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The Impact of German Idealism on Religion

Edited by
Christian Danz

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About the Editor

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Christian Danz, Protestant Theological Faculty of the University of Vienna, studied Protestant Theology at the University of Jena (1985–1990). During 2000-2002, he was a professor of systematic theology in Essen. Since 2002, he has been a professor of systematic theology at the University of Vienna, and since 2006 he has been president of the German Paul-Tillich Society. Since 2009, he has been a member of the commission for the edition of the works of Schelling of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and, since 2015, a member of the project "Schelling – Archive and Edition" of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences. Research fields: dogmatics, philosophy of religion, theology of religions, history of Protestant theology in the 19th and 20th century, German idealism (Schelling).

Preface

Important impulses for the emergence of the modern concept of religion came from what is known as German idealism. The modernization process of society in the 18th century led to the differentiation of religion as an independent cultural field. As a result, the Christian religion lost its old function as an overarching framework for the worldview. This loss of its old function initially made it unclear what religion was and what function it had for people and society. It was only with the development of post-Kantian philosophy that a new universal framework was established with the self-relationship of the spirit, into which religion could also be classified. With the new foundation of religion, a new, reflexive understanding of religion also emerged. The truth of religion now depends on religion representing the truth of the self-relationship of the spirit. The contents of historical religions can now be understood as expressions of a religion rooted in the structure of consciousness. However, since the self-relationship of the spirit can be understood in different ways, different religious–philosophical foundations of religion arise.

The reprint of the Special Issue "The Impact of German Idealism on Religion" discusses various possibilities for conceiving religion on the basis of the self-relationship of consciousness. The positions discussed, from Hölderlin to Schleiermacher, Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling to Feuerbach and Baur, are based on the same assumption of a universally valid framework constructed in philosophy. This makes these positions different manifestations of a romantic philosophy of religion and theology that were represented side by side in the debates.

Christian Danz
Guest Editor

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Article

Speaking of God in the Realm of Aesthetics: Religion in Hölderlin

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Abstract: This article considers the work and reception of Friedrich Hölderlin with regard to the impact of German Idealism on religion. To this end, two questions must be clarified in advance: can Hölderlin, who is known primarily as a poet, also be placed in the context of German Idealism, and does his work have a significant relationship to religion? I argue that both questions should be answered in the affirmative. Ernst Cassirer's study Hölderlin und der deutsche Idealismus (1918/19) clearly laid the foundation for appreciating Hölderlin's place within German Idealism, and the question of God is a leitmotif of Hölderlin's entire oeuvre. I seek to trace Hölderlin's influence on understanding religion in three steps: First, I want to show that Hölderlin, in a critical continuation of Kant, does not consider religion solely within the matrix of practical reason, but brings into play the dimension of aesthetics. By situating religion in relation to the two focal points of ethics and aesthetics, a fundamental question of the philosophy of religion is addressed. Second, I employ several examples to show the various conceptions of the divine that the poet elucidates and juxtaposes in his work (Christian motifs, Greek mythology, pantheistic concepts, etc.). This leads to a philosophy of religion that is not determined by dogmatic boundaries. Third, I point out how religion plays a major role in the reception of Hölderlin.

Keywords: Hölderlin; religion; divine; modernity; aesthetics; Kant; *Critique of Judgement*

1. Introduction

Religion plays an important role among all thinkers of German Idealism (Viertbauer and Lang 2022). It is not only a topic to which their philosophical speculation also turns, along with others, but it has a central place in the architectonics of their thinking. A study of German Idealism cannot bypass the reconstruction of the complex and differentiated thinking of religion; beyond that, these philosophical conceptions of religion are also of great importance as a starting point for contemporary theological reflections (Breul and Langenfeld 2023, pp. 175–215). Concerning theology and the philosophy of religion, the rich thinking of German Idealism is still stimulating and prolific, even after 200 years (Verweyen [2000] 2004; Danz 2022; Appel 2008).

The following article draws on the work and reception of Friedrich Hölderlin, who was a contemporary of Fichte, Hegel and Schelling and, for several years, was in close contact with these most important representatives of German Idealism. Nevertheless, we must clarify in advance whether Hölderlin, who is known primarily as a poet, can also be placed in the *philosophical* context of German Idealism. Then, we have to discuss whether the assumption that religion plays an important role for all thinkers of German Idealism, is also true for Hölderlin (Wagner 1991). These two questions, to which I answer in the affirmative, serve primarily to introduce the basic features of Hölderlin's thought, insofar as this is necessary for this article. Concerning the first question, I refer to Wilhelm Dilthey's and Ernst Cassirer's seminal essays on Hölderlin, which clearly laid the foundation for appreciating Hölderlin's place within the philosophy of German Idealism (Section 2). Regarding the second question, I attempt to provide a short sketch showing that the *Gottesfrage* can be regarded as a leitmotif of Hölderlin's entire oeuvre (Section 3).

I will then trace Hölderlin's influence on understanding religion in three steps: First, I want to show that Hölderlin, in a *critical* continuation of Kant, does not consider religion primarily within the matrix of practical reason, but brings into play the dimension of aesthetics. By situating religion in relation to the two focal points of ethics and aesthetics, a fundamental issue of the philosophy of religion in general is addressed (Section 4). Second, I employ several examples to show the various conceptions of God that the poet elucidates and juxtaposes in his work (Christian motifs, Greek mythology, pantheistic concepts, etc.). This opens the door for a philosophy of religion that is not determined by dogmatic boundaries (Section 5). Third, I point out how in the reception of Hölderlin the poet is closely linked to topics concerning religion—even in non-religious contexts (Section 6).

This essay is part of a Special Issue on the impact of German Idealism on religion. This also identifies the limits of the contribution: Its main objective lies in the presentation of Hölderlin's perception of Kant and how he sets himself apart from him (Section 4) and gives the divine a variety of forms of expression in poetry (Section 5). In addition, a discussion of Hölderlin's relationship to Protestantism, especially Pietism, would be very fruitful, but would go beyond the scope of this study (Dierauer 1986; Schäfer 1991; Wagner 1991; Hayden-Roy 2007). Another desideratum would be to compare Hölderlin's aesthetic approach to understanding religion to Schleiermacher's parallel concept (Ten Kate and Philipsen 2023). This is also beyond the focus of this article.

2. Hölderlin—A Thinker of German Idealism?

The following considerations address the question of whether Hölderlin is a thinker who cannot be ignored when it comes to the impact of German Idealism. Not only does the time of Hölderlin's intense creativity (1790–1806) coincide with the period of the formation of the intellectual systems of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, but the poet himself is also part of this development (Henrich 1992; Jamme 1983; Waibel [2002] 2011). Since a detailed examination of these connections is beyond the scope of this article, I refer to Ernst Cassirer, whose assessment of Hölderlin from a philosophical perspective paved the way for many other works (Dieter Henrich, Christoph Jamme, Michael Franz, Violetta Waibel, Johann Kreuzer, and so forth).

In the 1790s, when the independent philosophical drafts of the most important thinkers of German Idealism—Fichte, Schelling, Hegel—were developing, Hölderlin was in close exchange with all of them. These years were marked by a process of productive-critical engagement with Kant's philosophy[1]—a process which according to Dieter Henrich can "certainly be compared to the emergence of a supernova, in the spread of which immense intellectual energies are released—but as the rise, not the fall, of a stellar world" (Henrich 1992, p. 21, translation JD). In accordance with the Special Issue "The Impact of German Idealism on Religion", I understand this phase of developing a post-Kantian philosophy as the beginning of German Idealism, which lasted as a philosophical current until around the middle of the 19th century.

Hölderlin knew Hegel and Schelling from their time studying together in the Protestant seminary ("Tübinger Stift", 1788–93). He attended Fichte's lectures in Jena in 1794/95 and spoke with him often during this time. In a letter to Christian Ludwig Neuffer of November 1794, he writes: "I go to his lectures every day. Speak to him sometimes." (Hölderlin 2009, p. 149). Hölderlin then shared an intellectually productive friendship with Hegel when they both lived in or near Frankfurt (Bad Homburg) from 1797 to 1800 (Jamme 1983). Hölderlin inhabited the environment in which the most important strands of German idealism developed. It was in this "*Denkraum*" (Henrich 1992, p. 23) that the text "The Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism", found by Franz Rosenzweig in 1917 and so named by him, was written. Hölderlin was probably involved in one form or another in providing ideas for the draft of this philosophical program, even if the authorship and genesis of the manuscript have not yet been reconstructed with certainty (Jamme and Schneider 1984).

In Hölderlin's entire oeuvre, a philosophical background is directly or indirectly evident. In his philosophical drafts, which admittedly all remained fragments, an independent interpretation of Kantian philosophy can be found (Kreuzer 1998). Johann Kreuzer explains that Hölderlin's draft of his main philosophical texts ("The Declining Fatherland. . .", "When the poet is once in command of the spirit. . .") begin when his literary writing was on the threshold of a radical change (Kreuzer [1985] 2021, pp. 1–2). In letters, Hölderlin several times presents a program to be worked out philosophically and comments on philosophical questions. And finally, Hölderlin's literary writing also has a philosophical background. Let us now take a closer look at the process of uncovering the philosophical character of Hölderlin's work.

Many of Hölderlin's poems written after 1800 could not be published by the poet himself. Despite his declared aim, he had not succeeded in achieving a broader social impact with his songs (Vöhler 2018–19). Nevertheless, the author of the epistolary novel Hyperion was never completely forgotten in the 19th century (no small thanks to this work, cf. Bothe 1992). Some representatives of Romanticism (Bettine and Achim von Arnim, Clemens Brentano) were aware of Hölderlin's philosophical significance even during his lifetime (cf. Kaspers 1990–91). A few decades later, Wilhelm Dilthey was one of the first to point out Hölderlin's importance again and published two studies on him: a short portrait in 1867 (cf. Dilthey 1970, pp. 102–16) and an extensive study in 1906, which is part of his work *Poetry and Experience* (Dilthey 1985, pp. 303–84; cf. Vollhardt 2014). For Dilthey, who had an excellent knowledge of the sources, which were only partially accessible at the time, the philosophical relevance of Hölderlin's work was beyond question. In both linguistic and philosophical terms, Hölderlin showed a forward movement "towards new possibilities", in which "he prepares the modern age" (cf. Dilthey 1985, p. 338). Dilthey sees the philosophical character of Hölderlin's work in close proximity to Hegel's early writings: "The agreement of the poet and the philosopher derives from the similarity of their approach." (Dilthey 1985, p. 347). Both seek to overcome "all separateness" (Dilthey 1985, p. 347) by searching for a unifying moment that precedes all oppositions. While Hölderlin, who advocated an all-one doctrine, which was built on beauty and had a strong reference to Greek antiquity, Hegel focused on love and tried to give a reinterpretation of the Christian religion.

In the following years, after Dilthey's detailed study from 1906, Norbert von Hellingrath and Ludwig von Zinkernagel worked at the same time on complete editions of Hölderlin's works. Many previously unpublished texts became accessible for the first time and a wave of reception began. On the basis of this new textual foundation, an in-depth philosophical examination of Hölderlin also became possible.

