 1928–1941, vol. 12, p. 417].

⁷ See also: “The higher need is to apprehend what it means, its positive and true [significance], its connection with what is true – in short, its rationality. After all it is human beings who have lighted upon such religions, so there must be reason in them – in everything contingent there must be a higher necessity” [Hegel, 1984–1987, vol. 1, p. 198; 1993–1995, vol. 1, p. 107].

⁸ See, for example: “The bud disappears in the bursting-forth of the blossom, and one might say that the former is refuted by the latter; similarly, when the fruit appears, the blossom is shown in its turn as a false manifestation of the plant, and the fruit now emerges as the truth of it instead. These forms are not just distinguished from one another, they also supplant one another as mutually in-

the root, the stem, the leaf, the bud and the flower all belong to the same plant, although they are each very different from one another. Each of them plays its own crucial role in the development of the plant, which could not exist without all of them. The plant as a complex organic entity consists of several elements which must all be realized in the correct temporal sequence. It would be wrong to say that the truth, so to speak, is found only in one of these since all of them have an equal claim to be a necessary part of the plant as a whole.

If we take seriously analogies of this kind, this would seem to imply that Hegel's teleology is not so dismissive towards the non-Christian religions as one might at first glance assume. On this view, each of the different religions prior to Christianity has a legitimate and important role to play. Each of them captures a specific truth representative of its time and culture. This is not a far-fetched interpretation. Indeed, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset understood Hegel in precisely this way in the context of the philosophy of history. He writes,

Hegel's historical philosophy has the ambition of justifying each epoch, each human stage, and avoiding the error of vulgar progressivism that considers all that is past as essential barbarity... Hegel wants to demonstrate... that what is historical is an emanation of reason; that the past has good sense; or... that universal history is not a string of foolish acts. Rather Hegel wants to demonstrate that in the gigantic sequence of history something serious has happened, something that has reality, structure and reason. And to this end he tries to show that all periods have had reason, precisely because they were different and even contradictory [Buchanan and Hoffheimer, 1995, p. 71].

This interpretation is clearly correct. For Hegel, reason appears not just at the end of the development but at every step along the way as well, the trick is to learn how to recognize it.

Hegel himself states straightforwardly that each stage of religious development possesses some truth. In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, we read the following: "However erroneous a religion may be, it possesses truth, although in a mutilated phase. In every religion there is a divine presence, a divine relation; and a philosophy of history has to seek out the spiritual element even in the most imperfect forms" [Hegel, 1944, p. 195f.; Hegel, 1928–1941, vol. 11, p. 261].

This then raises the question about what exactly is this truth that is found in earlier stages of religious development and how is it different from the "absolute" truth of Christianity. The idea seems to be that the human mind is fundamentally rational, and thus its products, in the multitude of forms found in human culture, also contain an element of this rationality. Although the different myths and stories of the gods and goddess of the different religions might strike us as confusing and bizarre, there is buried in them some element of human reason that can be discerned if we can find it. These stories are a reflection of the mind of the people who created them.

compatible. Yet at the same time their fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which they not only do not conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole" [Hegel, 1977, p. 2; 1928–1941, vol. 2, p. 12].

Greek mythology, for example, is a product of the human mind, but this doesn't mean that it's fictitious or not true. Hegel explains,

[The gods] are discovered by the human spirit, not as they are in their implicitly and explicitly rational content, but in such a way that they are *gods*. They are made or poetically created, but they are not fictitious. To be sure, they emerge from human fantasy in contrast with what is already at hand, but they emerge as essential shapes, and the product is at the same time known as what is essential [Hegel, 1984–1987, vol. 2, p. 658n; 1993–1995, vol. 2, p. 549n].

The point is that while the stories about the gods are literally true in their details, nonetheless they represent something about the conceptions of the people at the time. They are a reflection of necessary ways of thinking at that specific period of history and human development.

We can find an echo of this idea at the beginning of Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. There he acknowledges, "Religions are thought to differ in value and rank; it is generally said that some are truer than others. The highest forms of religious thought cannot, it seems, be compared to the lowest without degrading the former to the level of the latter" [Durkheim, 2001, p. 3f]. He explains his approach as follows: "It is a basic postulate of sociology that a human institution cannot rest on error and falsehood or it could not endure. If it were not based on the nature of things, it would have met with resistance from those very things and could not have prevailed. When we approach the study of primitive religions, then, it is with the certainty that they are rooted in reality and are an expression of it" [Durkheim, 2001, p. 4]. In conclusion to this methodological discussion, he writes, "In reality, then, there are no false religions. All are true in their fashion: all respond, if in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence" [Ibid.]. In a sense this seems to be a restatement of Hegel's basic view. While Durkheim is more focused on the empirical aspect than Hegel, who is concerned with the concept of the divine, they share the idea that religion should be regarded as something essential in a specific community and that religious belief contains some essential truth that is not immediately evident.

