

RELIGION, RATIONALITY AND COMMUNITY

105

ROBERT GASCOIGNE

RELIGION, RATIONALITY
AND COMMUNITY

Sacred and secular in the thought of Hegel and his critics

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To Yvonne

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INTRODUCTION

This study is an attempt to examine the relationships between religious belief and the humanism of the Enlightenment in the philosophy of Hegel and of a group of thinkers who related to his thought in various ways during the 1840's. It begins with a study of the ways in which Hegel attempted to evolve a genuinely Christian humanism by his demonstration that the modern understanding of man as a free and rational subject derived its strength and validity from the union of God and human existence in the incarnation. The rest of this study is concerned with two different forms of opposition to Hegel: first, the critical discipleship of the Young Hegelians and Moses Hess, who insisted that Hegel's notion of Christian humanism was false because religious belief was necessarily inimical to a clear consciousness of social evil and the determination to abolish it; second, the religious opposition to the Enlightenment in the thought of Schelling and Kierkegaard, which emphasized God's transcendence to human reason and the insignificance of secular history. In the years leading up to the revolution of 1848, Hegel's synthesis was rejected in favour of the assertion of atheistic humanism or religious otherworldliness.

Chapter One, after discussing the young Hegel's critique of the social and political effects of Christianity, examines the union of religious belief, speculative philosophy and the rational state in Hegel's mature system. The development of this system was motivated by the need to come to terms with the contradictory inheritance of Christianity on the one hand and notions of humanist self-determination and rational autonomy on the other. This contradiction was expressed politically by the opposition between the ideas and institutions of the French Revolution and those of the Holy Roman Empire, and culturally in the antipathy of German Romanticism to the rationalism and universalism of the Enlightenment. Hegel's philosophy sought to grasp the truths generated by the clash of the Christian foundations of European culture with the modern ideas which saw in Christianity a powerful source of human weakness and alienation. In his philosophy these problems were treated in a way which his successors were forced to accept as the starting-point for their own work: whether through critical support or violent opposition they attempted to come to terms with the problem of the relationship between religion and the Enlightenment, and all its political and cultural consequences, by marking out their own relationship to Hegel.

Chapters Two and Three are concerned with the critique of Hegel's religious and political synthesis from the point of view of an atheistic humanism. In Chapter Two the intellectual development of Bruno Bauer is discussed, with particular emphasis on his attempt to show that Hegel's philosophy, if brought rigorously to its conclusions, implied the creative sovereignty of the human mind and the non-existence of any infinite spirit which could be distinguished from it. For Bauer, although religious ideas had played an important historical role as the first form of a universal concept of man, their contemporary effect was to make impossible any free development of reason. Religion was the sanctification of human weakness and religion, rather than social or political structures, must be the chief object of rational criticism. The chapter concludes by contrasting Bauer's concept of religious alienation with that of Feuerbach. Chapter Three examines the philosophies of political and social action which sought to build on the critique of religion made by Bauer and Feuerbach. Arnold Ruge attempted to develop a democratic political theory by criticizing Hegel's connections between political forms, such as the monarch and the system of estates, and the necessities of the absolute. The free practice of politics could, for Ruge, realize the spiritual ideals that Hegel had restricted to art, philosophy and religion. Religion, for Ruge, was not a relationship to the divine, but rather a unique ethical passion which should be directed towards political goals. For Moses Hess, the thought of the Young Hegelians must be applied to the drastic injustices of social life, revealing the alienation of man from his own productive activity through the capitalist control of industry. Religious ideas would, for Hess, find their true content only in the fulfilment of the human essence in a future society of brotherhood, made possible by ethical insight and determination.