The *systematic* philosophical analysis of Hölderlin's work began with Ernst Cassirer's essay "Hölderlin und der deutsche Idealismus" (Hölderlin and German Idealism; Cassirer 2001, pp. 346–88 [115–155]), which was published in the journal Logos in two parts (1917/18 and 1918/19). Cassirer's work builds on Dilthey's studies, but represents the first explicit philosophical approach to Hölderlin and sets its own accents. He neither adopts their biographical orientation nor does he emphasize Hölderlin's distance from his own time and his contemporaneity with the present. In his essay, Cassirer rather gives a panorama of German Idealism and situates Hölderlin's work in the philosophical debates relevant around 1800. With recourse to Plato and Spinoza, he works out how Hölderlin's continuation of Kantian philosophy relates to the works of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. As much as Cassirer emphasizes their exchange of ideas, he is concerned from the outset to work out Hölderlin's position as his own voice in this concert: Early on, he had tried to develop an independent position vis à vis Fichte and Schiller, the two thinkers so admired by Hölderlin; and in the conversation with Schelling and Hegel, important impulses probably also came from Hölderlin: "Hölderlin is not only a mere recipient of the overall intellectual movement of idealism, but by appropriating it, he also enriches it with a new positive content." (Cassirer 2001, p. 349 [118], translation JD). Cassirer arrives at this judgment even though he could not yet have known a fragment that was only published

in 1961 in the *Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, under the title "Urtheil und Seyn" (Being, Judgement, Possibility). In this short text, Hölderlin outlines his own position with regard to the relationship between subject and object as well as the consciousness-theoretical question of the self-relation of the "I am I" and gives an interpretation of the categories of modality. In this, he understands "opposition as the structure of self-consciousness" (Kreuzer 1998, p. XV, translation JD).

What Hölderlin introduced early on into the discourses of German Idealism was the idea that nature, myth, art and beauty cannot be limited to being reconstructed in the trajectories of the autonomous ego's history of freedom. They carry a meaning that cannot be reduced to anything else or serve as a means for something else. "For Hölderlin, myth is not merely an external allegorical symbol in which thought is clothed, but it forms for him an original and indissoluble spiritual Lebensform." (Cassirer 2001, p. 352 [121], translation JD). However, this requires not only philosophical reflection, but also an appropriate form of poetic expression. It is from this, he says, that Hölderlin's work must ultimately be understood—despite all the instructive attempts to trace it back to the influences that impacted it:

> "From the rules of this artistry alone can be derived the explanation for the distance and closeness, for the alternation between attraction and repulsion, which is manifested in Hölderlin's overall relationship to his epoch and especially in his relationship to the idealist-philosophical movement." (Cassirer 2001, p. 348 [116–117])

If we follow Cassirer, we can state two things: It is clear that Hölderlin belongs in the context of German Idealism. More concretely, the question of his significance can only be asked in connection with his literary work.

3. Religion as a Topic in Hölderlins Oeuvre?

Religion and the question of God (*Gottesfrage*) pervade Hölderlin's entire oeuvre as essential themes: the literary texts (the poems and the novel Hyperion), the philosophical drafts and also his translation work. I cannot address those authors who interpret Hölderlin in the direction of atheism (Hörisch 1992) and regard his work an abandonment of the divine, but I hope the following examples can show how present the theme of the divine is for Hölderlin:

(1) In the philosophical draft, which bears the title "Über Religion" (On Religion) in the *Stuttgarter Ausgabe* and the title "Fragment philosophischer Briefe" (Fragment of Philosophical Letters) in the *Frankfurter Ausgabe*, Hölderlin more precisely defines the place of religion within the framework of his thought (Franz 2000, [2000] 2011; Gaier 2008; Kreuzer [2002] 2011; Louth 2016). This draft was preceded by a letter of 24 February 1796 to Immanuel Niethammer, in which Hölderlin announced "New Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man", in which he wanted to "go on from philosophy to poetry and religion" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 68). This refers to the triad of philosophy, art and religion, which also designates the three dimensions of the absolute spirit in Hegel: art—religion—philosophy. The order of the three has no definitive meaning in either Hegel or Hölderlin; they interpenetrate each other, but ultimately cannot be placed in any hierarchical order, which can no longer exist in the realm of absolute spirit.

The first point we need to address with regard to the *Fragment of Philosophical Letters* (Hölderlin 2009, pp. 234–40) is the basic concept of the sphere. Hölderlin uses this term to oppose a finite thinking that is merely "machinery" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 234). He uses "sphere" to describe thinking in linguistic-historical-cultural mediations in which the human being is embedded. Only within a sphere, i.e., in "a more lively relation, raised above need, which he maintains to that which surrounds him" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 234), can man experience "that there is a spirit, a god" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 234). The relationship to God thus presupposes a certain relationship to the world. It is not merely a product of human self-reflection, nor does it arise from the necessity of connections in the world of phenomena, but corresponds to a living experience of being embedded in linguistic-

historical-cultural contexts. In this there is an analogy to the explanations in Hegel's early writings (Appel 2003).

God corresponds to the individual sphere of the human being: "And everyone would, according to this, have his own god, insofar as everyone has his own sphere in which he is active and which he experiences" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 234). God is thus, far from any heteronomy, a cipher for radical individualization of the human being. This echoes the idea of autonomy and freedom that has been central to the concept of God since Kantian thought. At the same time, the thought of God radiating from the sphere also contains the idea of what we might call a 'translation' from one sphere to another, and thus a border–crossing, a relation between different spheres or a commonly shared sphere. The sphere can also encompass several people, insofar as they are in a living community with each other, i.e., not based on servitude but on recognition. The more intensively mutual recognition is experienced, the more God also appears as the common God of this shared sphere. If all people formed *one* sphere, according to Hölderlin's utopia, there would also be "a common deity" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 234) of all. Conversely, if a religion professes monotheism, it must also promote the vision of a cosmopolitan society.

Hölderlin, goes still one step further. It is the *particular* conception of God, if it has itself emerged from free relationships, which is also the starting point for forms of translation and a commonly shared conception of God, not an abstract-general conception. It is "a desire of human beings, as long as they are not hurt and angered, not dejected and not outraged and involved in a just or unjust struggle, to make, just as in many other matters, their different kinds of representation of the divine join one another, and thus to give the limitedness which every single kind of representation has, and must have, its freedom" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 235).

The close connection of the sphere as an expression for the linguistic-historical-cultural form of mediation of our Lebenswelt with the concept of God leads us to another important thought. Again, Hölderlin's question is how we can escape a finite and objectifying view of the world. He sees in a consideration of "relationships as religious ones" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 237), which correlates to a consideration in the living context of a sphere, a capacity for differentiation that is lacking in "our iron concepts" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 237). Hölderlin trusts a religious perspective to work out differentiations that can be perceived neither in logical nor in moral judgements. He is not concerned with a reversal of the Enlightenment, but rather with a "higher enlightenment" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 237).

The transition to a religious perception of conditions is in no way connected with a decline into pre-modern conditions. Rather, it represents a free spiritual repetition [*freie Wiederholung im Geist*] of current conditions. The spiritual (religious) life emerges where the human being "as it were, repeats his real life" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 236). Spiritual repetition, however, does not mean a mere repetition in thought or through memory that does not become reality and does not expose itself to finite conditions of space and time. If repetition does not enter into the specific conditions of reality, it remains in the realm of necessary (automatic) connections of thought. Only with the transition into historical-linguistic-cultural contexts of the sphere, i.e., in specific conditions, is a freedom and differentiation associated with that can be grasped neither by logical nor by moral judgements.

According to Hölderlin, religion offers a special access to this repetition of reality that does not remain in thought; it can be seen as a form of expression of this new reality. How does he define religion? Hölderlin speaks of *religious relationships* and distinguishes them from "intellectual moral legal relationships on the one hand, and on the other hand, physical mechanical historical relationships" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 238). The first set means man in his freedom, the second man in his embeddedness in natural relationships. We could also speak of discreteness and continuity, of negativity and positivity. According to Hölderlin, religion has the ability to connect the two sets. It is neither absorbed in self-determination, i.e., cannot be reconstructed in the trajectories of practical reason (first row), nor can it be traced back to merely natural dispositions, such as genetic endowment, historical or economic circumstances (second row). It is "intellectual-historical, *that is*,

Mythical" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 238). It unites both sets and gives them expression, as addressed by the word "*Mythical*" (*mythos* as narrative, narration). In the expressions of religion, the I, which Kant imagines in a hiatus of nature and freedom, receives a form that seriously embraces and acknowledges its opposition. However, in order to be able to determine these forms of expression of religion, Hölderlin again finds himself referred to forms of art (Deibl 2023, pp. 143–49).

The *Fragment of Philosophical Letters* remains unfinished; many motifs are only hinted at and not elaborated. Nevertheless, it shows very clearly how Hölderlin seeks to think of philosophy, art and religion as closely intertwined.

(2) In Hölderlin's poetry, the concept of religion is not addressed, but the figures of the divine appear—quite often with a concrete name—in almost all the poems. The reference to God can be traced from the earliest texts to the great hymns and the fragments of the "Homburger Folioheft". The utterances in which Hölderlin refers to God range from a trusting call to a lament that he no longer has a language for God. Sometimes there is even a certain proximity to prayer. This article does not offer enough space to elaborate on this in detail. I am merely listing a few striking sentences to illustrate the breadth of the spectrum of reference to the divine. Admittedly, in all cases one would have to develop the appearance of the divine in the text from the corresponding poem.

One of Hölderlin's earliest juvenile poems begins with an address to God and asks, in a tone similar to the Psalms, who God is and who—in relation to him—human beings are: "Lord! what are you, what children of men?" (*M. G.*, V 1). Hölderlin then contrasts his own being misunderstood by humans with his greater acquaintance with the gods: "I grew tall in the arms of the gods." (*When I was a boy*. . ., V 32; Hölderlin [1990] 1994, p. 137). However, this turns into one of the most severe statements about the separation of humans and gods. In *Der Abschied*, Hölderlin refers to the time "[. . .] Since the rooted/all-dividing hatred separates gods and men" (*Der Abschied*, VV 13 et seq.). And finally, he states wistfully that the language to address the divine is mostly absent: "Silence often behooves us: deficient in names that are holy,/Hearts may beat high, while the lips hesitate, wary of speech?" (*Homecoming*, VV 101 et seq. Hölderlin [1966] 2004, p. 337). But then it says that "[. . .] the Godhead, the Spirit housed/In human words once more, at noontide/Again with a name, as once, calls himself." (*Exhortation*, VV 26–28, Hölderlin [1966] 2004, p. 221, translation modified). And finally, perhaps the most enigmatic phrase, revised several times by Hölderlin: "[. . .] no/Weapon he needs, nor subterfuge/Till God's being not there helps him" (*Dichterberuf*, VV 63 et seq., Hölderlin [1990] 1994, p. 157).

In the elegy *Homecoming*, the poetic I explicitly reflects on addressing God in poetry. The second stanza of the poem reports how the figure of the blessed God emerges ever more clearly from the chaos (first stanza). Against this background, the poetic I can also experience itself as speaking and says at the beginning of the third stanza: "Much I said to him; for whatever the poets may ponder, /Sing, it mostly concerns either the angels or him" (*Homecoming*, VV 37 et seq., Hölderlin [1966] 2004, p. 333). Poetry proves—at least in this poem—to be primarily addressed to God or the angels as his messengers.