IV. Hegel and Comparative Theology

A part of our modern struggle with religious pluralism lies in the perceived tension between one's own religious beliefs and the presence of other religious beliefs and traditions. If I am a religious person, then of course I hold dearly the key doctrines and beliefs of my religion. I take them to be absolute or foundationally true and even try to organize my life in accordance with them. This would seem to imply that I take all other beliefs to be false, especially those that contradict the teachings of my own religion. So there is a natural limit to the idea of religious tolerance, which can be found in one's own religious beliefs. I can, of course, say that other people have the right to exercise religious freedom: they are at their liberty to believe what they want and to practice their religion as they wish. But I cannot say that their beliefs are true in the same way that mine are since this would seem to undermine the absolute claim that every religion places on its believers. This dilemma

is present in Hegel's philosophy of religion in the way that we have just discussed: namely, there is a tension between Christianity's claim to being the absolute truth, in contrast to the claim that the other religions are merely relative truths along the way leading up to it. So if we take away for the moment the question of Hegel's teleology, the issue is fundamentally the same.

Here by way of conclusion, I would like to suggest that this tension is based on a misperception, namely, the idea that religious beliefs are necessarily mutually exclusive and to believe the one necessarily means that one must be intolerant towards others. I take as my model the approach which Frank Clooney and others have designated "Comparative Theology" [Clooney, 2010]. This is a movement that seeks interreligious understanding by taking seriously the claims of all religious traditions and learning from the other while not dismissing the faith that one begins with. The guiding premise of Comparative Theology is that religion is a fundamental aspect of the human experience, which arises from a common human need. Therefore, it makes sense to try to find points of overlap in the beliefs and practices of different faiths. Whatever the premise, common sense seems to dictate that one try to learn from the other in any case. According to this view, there is something universal in religion as such, and thus religious truth can be found in different traditions and indeed wherever humans think, act, feel and love. (It will be noted that this is very much in line with Hegel's approach.) So this means that one can find, for example, Christian truths in Hindu or Buddhist texts and vice versa. I submit that the idea of Comparative Theology is a more satisfying way to treat religious pluralism than Hegel's teleology, but it is not necessarily incompatible with it. In fact, in the two approaches one can find both of the key elements that we mentioned above: a sense of one truth found in one's own religious tradition and that of other truths found in others.

Hegel's historical approach starts to look not so implausible if we consider that in many cases religions seem *de facto* to have overlapped and borrowed ideas from one another. It has long been suggested, for example, that Judaism had its origin in the ancient Egyptian religion in the monotheistic cult introduced by Pharaoh Akhenaten. Scholars have also noted the relations between Hinduism and Zoroastrianism. The historical connections between Judaism, Christianity and Islam are well documented. What do these historical connections tell us? Religious ideas rarely die out. They get appropriated and co-opted in different contexts, where they are further developed in different ways. These kinds of connections might, however, offer a possibility of religious dialogue and respect.

When we examine two different things, this always takes place under the aegis of the categories of identity and difference. The two things are similar to one another in certain respects, and they are different from one another in other respects. In the history of religion, it is the differences which are often underscored, and this had led to a long history of religious wars, persecutions and violence. However, the historical connections between the different world religions also provide a basis for a positive comparison of points of similarity.

I believe that Hegel's approach is in many ways consistent with the view of Comparative Theology, and indeed that this can afford us a fresh look at his philosophy of religion. Both Hegel and Comparative Theology teach us that interest

in and respect for the history of religion or other religions does not need to undermine or compromise one's personal belief in one's own religion. Thus the perceived tension between the absolute claims of one's own religion and that of other religions is not a problematic as it might seem.

The tension that we noted with regard to religious tolerance and pluralism is just one aspect of a much more fundamental phenomenon that concerns our basic relation to the world. Every person has certain beliefs – some held more dearly than others. In our interaction with the world, we are constantly comparing our beliefs with the feedback or pushback that the world gives us. We constantly have experiences that contradict our beliefs and cause us to rethink them and modify them in different ways. This is what it means to live in the world as a sentient and thinking being. Religious beliefs are just one example of this. They form a part of our broader belief system that is constantly under evaluation. It does not make sense to reproach someone of intolerance simply because they believe something different from someone else and wish to insist on their own convictions. Indeed, this is the case all the time. The idea of religious intolerance must be something different and much stronger than this. Thus, there is nothing intolerant in believing in a specific religion. This does not in itself undermine respect for other religions or belief systems. Thus, I submit, that the perceived tension between holding a fundamental or absolute belief and the pluralism of religions is not a real tension. It is a pseudo-problem.

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