Chapters Four and Five deal with a very different group of criticisms of Hegel. While Hess and the Young Hegelians rejected Hegel's union of religion and the free subject from the point of view of an atheistic humanism, the late Schelling and Kierkegaard castigated his neglect of religious transcendence, his exaggerated claims for speculative reason and his illusion that the human subject could find realization in the political order. Chapter Four begins with an examination of Schellings's critique of Hegel's absolute idealism from the point of view of a 'positive' philosophy of religion. Only a receptivity to the historical structure of religious experience as set forth in mythology and revelation could show the truly divine character of the absolute, which must remain no more than conceptual possibility in Hegel's system of pure reason. For Schelling, the secular world was not, as Hegel had imagined, the arena for the spiritual subject's self-realization, but rather the world of man's fallen nature. Chapter Five examines Kierke-

gaard's assertion of the transcendence of God to human reason and human history and his attack on the Hegelian philosophy of immanence. For Kierkegaard, Christian faith was the relationship of an individual in 'passionate inwardness' to a God who had intervened in human history only in an 'instant'. Kierkegaard rejected completely Hegel's thesis that the human subjectivity which derived from Christian belief had important and fruitful consequences in the shaping of political life. Both the social conservatism of 'Christendom' and contemporary liberalism were guilty, for Kierkegaard, of identifying Christian existence with secular civilization.

The failure of Hegel's attempt to create the intellectual conditions for an age in which Christianity and the Enlightenment would live at peace together can be seen in the thought of his immediate successors: their reaction to Hegel, and to the social and political crisis of their age, helped to strengthen the opposition between Christianity and the social and political consequences of the Enlightenment for a long time to come. Hegel's mature synthesis was at a point of tension between his own youth and the thought of his radical disciples. The Young Hegelians re-affirmed many of the themes of the young Hegel's unpublished works, asserting the superiority of Greek thought over Jewish faith, of human self-determination over devotion to a transcendent God. Their thought dissolved the synthesis of the mature Hegel by abstracting its emphasis on the free work of human subjectivity from the religious context that gave it stability and meaning.

By the end of the 1830's, with the publication of the works of Strauss and Cieszkowski and the appearance of the *Hallische Jahrbücher*, the opposition between the Young and Old Hegelians had become clear. It was in the 1840's, in the years leading up to the revolution of 1848, that the Young Hegelians published all their important works. In 1841, the aging Schelling was called to Berlin by the Prussian government and he remained there long enough to experience the revolution. Kierkegaard, seeking intellectual stimulus and relief from the unhappiness of his broken engagement, came to Berlin to hear Schelling: most of his works, too, were published during the 1840's, and his reflections on politics and society centred on the upheavals of 1848. The combined crisis of industrial and political revolution led to the articulation of a group of political, philosophical and religious ideas which rejected Hegel's synthesis from diametrically opposed standpoints. Hegel's philosophical resignation gave way to an intellectual radicalism which was intensified by the premonition of a coming storm. The understanding of this situation, of its potential for good or evil, was expressed for the most part in the recommendation of exclusive commitment: the last years of the Restoration and the dislocating beginnings of industrialization in Germany went hand in hand with an intellectual preference

for eschatological language and utopian solutions. The harmony between participation in the socio-political community and worship of the divine that Hegel had urged was rejected in favour of radical commitment either to the world-historical task of realizing the ideals of philosophy in a practical realm of freedom and justice or to the priority of religious truth and the affirmation of the sinful and corrupted character of the secular world.

The political conditions that were the background to Hegel's political theory were the enlightened bureaucracy of vom Stein and Hardenberg and the union of monarch and people in the aftermath of the war against the French. It was the revival of political romanticism in the 1840's, focussing on the young Friedrich Wilhelm IV, which helped to intensify the opposition between those who sought to radicalize Hegel's philosophy and those who saw the reign of the new king as the possibility of a genuine restoration of Christendom. Whereas Hegel had hoped that the French revolution would be the last great cataclysm of European society, his disciples and critics in the 1840's saw that its ideas and example would result in an age of ever increasing turmoil. For some, this suggested the possibility of a revolution that would at last introduce men to the peace and security of genuine freedom and justice, a society that could look back on the past as a long nightmare of 'pre-history'. For others, these revolutions were the direct result of atheism, the sign of man's delusion that he was capable of determining his own fate without reference to divine will. This polarization of ideas perpetuated the mutual estrangement of Christianity and the Enlightenment. The thinkers of the 1840's challenged Hegel by insisting that his own philosophy had failed to do justice both to the mysteries of faith and to the discontinuities between a given social ethos and moral ideals. Yet they did not realize that their own thought remained inevitably one-sided in its failure to address itself to the problem that Hegel had struggled to resolve: the relationship between religion and community, worship and social action, grace and human freedom.