(3) The reference to religion is also of central importance in Hölderlin's translations. With regard to the Pindar Hymns, Antigone and Oedipus, it is already true in terms of content that these works are rooted in religious myth. However, I would like to point out another aspect. Hölderlin wrote philosophical notes on both of the translations of Sophocles' tragedies, reflecting on the process of translation. In the "Notes on Antigone" (Hölderlin 2009, pp. 325–32), Hölderlin discusses, among other things, the question of how to deal with the names of the gods. Contrary to the original, he translates "Zeus" as "Father of Time" and justifies this intervention in the text with the words: "For we must everywhere represent the myth more demonstrably." (Hölderlin 2009, p. 328). The myth, i.e., the form of expression which—as the *Fragment of Philosophical Letters* shows—is the linguistic form of religion and combines the aspects of freedom and nature, must be given an appropriate form.

For Hölderlin—as a thinker of German Idealism—both the concept of religion and the question of how to address the divine play a central role. Johann Kreuzer states that "the engagement with the discourse of God [Rede von Gott] forms a constant in Hölderlin's work" (Kreuzer 2016b, p. 245). In the following, I will point out three aspects in which Hölderlin's reflections on religion and the question of God still offer departure points for reception.

4. Religion in the Trajectories of Aesthetics

Kantian philosophy always remains an important point of reference for Hölderlin, and yet he gradually detaches himself from the attempt to reconstruct religion along the lines of practical philosophy. No longer the generality of morality alone, but also a generality that is inherent in aesthetics becomes the horizon of the consideration of religion for him. In this chapter, I aim to show how Hölderlin takes up the matrix of Kantian philosophy in order to develop his own understanding of religion and the "Gottesfrage".

(1) Hölderlin's reading of Kant began in the summer of 1790 when he was already studying at the Tübinger Stift (Doering 2022, pp. 261, 279–87). In a letter from Hölderlin to his mother dated 14 February 1791, Hölderlin gives some hints that do not mention Kant directly, but which Violetta Waibel has clearly ascribed to the latter—namely with regard to Kant's demonstration of the impossibility of the proofs of God's existence in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Waibel [2002] 2011, pp. 90 et seq.):

> "I had been studying the area of philosophy that deals with the rational proofs for the existence of God and with those of his qualities we are supposed to recognize in nature, and I had an interest in it I am not ashamed of though for a while it did lead me into thoughts you would perhaps have found unsettling had you known what they were. For I soon came to see that these rational proofs for the existence of God, and also for immortality, were so imperfect that a fierce opponent could knock them down completely or at least in their main lines." (Hölderlin 2009, p. 7 et seq.)

For Hölderlin, this insight does not mean the loss of religion, as Hölderlin also says in the same letter: "But I was still left with the faith of my heart, which is so incontestably full of the longing for eternity, for God" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 8). Rather, the reading of Kant forms the starting point for his critical reflection on the status of religion. It is interesting for the context of this contribution that where you can find first (even just slight and indirect) references to Kant, they deal with the *Gottesfrage*. In a letter to his brother Carl dated 13 April 1795, Hölderlin concisely summarizes the doctrine of the postulates five years after he began reading Kant:

> "But since this aim [moral perfection] is impossible in this world, since it cannot be attained within time and we can only approach it in infinite progression, we have need of a belief in an infinite extent of time because the infinite progress in good is an uncontestable requirement of our law; but this infinite extent of time is inconceivable without faith in a Lord of nature whose will is the same as the command of the moral law within us, and who must therefore want us to endure infinitely because he wants us to make infinite progress in good and, as the Lord of nature, also has the power to realize that which he wants. [. . .] And so the sacred law within us is the basis for the rational belief in God and immortality, and also, insofar as they are not dependent on us, in the wise governing of our destinies." (Hölderlin 2009, p. 50)

Although there is evidence of an intensive reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* at this time, it does not yet have an impact on Hölderlin's reference to religion. The connection between freedom, morality, God and infinite progress—all this still points to practical philosophy as the focal point.

(2) A year later, in March 1796, Hölderlin addressed his brother in another letter and spoke again about the path to philosophy. In this letter he refers to aesthetics as *cacumina*

rerum, i.e., as the peak of knowledge. He makes it clear, however, that the occupation with it presupposes that foundation which he has presented him in the above-mentioned letter:

> "You say you want to occupy yourself with aesthetics. Do not you think that the definition of concepts must precede their union, and that for this reason the subordinate parts of knowledge, e.g., the theory of right (in the pure sense), moral philosophy, etc., must be studied before approaching the *cacumina rerum*? [. . .] It's true it is also possible to start from the top—to the extent that the pure ideal of all thought and action, unrepresentable and unattainable beauty, must be present to us everywhere, one has to—but it can only be recognized in all its completeness and clarity when one has found one's way through the labyrinth of knowledge and only then, having keenly missed one's homeland, arrived in the quiet land of beauty." (Hölderlin 2009, p. 69)

Hölderlin does not want to give up practical philosophy as a foundation. However, through his preoccupation with Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, Schiller's reception of the *Third Critique* and the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus*, Hölderlin develops an independent path beyond Kant. Hölderlin's letters document this development. This he wanted to give form in an "essay on aesthetic ideas" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 34), which, of course, was never completed:

> "Perhaps I'll be able to send you an essay on aesthetic ideas; as it can be considered a commentary on Plato's Phaedrus, taking a passage from it as its express starting-point, it might interest Conz. In essence it is to contain an analysis of the beautiful and the sublime in which the Kantian analysis will be simplified and also, from another perspective, varied and extended, as Schiller has already done in part in his treatise on 'Grace and Dignity', though he has ventured a step less beyond the Kantian borderline than he should have done in my opinion. Don't smile! I may be wrong; but I've checked, and checked again and again at the cost of much effort." (Hölderlin 2009, p. 34)

Violetta Waibel says of this project that Hölderlin "presents here his ambitious plan to combine and at the same time to surpass the conceptions of beauty of Plato, Kant and Schiller" (Waibel [2002] 2011, p. 92). With the beautiful and the sublime, Hölderlin now also mentions the two basic categories of Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* after the aesthetic ideas. So, we are now moving entirely in the environment of Kant's third critique.

What is meant by the transgression of the Kantian boundary line is evaluated differently in research (cf. von Bassermann-Jordan 2006–7). According to Johann Kreuzer, Hölderlin addresses a question that arises with the *Critique of Judgement* and whose answer remains in abeyance—the question "whether aesthetic experience also has the status of generalisable knowledge [verallgemeinerbarer Erkenntnis]" (Kreuzer 2016a, p. 37). In this respect, Hölderlin had been disappointed by Schiller, who had not taken advantage of the potential offered by the *Critique of Judgement*, since he ultimately saw the experience of the beautiful primarily as a transition to the moral (Cf. Kreuzer 2016a, p. 38).

Hölderlin, on the other hand, wants to preserve the dignity of aesthetic experience and sees in it a constitutive role for knowledge. Kant precludes this in the *Critique of Judgement* on the one hand, but indirectly admits it again in other places. In the first paragraph, he clarifies that the aesthetic judgement "contributes nothing to knowledge" (Kant [1952] 2007, sct. 1, p. 36). In paragraph 39, however, he sees in aesthetic experience "a process of judgement which has also to be invoked in order to obtain the commonest experience" (Kant [1952] 2007, sct. 39, p. 122). In paragraph 9, to which Kant himself attaches decisive importance in the *Third Critique*, he repeatedly refers to what is "suitable for a cognition in general" (Kant [1952] 2007, sct. 9, p. 49) when he grasps the *free play* of imagination and understanding. Although aesthetic judgements do not contribute to the determination of the object, they do thematize the interplay and attunement of imagination and understanding that is necessary for all cognition. With the aesthetic judgements, the activity of the power of judgement itself, in which "the understanding and the imagination

are regarded in relationship with one another" (Kant [1952] 2007, p. 333), comes into view. "Kant repeatedly inculcates that the analysis of pure judgements of taste ultimately leads back to a 'subjective condition' [sct. 9, p. 132] of the possibility of cognition in general", as Stephan Zimmermann points out (Zimmermann 2014, p. 32, translation JD). According to this interpretation, the *Critique of Judgement* provides a deeper insight into the conditions of cognition in general than the two critiques that preceded it. As Thomas Rentsch puts it, the Third Critique partakes in "a permanent radicalisation of transcendental questions" (Rentsch 2013, p. 370): "The preconditions of critically conceived theoretical reason are of a practical (and religious) nature, and their preconditions lie in our power of judgement" (Rentsch 2013, p. 370). Aesthetic judgements, freed from the functionalization on the determination of the object, thus grant an insight into the conditions of cognition that lie in the subject in general. Aesthetics is thus not only a marginal topic of the system of cognition in general, but it brings cognition into focus in a deepened way and thus has a general character.

Hölderlin follows this specific line laid down in the *Critique of Judgement*, which assigns a fundamental function to aesthetic judgements. In his own thinking, however, it must first assert itself against another Kantian line, which proceeds more strongly from practical reason and the postulates. In a letter to Schiller from 4 September 1795, both lines still appear in parallel:

> "I am attempting to work out for myself the idea of an infinite progress in philosophy by showing that the unremitting demand that must be made of any system, the union of subject and object in an absolute. . . I or whatever one wants to call it, though possible aesthetically, in an act of intellectual intuition, is theoretically possible only through endless approximation, like the approximation of a square to a circle; and that in order to arrive at a system of thought immortality is just as necessary as it is for a system of action." (Hölderlin 2009, p. 62)

When Hölderlin speaks of "the union of subject and object", he does not mean the substantiation of an absolute position beyond space and time. He only says, almost casually: "in an absolute. . . I or whatever one wants to call it". Hölderlin is merely referring to a cipher for a position that we must presuppose if we want to think of unification. Here, two concepts confront each other: endless approximation and intellectual intuition. Where with Kant's first two critiques the idea of infinite approximation indicates a point of unification, Hölderlin activates the motif of intellectual intuition in an independent continuation of the *Third Critique*. The concept of intellectual intuition points away from the idea of infinite approximation to the realm of the aesthetic. However, after a brief phase in the mid-1790s, it loses its appeal for Hölderlin again. With this term, Hölderlin strives to express the fundamental meaning of aesthetic experience, which cannot be captured either theoretically or practically. In the words of Johann Kreuzer:

> "What interests Hölderlin in this early phase of his thinking about the theorem of intellectual intuition [. . .] is obviously that with it, the epistemological and consciousness-theoretical [bewusstseinstheoretische] significance of the meaning of aesthetic experience becomes describable." (Kreuzer 2012, p. 122, translation JD)

(3) In a programmatic letter dated 24 February 1796, addressed to the philosopher Immanuel Niethammer, Hölderlin now also includes religion, which in his letter to his brother in 1795 was still thought of entirely in Kantian trajectories, in the realm of aesthetics. The idea of infinite approximation no longer appears here; Hölderlin now rejects practical reason as an aid or final focal point. In this letter, he speaks of wanting to write *New Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*:

> "In the philosophical letters I want to find the principle that will explain to my satisfaction the divisions in which we think and exist, but which is also capable of making the conflict disappear, the conflict between the subject and the object, between our selves and the world, and between reason and revelation—

> theoretically, through intellectual intuition, without our practical reason having to intervene. To do this we need an aesthetic sense, and I shall call my philosophical letters New Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man. And in them I will go on from philosophy to poetry and religion." (Hölderlin 2009, p. 68)

The framework for Hölderlin's reflections will always remain Kant's epistemological critique and the foundational importance he gives to morality vis à vis transcendent ideas. However, it becomes increasingly clear to Hölderlin that the place where he reconstructs religious experience is aesthetics. This is not to discount morality because, as Hölderlin shows in his interpretation of the *Critique of Judgment*, aesthetics itself has a fundamental significance for morality. If it is true that aesthetic judgements have a founding function vis à vis moral judgements, religious content can be interpreted within the broader horizon of aesthetics without having to give up its connection to practical reason.

Hölderlin's reference to religion raises a fundamental question: In Modernity, can the contents of religion be reconstructed solely and comprehensively within the framework of practical reason? According to Jamme and Schneider, this would be the Fichtean line of the continuation of Kant: "In the Kantian-Fichtean approach, the beautiful had nothing to do with religion, was even a hindrance to it" (Jamme and Schneider 1984, p. 60, translation JD). Can religion therefore ultimately be translated into morality or is there a sensual surplus that points to another form of aesthetic thematization? This would be Hölderlin's continuation of the Kantian line. This alternative is a basic question that Hölderlin passes on to contemporary theology and philosophy of religion.

5. Multiplicity of Understanding the Divine

(1) In Hölderlin's literary work, the divine has a constant presence. The names under which it appears are manifold: God, gods, demigods, spirit, the blessed, the heavenly, father, lord, Zeus, father ether, Dionysus, Heracles, Christ... The divine is associated with a variety of ideas that are difficult to subsume under a single concept: Elements of Christian narrative, Greek mythology, a pantheistic devotion to nature, a new mythology, a religion of art, as well as the loss of God and the difficulty of still naming him in language, all occur in close proximity to one another in Hölderlin's literary work.

Thus, at the end of the second book of the first volume of the epistolary novel *Hyperion*, it says: "Sacred Nature, thou art the same within me and without. It cannot be so hard to unite what is outside of me and the divine within me" (Hölderlin [1990] 1994, p. 73). This is contrasted with a rupture, as we have seen in *Der Abschied*, where it says: "[...] Since the rooted/all-dividing hatred separates gods and men" (*Der Abschied*, VV 13 et seq.). The aforementioned pantheistic devotion to nature ("Sacred Nature!") corresponds to an art religion of beauty, in which Hölderlin has the ancient Greek world in mind. The first daughter of beauty is art and its second is religion: "Religion is love of Beauty" (Hölderlin [1990] 1994, p. 65). "There will be but one Beauty; and man and Nature will be united in one all-embracing divinity" (Hölderlin [1990] 1994, p. 74). In *Patmos*, a poem more strongly influenced by the Bible, it is precisely this idea of beauty as a mediating instance of gods and men that collapses when, alluding to the death of Christ and the dispersion of Jesus' disciples, it says: "But when thereupon he dies/To whom beauty most adhered [...]" (*Patmos*, VV 136 et seq., Hölderlin [1990] 1994, p. 251). Thus the poetic I also proclaims at the beginning of *Germania*: "Those images of gods in the ancient land,/Them, it is true, I may not now invoke [...]" (*Germania*, VV 2 et seq., Hölderlin [1990] 1994, p. 209). The images of the divine and the ideas of religion must be constantly dissolved and rewritten, and only in this way do they retain a moment of withdrawal, of the unspoken: "Now threefold circumscribe it/Yet unuttered also, just as you found it,/[...] let it remain" (*Germania*, V 94–96, Hölderlin [1990] 1994, p. 215).

All these examples show: if one encounters the divine somewhere in Hölderlin's texts, one cannot associate with it a definite idea from other texts by the author, knowledge of his biographical background or familiarity with the historical context in order to create a closed theological system. What the divine means, is not given with certainty, but must

be developed from the concrete text, in the act of reading. It is important not to regard individual expressions or sentences from Hölderlin's writings directly as statements by the poet, but to consider their position in the specific text in each case. At certain points in the text, Hölderlin makes the divine appear like figures on a stage. But this is never to be understood in the sense of a final determination. Rather, these figures of the divine also take leave again, only to be called up again at a later time. Of course, this is not an arbitrary process, but has several reasons.

First, the divine can only be spoken of in concrete constellations, i.e., in the context of a certain understanding of human beings, nature and language. This constellation (or sphere) always presents itself differently. With a changed understanding of human beings, nature and language, there is also a different form of understanding of the divine. Second, any talk of the divine is well-prepared in the text; individual sentences must not be torn out of the dynamics of the text and taken as isolated statements. Hölderlin is primarily a poet and is interested in the course of a text and does not write treatises from which individual formulations could be detached like doctrines. Third, Hölderlin struggles—and this touches a deep core of his writing—with how different representations of the divine (and the understanding of human beings, nature and the language associated with them) can be translated into one another. Their connection is not apparent, so that it would only be a matter of explicating it. Rather, it must always be brought forth anew (performatively) in the dynamics of a text. Finding such connections (at least temporarily) is the challenge that Hölderlin's texts face and which they also fail at time and again, which sometimes leads to the abortion of texts. Fourth, a dynamic emanates from the divine that sets the text in motion and leads to its revision in many places, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section. The divine is thus itself something that cannot be fixed in any way.

(2) Hölderlin's legacy in this respect is the openness of the question of God *as a question* (see Appel and Deibl 2020). The divine is no longer a concluding thought, but a reference to an openness that can only be grasped in the specific situation (in the sphere of human beings, nature and language) and requires a new representation in each case. The phrase from *The Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism* could also be understood from this perspective, where it says: "Monotheism of reason and the heart, polytheism of art and the imagination" (Hölderlin 2009, p. 342). The monotheistic matrix of practical reason remains unscathed; the line of flight of polytheism is not a matter of many gods, but of the ever-new representation of the divine, which—as connected with the power of imagination—is transient. In the important § 49 of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant speaks about "a faculty for laying hold of the rapid and transient play of the imagination and for unifying it in a concept (which for that very reason is original, and reveals a new rule which could not have been inferred from any preceding principles or examples) that admits of communication without any constraint of rules" (Kant [1952] 2007, sct. 49, p. 146). The creative faculty of which Kant speaks here, Hölderlin tries to realize in his poetry. This is particularly evident in the divine, which can only be thought of as something open.

In Hölderlin's trajectories, the divine neither evaporates into the indeterminate (e.g., of a religion of the Enlightenment) nor can it be grasped within denominational or religious boundaries. It is not beyond its representation, but nonetheless always dissolves it. The idea of God is not what separates the religions and confessions, but what blurs their fixity in the search for forms of temporary possible representation.

6. Contemporary Reception of Hölderlin

(1) With the publication of the first complete edition of Hölderlin's works by Norbert von Hellingrath, a broad reception of the poet began around 1914. His approach to religion plays an important role in this. Hölderlin's reference to God or the divine is obviously suitable for taking up the question of God in the present—sometimes in entirely secular contexts. Hölderlin, who wrote at the turn of the 19th century, appears to speak for a later age and to understand that age better than we, the people living in it, which is why one can speak of the anachronistic contemporaneity of the poet (Deibl 2018).

Hölderlin permits us to address the unrealized potentials of the question of God. This is probably related to the fact that the divine in Hölderlin is not subordinated to a specific concept from which it is thought, but can only be grasped as the open. In other words, the absolute, not as the ultimate conclusion, but as the indisposable/inaccessible (*unverfügbare*) reference point that saves discourses from their conclusion. In the following, I would like to present an important strand of Hölderlin's reception that is closely connected to religion.

(2) With the onset of Hölderlin's reception at the beginning of the 20th century, one also comes across a motif that is repeated with certain variations up to the present: Hölderlin's work reveals a basic apocalyptic tension that pervades Western history and concerns its position in relation to the divine. This is divided into two further issues: In Hölderlin, the tension between flight and the new arrival of the gods is presented, as is the tension between a biblical and an ancient Greek paradigm of relating God and history to each other. In this context, Slavoj Žižek speaks of a "Hölderlin paradigm" referring to thinkers

> "who all conceive their own age as that of the critical turning point of metaphysics: in their (our) time, metaphysics has exhausted its potential, and the thinker's duty is to prepare the ground for a new, post-metaphysical thinking. More generally, the entire Judeo-Christian history, up to post-modernity, is determined by what one is tempted to call the "Hölderlin paradigm": "Where the danger is, grows also what can save us" ("Wo aber Gefahr ist wächst das Rettende auch"). The present moment appears as the lowest point in a long process of historical decadence (the flight of Gods, alienation. . .), but the danger of the catastrophic loss of the essential dimension of being-human also opens up the possibility of a reversal (Kehre)—proletarian revolution, the arrival of new gods (which, according to the late Heidegger, alone can save us), etc." (Žižek 2014, p. 344)

In order to express the Hölderlin paradigm, Žižek refers to a famous dictum from *Patmos*: "Where the danger is, grows/also what can save us". With Hölderlin, history is considered in its entirety and it can be expressed that one's own time has reached a low point, but that the saving—whether this is to be thought of divinely or secularly—is approaching. Žižek attributes to the Christian conception of history, which still lingers in many secular concepts, an awareness of the catastrophic, but also of the (divine) saving reversal.

One example for this is Martin Heidegger, who, at the beginning of his first lecture on Hölderlin, states:

> "One treats Hölderlin 'historiographically' and fails to recognize the singular, essential point that his work, still without time or space, has already surpassed our historiographical rummagings and has grounded the commencement of another history: that history that starts with the struggle over the decision concerning the arrival or flight of the God." (Heidegger [1980] 2014, p. 2)

Hölderlin's work has a singular character, which Heidegger expresses by stating that it stands outside the order of space and time. Thus, it contributes—as an event—to the foundation of another history. Hölderlin's work reveals an otherwise (as yet) invisible reversal in history that is essentially related to the presence or absence of the divine.

One could also consider the work of the theologian Erich Przywara to be part of the Hölderlin paradigm. In his book entitled "Hölderlin" (1949), he connects the possibility of that reversal of history—with reference to the same passage from Patmos—with the tension between ancient Greek and biblical thinking: "Hölderlin is the place of primeval occidental events: namely, of the conflict between what is actually Christian in the Occident and its Hellenistic-Roman form of completion and order" (Przywara 1949, p. 19). Hölderlin's opus shows the tension between a Johannine-apocalyptic thinking, which reveals the ruptures of history and the saving God, and a Hellenic thinking, which thinks of the divine in terms of the perfection and harmony of nature, but which cannot do justice to the abysses of history. "Przywara sees Hölderlin's life as analogous to the development of the Occident, which is characterized by the struggle between pure perfection and the folly of

the cross" (Kathrein 2018, p. 86, translation JD). In Hölderlin's work, the breakthrough of the apocalyptic Christian interpretation of history ultimately occurs and with it, reference to the saving God.

In a similar apocalyptic tone, Peter Sloterdijk also writes about Hölderlin. According to him, Hölderlin for the last time expresses the unification of both paradigms—the Christian and the Greek (Christ and Dionysus). In his last poems, which he wrote in the Tübingen Tower after 1806, this unity dissolves and it proves to be too great to be attained. In the following note, Sloterdijk speaks in the first person in Hölderlin's place:

> "The existence in the tower was utterly tuned to the basic sound of the afterwards. Once I spoke like gods. I knew what it meant for grammar to have become flesh and to have dwelt among us. Melos was a frequent visitor. It was not rare for the highest of them all to stay overnight and when morning came verses were in the world that sent a message to the coming century: Christ and Dionysus are united. The alliance that the god forged with the god in me was torn asunder. Now I am small and left behind, a servant in the hall, sweeping the floor after the major conference is over. Robbed I am of my rights, language no longer speaks." (Sloterdijk 2012, p. 14, translation altered JD)

Hölderlin symbolizes an end point in history: his ideas show how much the entire Occidental history revolves around the connection between Greek and biblical thought and how it must be continually expressed in new forms. At its highest point, the concept of the divine, Hölderlin once again attempts to express such a synthesis (cf. Vöhler 2020), but fails.

The dissolution of a certain constellation of the divine (here the connection between Christ and Dionysus) also has far-reaching effects on language. As apocalyptic as Soterdijk's description sounds and as unrealized as it remains here, it has an important point of reference in Hölderlin himself. In fact, the elusive character of the divine repeatedly leads to the necessity of reformulating the text and sometimes prevents its final expression. With the concept of the divine, a crisis of language occurs. This is also evident in the work of Giorgio Agamben.

At a neuralgic point in *The Time That Remains*, Agamben's book on Saint Paul and the legacy of Pauline thought in occidental culture, Hölderlin unexpectedly appears in the last paragraph of the fourth chapter, and he again leads to a reversal of time:

> "When Hölderlin, on the threshold of a new century, elaborates on his doctrine of the leave-taking of the gods—specifically of the last god, the Christ—at the very moment in which he announces this new atheology, the metrical form of his lyric shatters to the point of losing any recognizable identity in his last hymns. The absence of the gods is one with the disappearance of closed metrical form; atheology immediately becomes a-prosody." (Agamben [2000] 2005, p. 87)

This note, which combines "the birth of modern atheology" (Neri 2014, p. 45, translation JD) and the disintegration of language, expresses a change in Hölderlin's poetry that, for Agamben, is paradigmatic for literature and thought in general.

The forms of structure characteristic of poetry, such as rhyme and metrical form, which Agamben talks about losing, are not merely linguistic means of expression. In the poem, they constitute a temporality of their own: each verse end inscribes a coming to an end in each line and recapitulates the content of the verse before the flow of content can continue; in the rhyme, phonetic material is repeated so that internal textual bridges are formed—as references both backwards and forwards; metrics and rhythm structure language, etc. Hereby, a qualification of time takes place in the poem, which forms a structured time within the chronologically passing time, a time of memory, of looking ahead, of recapitulation. Agamben sees in this the vitality of a messianic heritage, or more precisely of the messianic time. When all structures are lost in Hölderlin's last hymns and he creates a new free-rhythmic poetry, and when the text structure visibly dissolves more and more and no further finished texts are produced, Agamben sees this as a sign

of an epochal change in occidental history. It threatens to lose all its messianic traits (cf. Agamben [2000] 2005, pp. 60–87).

What do the examples from Žižek, Heidegger, Przywara, Sloterdijk, and Agamben say about the impact of Hölderlin as a thinker of German Idealism? The contemporary thinkers cited all refer to Hölderlin's work at a very precisely definable point. After the end of the great historical-philosophical narratives, a total overview of history is no longer feasible (cf. Appel 2022). Nevertheless, questions remain about the meaning of history in general—questions that obviously cannot be asked without reference to the divine, even in secular contexts: the divine as a cipher for the saving reversal; the divine whose leave-taking renders the departure from every dimension of the meaning of history thematizable; the perception of history between the utopia of its fulfillment and the awareness of its abysses; the question of the valence of a messianic trace in language and history. However, these questions can no longer be posed directly or immediately after the end of the great historical-philosophical narratives. It seems that the interpretation of some verses by Hölderlin can help at this point. Through them, these questions are temporarily given a language (cf. Deibl 2018).

Hölderlin's discourse on God has likely been such an important point of reference since the beginning of the 20th century because of its ambivalence, the tensions it conveys, its complexity and its openness. Of course, one could argue that all of this is far removed from German Idealism. I consider it a sign of the vitality of this movement that we continue to engage with it, struggling both alongside as well as against its thinkers to this day. It is a sign of the vitality of this movement that its motifs still pervade discourse today and hold it in a state of productive unrest.

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Notes

[1] For Hegel, Schelling and Hölderlin, reading Plato also played a decisive role (Halfwassen 2020), but it is not the focus of this article, especially since it primarily deals with German Idealism as a reaction to Kant's philosophy.

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Article

Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Protestant Theology

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Abstract: Johann Gottlieb Fichte's thinking is part of the *Sattelzeit*, in which the foundation for the modern use of important concepts is laid. The stages of Fichte's philosophy and his various theories of religion and Christianity reflect attempts to determine the function of religion in a modern society. Important is the philosophical foundation of religion, which is transformed from a moral theology based on Kant to a unified theory of the philosophy of mind. Fichte thus offers an alternative to Hegel and Schelling. This alternative has only been taken up in Protestant theology at a small number of points, but all the more intensively.

Keywords: Fichte; philosophy of religion; Sattelzeit (saddle period); differentiation; modernization; history of theology

1. The Historiography of Theology

What means and fields are used to describe the influence of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) on theology? The typical way would be to interpret Fichte's philosophy of religion as the basis for a general concept of religion, upon which a symbolically representing theology can then be built. Fichte's philosophy is then interpreted as the ultimate foundation of religion. This theory of subjectivity starts from the self-reflection of consciousness. In this way, it decomposes a metaphysical, objective concept of God, which is critical of knowledge. It explicates the knowledge contained in the pre-reflective or immediate self-consciousness and builds the idea of an underlying absoluteness upon it. This reception is suggested by various Fichte renaissances in theology, both in late idealism and in the neo-idealist turn around 1900, and finally in the search for a general concept of religion in the context of a relecture of Schleiermacher since the 1960s. These approaches agree on this ultimate idea of a general religion based on the universal structure of human consciousness.

In the following, a different approach will be taken, one which is intended to be linked to the first. The historical semantics and social function of idealistic discourse on religion will also be taken into account (cf. Schlögl 2013, 2015). Idealism is not so much regarded as a valid philosophy of a final foundation that has to be reconstructed to this day, but rather as a self-observation of the modernizing society that can be explained in contemporary history. Fichte's philosophy of religion is only one element of a new anthropological theory of unity, which, in contrast to the eclectic anthropology of the Enlightenment, seeks to bring to the concept the developments and transformations that occurred up to the *Sattelzeit*.

The *Sattelzeit* as a historical epoch, i.e., the years between about 1780 and 1820, reflects on the various processes of differentiation of European societies in the 17th and 18th centuries. Against the yet still valid Christian–Biblical framework theory for the world, nature, humanity, history and culture, it creates a new basis that rests upon the knowledge and experience of the human being. It is important that the (Christian) religion is reduced from a comprehensive world explanation to a separate area of social discourse, which is opposed to other sub-fields of social organization. This view follows several years of revolutionary uncertainty about whether and how religion can be explained functionally and anthropologically at all. This insecurity is compounded by the fact that, at the same

time, a civil public is established in relation to politics and administration, and that its right to discuss religious matters has yet to be fought for. In the end, however, it is recognized that religion cannot be abolished by rationalization or made superfluous by functionalization. Rather, religion exists as a separate form of communication in bourgeois society. One question still remains: how the new bourgeois public sphere relates to religion and how the relationship between the public sphere and the church is to be determined. For the Christian religion always consists in the ecclesiastical public organization of worship and preaching.

2. Methodological Considerations

In European society in the 18th century, the traditional view of religion and religious practice was transforming. From something self-evident, the achievement of recognition that reflects the structure of reality as a whole, religion became a special social force of its own. This force no longer encompassed everything, but instead confronted itself with other fields of social interpretation and activity. Accordingly, changes occurred at multiple levels. Texts from the Enlightenment period, especially theological and philosophical ones, can therefore not only be read as sources for the history of concepts, discourse or ideas, but also as sources for the social shifts that can be noticed from a social–historical point of view (cf. Bergunder 2011; Trein 2023).

At a first level, it is assumed that 'religion'—and also Christianity as a religion—does not have a firm identity. Rather, what religion is changes at the same time as the process in which the observation of religion, and the way in which it is accessed, changes. Pietism, as well as the bourgeois moral religion, which was widely developed in the 18th century, are evidence of how access to religion changes in the way of life of individuals and builds personal structures for the transmission of meaning. In addition to the social significance of religion, this connection between religion and the way of life and the self-image of individuals is the basis for ensuring that religion does not disappear at the end of the century but continues to be lived and communicated.

It can be assumed that, by the middle of the 18th century, it initially became completely unclear what religion actually is, what function it has and what it means for the individual. Deistic theology and its conception of religion, directed toward natural (namely rational) religion, makes way for a search for the function of religion beyond the reduction to the true or universal content. The anthropological question of the meaning of religion for the individual and for society arises, and various options are proposed. The differentiation of society becomes the background of religious distinctions. Public, i.e., in this case government official or political religion is distinguished from the individual private religion. In religious history, the many religions of the world are classified in the direction of moral development; the old assumption of religious knowledge as being dependent on revelation is set against its rationalization as a claim of the independence of religion. Revelation and reason, however, can both be judged inadequate to the true nature of religion as heart and conscience.

It is important that this uncertainty in the definition of religion does not initially directly affect theology as a specialist science. Rather, there is a solid tradition of both the body of texts and their treatment. The increasing neological criticism of the material notions of the Christian faith, in particular Trinity, Christology and Anthropology (doctrine of sin), does not lead to a break, but is understood in the tradition of transforming and continuing to adopt the truth of Christianity. The social transformation processes are not reflected directly, but are accompanied and illustrated in the form of a transformation of the content of faith. The ecclesiastical commitment of theology, i.e., its function for the vocational training and administration of the pastors, is generally assumed. The scientific self-conception of theology is unknowingly divided. Church bonds and their scientific orientation are held side by side, assuming that both are somehow connected.

The scholarly nature of theology is thus finally debated. Traditional theology, with its contextual discussions, which are hardly decidable in argumentation, can be described as a

further and systematized form of general knowledge. At the same time, this framework of general knowledge makes it possible to express very different opinions in detail. In contrast, the modification of theology in the 18th century uses philosophical knowledge as a methodological starting point and as a criterion for the content in theology. Theology becomes a science of its own. Historical, philological and systematic arguments are equally included in their criticism and structure. Towards the end of the century, the question of how the new forms of observation of religion that seek to function for humanity can be incorporated into theology becomes a problem. Only then does the possibility arise to establish theology in terms of a philosophy of religion. At the same time, a result of this is that the reality of this new scientific theology is composed positionally, because the basis—namely the respective anthropology or philosophy of consciousness—cannot be negotiated within theology itself.

Religious and theological issues are increasingly discussed in the 18th century in a newly constituted public sphere. This is originally controversial. Still Semler argues in favour of a government authority to interpret theological discourse. The Wöllner religion edict of 1788 seeks to secure this authority. Lessing was still banned from publication after the fragment dispute. However, in the controversy over the atheism dispute, the absolutist hold over the public finally begins to topple. Nevertheless, even the assumption—still dominant in Kant's Enlightenment article—that this free bourgeois discourse is by itself rational, critical of religion and moral, proves to be naive. The opening up of religious discourse allows both conservative and critical statements. Additionally, with regard to the differentiation of religion, it is precisely the traditional voices that determine, via majority, what religion is in modern society and how it should look and organize itself. One can also describe this the other way around: religion is a crucial issue on the basis of which the bourgeois public is formed. This is where the ideas of tolerance from the Enlightenment came in.

3. Fichte's Idealism in the History of Theology

It is important to integrate these methodological—social–historical, modernization and differentiation-related, and social and public-oriented questions, which change from questions of content to questions of observation—into the presentation of Fichte's influence on theology. Fichte's philosophy of religion is then not so much to be interpreted as the ultimate theory of truth, but as one of many possibilities of the time to reflect and observe social changes. These possibilities are to be interpreted today on the basis of the previous scientific—philosophical and theological—developments. The starting point is not Fichte's philosophically epochal invention of the '*Wissenschaftslehre*'. Instead, it is more important to describe the theological problems, possibilities and alternatives around 1790, of which Fichte's thinking—as one of many possible further developments—begins.

At several places around this time—in the reception of Kantian criticism of knowledge, its anthropological capability theories and the application of a uniform explanatory program—idealistic ideas and various system designs are emerging. In parallel, however, the contrast between rationalism and supranaturalism develops in theology, which dominates the next decades. It does not make sense to operate with a development and overcoming program from the outset. Idealism is usually portrayed in the historiography of theology as the beginning of the 19th century and the new theology. Here, modern neo-Protestant theology begins with Schleiermacher's '*Reden über die Religion*' of 1799, which, as an idealistic (and early romantic) program of independence for religion, refers to Fichte's self-consciousness-related ideas of justification.

Idealism, on the other hand, is regarded as a reflected enlightenment in the following: it is a summary and observation of the processes, ideas and developments that take place in the 18th century, the recording of which arrives at a certain conclusion in the decades of revolution. The *Sattelzeit*—as described above—thus lays the foundation for the way in which the modern world of Europe is built. As a tool of reflection and observation, idealism remains related to the development of modern society in the Enlightenment period.

Problems and questions of the reflected enlightenment are as follows: Which basic theory replaces the old validity of a Biblical–Christian worldview? How is the position of religion to be determined in this new theory and how does it relate to the other fields of social differentiation? What is the guiding principle of a differentiating religious system? How can the historically existing religions and Christianity be related to this guiding concept? What symbolic achievement do the worlds of imagination, ever immanent to religions, provide? How can the previous theology of Christianity be integrated into this modernized understanding of religion in society and which transformations result?

In a theological–historical treatment of this time (as the basis for a presentation of Fichte's meaning), the theory of idealism is questioned not with regard to its internal validity, but with regard to its social, cultural–historical and thus religious–historical, external references. However, even the theological drafts from 1790 onwards offer their own form of confirmation of this development. In contrast to neo-Spinocistic interpretations of the world, history and human development, which, as in the case of Herder and Goethe, use Christian content as a free means of representation, they give a representation of theology related to the Christian religion. They therefore explain what idealistic system designs seek to justify anthropologically: the free independence and separateness of religion in the modern public sphere, which is nevertheless assigned its place in a new framework theory of the human spirit (or human consciousness). The lasting problem—and this applies until the emergence of neo-Kantianism—is that the idea of justification and unity on the one hand and the religious or theological description of the system on the other hand are confused.

4. On the Development of Theology until 1790: Revolutionary Situation

The basis of the theological situation around 1790 is the implementation of neological theology (cf. Aner 1929). Its understanding of science, its image of humanity, its ecclesiasticism and its political self-image replaced the old Protestant orthodoxy and the old social theory with its supremacy of church over culture. The leading neologists can see themselves as winners of a transformation process that has fundamentally questioned ancient theology through rational, historical and experiential argumentation. It is not only in philosophy that 'godless' patterns of reasoning can now prevail. This had already been demonstrated by Wolff's reinstatement against the Pietists in Halle in 1740. Now, however, even in theological science itself, every appeal to revelation and tradition must be connected with contemporary and substantiated plausibility tests. Basic assumptions of ancient theology, such as the original sinfulness of humanity, for example, and humanity's reliance on divine revelation and its inability to improve itself, as well as the identity of this necessary revelation with the biblical text and the impossibility of its rational criticism were abandoned in a 40-year process of criticism. Nonetheless, neology is not critical of religion or Christianity: Rather, it emphasizes the importance of the Christian religion and church for society, for morality and improvement of the way of life, for political work on the foundations of the still predominantly agricultural economy. It defends the historical revelation of God as the basis of moral education and therefore sees the Church as an educational authority for a new human formation and a new self-conception of people that recognizes freedom. However, the relationship between transformation and differentiation, between theological development and religious determination remains unclear. This is reflected in the relationship between the neological view of religion and politics. Here the proximity to the absolutist state remains. On the one hand, the question arises as to how far scientific criticism of religion and the replacement of revelation by purely rational anthropology may go. On the other hand, the "crisis of Neology" (Hirsch 1949b, p. 80) is also visible in the position of the newly emerging bourgeois public sphere, specifically through state censorship in matters of religion and freedom of theological discussion.

Neology shows that there is a strong continuity on the social surface in terms of the existence of Christianity in society and the theological continuation of Christian dogmatism. Neology does indeed make strong transformational efforts with regard to the rationalization

and anthropologization of theology. This also includes the acceptance of their historicity and changeability and the construction of the various disciplines—exegetic, historical, systematic and practical. However, it becomes unclear what is actually the subject matter and the method of theology appropriate to the subject matter. The perception of historicity can—as with Lessing and Kant—lead to a demand of unhistorical reason or moral religion. Anthropologization can also lead to a corresponding abolition of traditional Christianity by transforming the doctrine of original sin into a doctrine of perfection and happiness. The individualization of the private religion, as with Semler, leads to the loss of the connection between church and piety and relies on a political form of the socialization of religion. The pluralization of the understanding of religion beyond deistic and natural–religious constructs and the perception of pre-Christian and non-European religions can be carried on to the point of questioning the necessity of salvation within Christianity. In a historical–ontological reaction to the vagueness of religion, Christianity can be used, as with Herder, as a metaphorical description of the world and spiritual development as a whole. In the generation following the neologists, it becomes clear that the loss of Christianity as a framework for the conception of the world, society and self needs a new definition of 'religion'. However, at first there is neither a philosophical basis for a new anthropology nor a comprehensive acceptable definition of the understanding of religion. It is also unclear where the transformation will lead—the loss of the Christian framework could also be final and a new materialistic, social–technical and science-based framework narrative could take its place. In addition, even if one assigns religion its own place in the cultural fields of the interpretation of life, in addition to politics, law, art, science, etc., what constitutes the nature of these fields, or according to which internal codes the religious system functions, is not recognizable.

At this point, the discourse about the new bourgeois public sphere, and the function of religion within it, is important. It develops in parallel with the disputes of this revolutionary time, or, in other words, the fragments, pantheism and atheism disputes. Kant's Enlightenment paper addresses the demand for a public space alongside politics, in which free debates can take place. His faculty paper calls for a free philosophical science, which is superseded by the faculties dedicated to its purpose and especially the theological faculty with their authoritarian attachment to scripture, confession and tradition-protecting politics. At around 1790, the question therefore arises as to whether the discourse on religion can survive in a free society, what function it has for the whole society, and which form of religion in this free discourse will prove to be viable and sustainable.

An alternative solution to the question of religion can be read from Jacobi's philosophy (cf. Timm 1974). Here faith is understood as a representation of a pre-rational or sensed unity of God, world and spirit. This is a philosophical reaction to Kant's criticism of the rational proofs of God and to the crisis of neology expressed in this criticism. For this purpose, the emotional approaches of the time of *Sturm und Drang*, which understand the heart as a place of the individual's wholeness, are included. The decisive factor is the insight that religion cannot be resolved functionally or rationally in terms of content. Faced with pantheistic solutions to the problem, which involve ontology, cosmology, consciousness, linguistics and history, and as with Herder and Goethe, Jacobi (with Hamann and Lavater) insists on an individual relationship with God as a personal counterpart. This insistence was understood by Jacobi's contemporaries as a leap into faith. Jacobi can also be interpreted as pointing to the independence of religion in the context of cultural differentiation. For practicing Christians, religion does not consist of moral improvement or an explanation of the world in thought, but in the giving of individual meaning. This includes the individual personal relationship with God. A theology that does not take up this moment is unsuitable as an interpretation of religion. This makes it possible to see, in outline, how religion and theology are understood anew, namely in the recognition of religion as a separate entity in the life of the individual, in cultural communication and in the social organization of society. Theology becomes its own science, which on the one hand always refers to religion

as its object, i.e., is not simply philosophy, but on the other hand does not identify directly with the religious attitude, but observes it.

Another development concerning theology as a science marks the publication of Kant's critical philosophy and his proposals for determining a rational moral religion. As is well known, his acceptance of the doctrine of sin as an anthropological point of construction was interpreted in Weimar as a mockery of what was achieved in the 18th century. But for the younger generation, this was a starting point for understanding religion as an anthropologically necessary field of human self-understanding. Christology and the doctrine of sin are not forms of past moral levels but can be interpreted as permanent elements of a religion that reflects on itself. This emphasizes the intrinsic importance of Christian content. Furthermore, a new form of hermeneutic interpretation is proposed. This should no longer be about truth and object-related aspects, but rather about the anthropological and consciousness–theoretical function. The fact that these functional hermeneutics are at the same time a final stage of the truth orientation of the understanding of religion is visible in Kant's theory of religion. He interprets the contents of Christianity as a means of representation of the moral religion of reason. The moral theological drafts of the 1790s, by Tieftrunk, Forberg, Fichte, Röhr and the young Carl Daub, show that one can continue to work well on this level of Kantian reception in terms of philosophy of religion. However, the Kantian truth of moral religion shifts to anthropological correctness and interpretability. Albrecht Ritschl later rightly invoked this side of Kantian philosophy of religion in his turn from the speculative philosophy of unity to a special concept of religion oriented toward Christianity. In addition to the aforementioned forms of a post-Kantian reception of moral religion, supranaturalism should also be read in this way. It reacts to the philosophical independence of religion initiated by Kant. Supranaturalism interprets Kant in a philosophically naive way. By restricting knowledge, Kant opened the way for faith in a new way. However, theologically, this interpretation offers the possibility of understanding the contents of Christianity as forms of description of an anthropologically anchored religion. The new appeal to revelation against reason, as practiced at the Tübingen school of Storr, can thus be understood as the foundation of a theology that is related to religion as a newly fixed subject area (cf. Pannenberg 1996, pp. 35–45).

5. The Situation of Theology around 1790: Tasks of the *Sattelzeit* and Reflected Enlightenment

If one summarizes the above-mentioned currents and tasks for theology, one arrives at the following: 1. There is a lack of a precise understanding of what religion is, what it means, how it functions, and how this can be named anthropologically without dissolving itself. This task can be understood as a search for the code peculiar to religion, one according to which it functions within a society that is becoming more and more differentiated. 2. Especially if this task is to be solved, the question of the connection of religion with the other new fields of social action and interpretation arises immediately. There is a lack of an anthropological foundation of the whole human being, which establishes the connection in the capacity of consciousness and classifies religion there. Here, the current Christian–religious framework theory of reality based on biblical authority and ancient thinking is abandoned and instead a modern anthropological foundation based on the self-determination of humanity is introduced. 3. There is no indication of the place where discourses about the Christian religion are meaningful and further reaching. The ecclesiastical version of the power of the pastor's public speech, which is closely related to politics, is out of date. The individualizing compromise solution of the separation of private religion and public religion does not reflect their own place. This also means that a pure individual religion cannot be the target. Poetic and literary forms of the representation of the religion of the heart and conscience are also public forms of speech. The assignment of religious discourse purely into science, in turn, leads to a philosophical transformation. The relationship between public communication and internal religious discourse is needed, especially if both do not merge into each other, but the peculiarity

of religious understanding is recognized in society. 4. The theological debates that take place as transformational discourses of the interpretation of Christian contents must be distinguished from this. Here, on the one hand, there is a persistence of the contents and their enlightened, objectively truthful processing. On the other hand, it cannot be denied in the long run that theology itself must react to the new suggestions for philosophy of religion or must incorporate them into its own foundation.

In view of these problems, the time from 1790 can be considered as *Sattelzeit*. In the following drafts of a religious–philosophical foundation of theology, various characteristics of religion that are decisive for modernity are worked out. First of all, the independence of religion is established, and it is incorporated into the comprehensive concept of the human spirit. Then, their relationship to the new phenomenon of a discursive bourgeois public is clarified. Additionally, theology is re-founded as a science within a concept of the human spirit, which is already thought of in religious terms. This lays the foundations of the religious system in modern society. Fichte is involved in these attempts. His philosophy of religion can be read as a variant of a modern reflexive observation of the religious system. The reflexive observation in this *Sattelzeit* represents a decisive difference to the specialist theology. In the context of rationalism and supranaturalism, the Christian religion is understood as a system of its own and represents it with the classical means of theology. However, it does not at first receive the reflexive foundations and rationale of the new, anthropologically founded philosophy of religion. It is precisely in this refusal, however, that the new social self-relation and independence of religion becomes theologically and scientifically visible. This also means, however, that a contemporary reception to Fichte's theory in theology was not initially realized. Fichte's development and its significance were hardly recognizable to his contemporaries, partly because he no longer published the versions of the '*Wissenschaftslehre*'. Conversely, a popular work such as the '*Anweisung zum seligen Leben*' (1806) was theologically undecipherable due to the lack of background and was read as a pious piece.

6. Fichte's Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion until 1790

In the following, it is therefore necessary to trace the fundamental moments of Fichte's development of thought about religion in such a way that the references to contemporary problems become visible. Different versions are recognizable. First, the pre-Kantian way of thinking until 1790 (cf. Preul 1969). Then, Fichte's reception of Kant in his '*Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*' of 1792, followed by a new foundation of practical philosophy in the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' and its versions from 1794 onwards. The atheism dispute in 1799 led to Fichte's move to Berlin, with which a new version of the relationship between religion and '*Wissenschaftslehre*' is also carried out in the '*Bestimmung des Menschen*' of 1800. Knowledge reflection and theory of the absolute dominate the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' from 1801 onwards, which also remains the basis for Fichte's 'late philosophy' between the '*Anweisung zum seligen Leben*' of 1806 and his death 1814 (cf. Schmid 1995).

Fichte's early texts, written before his reception of Kant, reveal a metaphysical system of thought that represents a mixture of the philosophies of Spinoza and the Wolffian school. Fichte calls this theology without any difference to philosophy. Theology is thus interpreted as a philosophical search for the reason of the world, the context of things and their thinking. Religion is understood as a life-world form of individual contemplation. Here he takes up the search for the determination of the conscience and heart of the religious in the context of the enlightened moral religion. Religion has an impact on the life of the individual. It is a mood of feeling that makes her joyful to do good in the face of a personally reactive God. It is important that Fichte does not construct a connection between theology and religion. Both functions are simply side by side, they do not contradict each other or affect each other. Science as a declaration of the world is different from religion, which stands for a moral-pedagogical basic determination of the individual. There can be no revelation in a strictly deterministic world; an interpretation of reality as a place of individual commitment and reconciliation is unthinkable. What is missing, however, is an explanation of how

both can be united in one person—at least the philosophical or theological thinking person. Fichte notes a deficiency here.

7. Fichte's Philosophy and Ethicotheology 1790–1794

The reception of Kant in 1790, along with the adoption of the philosophy of freedom, resulted in new content for theology and religion. However, the fundamental problem of the separation between ultimately substantiating and reflexive knowledge on the one hand, and moral–personal immediacy on the other, remains. Fichte's philosophy of religion is visible in the first two editions of the '*Offenbarungsschrift*' (cf. Kessler 1986; Wittekind 1997a, 1997b). The deterministic system of thought is replaced by a justification of thought and the conception of reality based on the principle of freedom that gives itself its moral law. In this system of freedom, the idea of God—and here Fichte also calls this system "theology"—stands for the harmony of nature and morality. This transforms the opposition of determinism and personal attribution into another opposition, namely that of rational moral determination and its enforcement in the place of an individual being that is only finite, i.e., one that is at the same time subordinated to the world of the senses. Fichte reformulates religion as a determinacy of the lower appetitive faculty, as a search for appropriate action in the context of the reality of the world with the help of the sense-related ethical judgment. Kantian theology is now interpreted as an autonomous knowledge of the moral determination of practical reason. However, Fichte does not conceive religion—as Kant then does in the '*Religionsschrift*'—as an illustration of the structurally general transition to purely moral determination, but rather as a continuous influence on all human actions in the context of reality. The moral law, in which pure practical reason gives itself the law, acts in the form of its objectifying interpretation—as given by God and understanding God as continued causality—back on the will of humanity. This is the formal principle of religion. From here it is asked whether and under what conditions revelation is necessary and possible. Fichte concludes that this is the case where humanity is completely under the dominance of sensual desire and the legislation of moral reason is no longer heard. Where, however, moral freedom, even if only rudimentary, is given, God's revelation is given not as an outward event, but as an expression of morality itself. Fichte's theory is thus already based on the gradual arrangement of states of self-consciousness with regard to the reflection of autonomy.

Theologically, Fichte's claim becomes visible in the criticism practiced by F.G. Süskind as a pupil of the older supranaturalist school in Tübingen (Süskind 1794). He sees Fichte's ultimate intention of revelatory thought for autonomous morality at the moment of its loss in the world of life, but cannot accept the loss of significance for the bourgeois way of life. Religion is conceived by Süskind as an ever-accompanying awareness of God's revelation in life, not as an expression of morality. Thus, an external moment experienced in religion is recorded as its constant characteristic. The appeal to God as a counterpart becomes an essential feature of religious communication. It is clear that this definition of religion cannot be dissolved into a (religious) historical model of development toward rational–reflexive self-justification. The new supranaturalism represented by Süskind counteracts the crisis of theism by pointing to the necessity of the concept of God for religion. Thus, the differentiation of religion as a separate social context of interpretation in theology, which proceeds according to its own laws and codes, becomes tangible.

The dominance of a discourse of justification, aimed at conscious reflection within the conception of religion—as opposed to the question of its own area-forming characteristics—is also evident in Fichte's statements on Judaism, which are reflected in his opinion on the French Revolution. This concerns the right of public opinion and discussion in the state. The justification for the revolution depends on the general negotiation of the state constitution. Fichte, however, excludes from this discussion those groups that form their own state within the state. This includes, for example, the military, but primarily Judaism. Because the Jews do not celebrate the Christian—and secular or political—festivals of the people, they have no share in the community and are only to be respected as individual

carriers of human rights. Like morality, Fichte's integration into the community depends on conscious approval. Religion is also subordinated to this. There is no room for Judaism as a religion in its own right and thus for the independence and anti-modernity of religion in general in Fichte's society-related theory of ultimate justification.

8. Fichte's Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion from 1794

With the beginning of the work at the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' in 1794, the term 'theology' for the foundation of philosophy in consciousness ceases to exist. The subjectivity–theoretical foundation is not intended to include the philosophy of religion. Nevertheless, a potential for the treatment of questions of philosophy of religion remains in the foundation of knowledge. From the '*Bestimmungsschrift*' of 1800 onwards, this has an increasing effect on the theory of the '*Wissenschaftslehre*'. It is transformed into a speculative theory resting upon knowledge of the Absolute, as is evident in the '*Anweisung zum seligen Leben*' of 1806. Religion is negotiated on three levels: Initially, as a question of a reflected theory of final justification and its core of reality. Then, as a question of the specific contribution of religion to the individual, morally oriented way of life. Finally, as a question of the different religions and their historical sorting. Fichte's thought on religion in the period between the '*Kritik aller Offenbarung*' of 1792/93 and the '*Bestimmung des Menschen*' of 1800 can be read from his recurring commentary on Platner's philosophical aphorisms, which is part of his teaching duties as a professor in Jena (cf. Wittekind 1993).

In the third edition of his aphorisms, Platner proposed a peculiar reception of Kant. He recognizes the constructiveness of consciousness for object recognition. At the same time, however, he postulates that this self-generated thinking actually corresponds to things. For God, too, Platner held on to such an analogy that acknowledged objectivity. The ideas of perfection and aseity point to God as an object. Thereby, eclectically, Platner tried to balance the metaphysical foundation of the world with the modern critique of knowledge. Fichte, on the other hand, has fixed Kant's transcendental philosophy on the reflexive illumination of the conditions of thought. God is not before or outside the thought of God. However, this only applies to philosophy. Religion as a life-world phenomenon is distinguished precisely by the fact that it is certain of God's 'objectivity'. The task of philosophy is to explain how this religious certainty is possible and how it arises.

Fichte's Platner lectures show a differentiated reflection on religion, arguing at different levels. On the transcendental level, the idea of God as the guiding idea of religion depends on the self-knowledge of the freedom that gives itself its law. However, because this freedom in humanity as finite beings exposed to the sensory world is not consistently legislative, various moral standpoints arise. Each of these points of view is associated with a particular type of religion and these types can have different forms, representations and contents depending on their historical location. Thus, a religious symbol theory is combined with a morally staggered religious history. It is held together in a common concept of religion, namely the expression of immediate certainty. With these elements Fichte reacts to the requirements of a determination of religion in modernity. However, this sequence remains controlled by the foundation of religion in the moral consciousness of freedom, which cannot be betrayed by reason because of the fundamental self-positing structure. Philosophical derivation dominates the sphere of the religious, for which immediate certainty is also claimed.

9. Fichte's Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion at the Time of the Atheism Dispute

Fichte's essay '*Über den Grund unseres Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung*' of 1798, which triggered the atheism dispute, provides a summary of the religious theory developed in the context of the Platner lectures. Fichte published these considerations as a correction of Forberg's essay '*Entwicklung des Begriffs der Religion*' of 1798 (Röhr 1991). There, Kant's philosophy was continued with its separation from practical and theoretical reason. For religion, this means that a theoretical claim to knowledge for the thought of God can no longer be made. Practical reason contains immanent assumptions that require action as

if God exists. Nothing is said about this existence itself. Against this position of Forberg, Fichte wants to show that practical reason is directly connected with the assumption of the reality of God. The moral world order is synonymous with God and is directly a religious self-interpretation, which is given at the same time as the moral self-determination of humanity. After the successive elaborations of the relationship between morality and reality developed in the Platner lectures, every claim about reality must be waived. The moral world order is an interpretation of the immediately certain present constitution of will; it is impossible to draw realistic conclusions from it for the post-mortem survival of people and the actual establishment of the Kingdom of God in time. Fichte not only tried to hold on to Kant as guarantor for a comprehensive theory of the human world. Instead, he also takes up moments of criticism of his own theory, as had been expressed in particular by Jacobi. His transformation of the concept of God was supported by a decisive criticism of the metaphysical remnants in the concept of God, as they were still recognizable by Platner. For Fichte, this criticism also included the idea of God as a person of his own, facing the world with will and mind.

Because of this criticism and the increasing decoupling of the moral order from world and history, Fichte was accused of atheism, initially by an indictment of the Higher Consistory in Dresden. On the one hand, the contents of Christianity were defended, like God as the transmundian creator and the immortality of the soul. At the same time and beyond, Fichte's 'atheism' was presented as incompatible with any modern natural conception of religion. Similarly, in a letter from a father to his student son, the neological interpretation of Christianity, continued in the present in rationalism and supranaturalism, was presented as exemplary (Röhr 1991). In these allegations Fichte's philosophical reconstruction efforts for a transcendental justification of religion were not even understood. Fichte found it easy to reject them. He even turned the accusation of atheism upside down and in his turn accused his opponents of atheism. For that 'thing' with will and mind, which they have in mind as God, cannot be morally significant. However, it becomes apparent in this dispute that the transcendental philosophical justification of religion contradicts religion's view of itself. Fichte's opponents included not only traditionalists and neologically minded people, but also Jacobi, Goethe and Herder as well as, for example, Reinhard, who represents his own form of supranaturalism, among the churchmen. They were all of the opinion that religion had to be defended as the necessary greatness of social order and governance and to which substantially belonged the dependence on a transcendent power, which must not be dissolved anthropologically. In other words, Fichte's separation of the philosophical level of reconstruction and the religious-content-related attitude and concept in the individual person is not perceived as sufficient to understand religion. Rather, as a result of the dispute, it can be recorded in the context of the *Sattelzeit* modernization of key social concepts. On the transcendental level of the argumentation itself, it is to be reasoned that realistic moments of a transcendental counterpart to the consciousness of the human being exist, for otherwise it becomes pointless to hold on to religion as a determining power on the level of the living world.

10. The Change in Fichte's Philosophy after the Atheism Controversy

Following the atheism dispute, and after his withdrawal from the professorship in Jena, Fichte continued to work at this point, namely on the foundation of his anthropological theory of freedom in absolute theory (cf. U. Barth 2003; Danz 2012a). However, the extensions of Kant's transcendental philosophy, which have been associated with the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' since 1794, have been retained. As a result, from 1801 onwards, the foundation of the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' becomes a puzzle of well-founded logical reasoning and permanent reflection on the possibility of knowing this. Fichte's processing of the atheism dispute does not only take place on a content level. He also sees his role as a publicist operating in the public sphere under attack. The crisis of theism, described by philosophers, is not really possible in increasingly conservative social communication (and as a result of its permanent political lack of freedom threatened by censorship). Fichte

repeatedly tried to point out in this dispute that he wanted to distinguish two levels of reflection from each other. On the level of philosophical reflection, the classical idea of God is no longer sustainable under further developed Cartesian as well as under neo-Spinozist and Kantian conditions. However, this does not apply to the life-world level of people's immediate religious attitudes. However, it was not only Goethe who deliberately reduced Fichte's philosophy of the ego (i.e., the general structure of ego) to its empirical impossibility.

Fichte's philosophy from 1800 onwards and the connection to the philosophy of religion, which has now been (re)inscribed into it, cannot be viewed in isolation from the point of view of theology, but only in the context of other contemporary attempts at a final foundation of philosophy (cf. Fulda and Stolzenberg 2001; Stolzenberg 2007; Danz and Stolzenberg 2011; Waibel et al. 2018). The absolute claimed in this case can be described in realistic, truth, unity reflection or negation theoretic terms. At the very least, the names Jacobi, Novalis, Schlegel and Schleiermacher could be mentioned, as could Reinhold as a catalyst for Fichte, Schiller for his aesthetic continuation of Kant, and the Tübingen line with Hölderlin, Schelling and Hegel. The various foundations of a new (idealistic) type of philosophy, as well as the mutual historical dependencies, respective renewals and claims to overcome, have been worked on in philosophy for decades and can be researched through the growing editions of the protagonists' works. In theology, these results are rather en passant and only received in depth by individuals. The connection between the philosophy of absoluteness and the philosophy of religion, as well as the connection between a such founded philosophy of religion and theological dogmatism, is unclear. Fichte's influence on Schleiermacher is itself a dispute in theological historiography and is influenced by the respective reception of positions. The relationship of Fichte to Enlightenment and neo-Spinocistic attempts to integrate cosmology and the natural and spiritual–cultural history of development can also be regarded as a precursor for a theological–historical reconstruction. Fichte's philosophy from the unity of being, which enables truth and certainty, presents itself as an alternative to Hegel's dialectics. In this, every possible determinacy of thought about the immanent movement of the double negation is generated. The absolute or the absolute spirit as the final thought of the system is also genetically constructed in this way. It is precisely the possibility of this construction that Fichte denies. However, he maintains that his idea of unity is also the result of the reflexivity carried out until the very end. The absolute or absolute being is not to be interpreted as a mere setting, a mystical relic or a fideistic assertion. The questions as to what exactly Fichte means with his '*Wissenschaftslehre*' from 1800 onwards are still open today. It is a question of what affinity exists between science and philosophy of religion, how religion as a worldly attitude follows from it, what is the core of religion in the world of life, how the diversity of religions can be understood and what all this means for theology. To this day, this question can be answered in a manner that is less text-related but that relies instead on the frequently broken research process on Fichte's late philosophy up to the present.

11. The Change of Fichte's Philosophy of Religion after the Atheism Dispute

Since his reception of Kant in 1790, it was clear for Fichte that the foundation of religion can only be a component of the philosophy of practical reason. This practical reason depends on the self-positing structure of knowledge in general. The change in the foundation of the '*Wissenschaftslehre*', which began with the publication '*Die Bestimmung des Menschen*' of 1800, consists in the fact that overarching aspects of a sphere of absoluteness are incorporated into the foundation of knowledge (cf. Hirsch 1914; Stolzenberg 1986; U. Barth 1992, pp. 311–54). Thus, the possibility of the philosophy of religion shifts from the treatment of a subsequent problem of moral consciousness to the incorporation into the foundation of the highest principles of the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' itself. Not only all morally bound actions of the human being, also all reality related knowledge is reflected religiously. This shift becomes visible in the '*Bestimmungsschrift*'. For the question arises here from moral doctrine: what is the framework within which the individual determinacy of my

duty in relation to the determinations of other individuals can be recognized? The possible answer is linked to the religious conception of the Kingdom of God. This is not only the result of the actions of people under ethical normativity, but is already a basic condition for this ethical determination. Thus, the Kingdom of God is the framework within which free spirits can have knowledge of free spirits. As a religious term, it is the necessary absolute–theoretical condition of intersubjectivity. At the same time, the superordinate dimension that this implies is not only a guarantee of determination but also of reality for all of the knowledge constituted by free knowledge. Thus, the new foundation links the philosophy of freedom not only with the awareness of one's respective duty, but also with the certainty of the worldly understanding of reality.

Fichte's variations on '*Wissenschaftslehre*' from 1801 onwards revolve around the question of how to know about the reason constructed in this way. The problem is how the determination and the necessary construction performance of knowledge can be given at the same time and how this double determination can also be represented in the execution of knowledge itself. With the help of metaphorical expressions, such as light and eye, the connection between the execution dimension, determination, reflexivity and certainty is anchored in the centre of the knowledge of the ego about itself. With this, Fichte enriches his theory of self-positing in the intellectual intuition from the early '*Wissenschaftslehre*'. This basic form of consciousness in the intellectual intuition constructs philosophy in a double distinction between freedom and being on the one hand, and direct and reflected knowledge on the other, which is held together by the act of realisation. This is the scheme of the fivefold synthesis of knowledge (cf. Meckenstock 1974).

12. Fichte's Philosophy in Late '*Wissenschaftslehre*'

According to the conviction of secondary literature, the most detailed construction and determination of the absolute as the basis of self-knowledge in its fivefold form is available in the versions of the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' from the year 1804, which in turn forms the philosophical basis of Fichte's writing on the philosophy of religion, '*Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben*' of 1806. The elaboration of the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' of 1801, which almost made it to print, offers a decisive step in this direction, insofar as here the transparency of absolute knowledge as freedom is attached to its antinomic reference to absolute being. In 1804, on the other hand, absolute knowledge is developed as a moment of the absolute or a presupposed absolute truth and unity (R. Barth 2004, pp. 257–356). Pure certainty, which is not the certainty of this or that, is thus rooted in a superior transcendental absoluteness sphere in which absolute truth and unity of knowledge are co-represented in this Self as its execution and condition. At the same time, the pure certainty thus reconstructed proves to be the condition of the possibility of certainty with regard to all individual capacities of consciousness and every single act of this consciousness. Fichte takes up Kant's transcendental method but combines it with a further idealistic claim to unity. All faculties have their foundation in the moment of production of knowledge, of imagination. It is inescapably set with the feeling of certainty of itself, against the romantic irony and inexhaustibility of the imagination. From this, it is deduced that every form of human interaction with the world is accessible to itself. Each determination of consciousness in life represents in its own way the pure certainty that underlies it, the certainty of that unity which is at the same time truth. In all of these forms, self-presenting knowledge is understood as a representation of the absolute, whose image must first be regarded as pure knowledge for itself.

13. Fichte's Philosophy of Religion in the '*Anweisung zum seligen Leben*'

Fichte's '*Anweisung zum seligen Leben*' of 1806 is his most important writing in the philosophy of religion (Pecina 2007). Behind the popular use of Christian images, such as the Johannine love metaphor in particular, stands a complicated architecture, sorting the religious theme into various argumentative contexts. This assumes the foundation of the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' in the absolute from 1800 onwards, in theory of truth and unity. For

this absolute, Fichte already uses the concept of God in purely philosophical contexts. In relation to the absolute is the form of self-transparency of consciousness, which is related to knowledge and recognition, as it is genetically reconstructed by the '*Wissenschaftlehre*'. It sees itself as a representation of the absolute. However, this representation of the absolute always exists only in the form of five various standpoints in which the subject realizes her free self-referentiality. These standpoints form the foundation of the living-world, in which they are then provided with cultural and historical variants of symbolic contents. The presentation of the five possible standpoints is initially oriented toward the reconstruction of forms of self-consciousness. It is only in a further step that a framework of supportive self-experiences is assigned to the respective standpoint. It is only here that the foundation of the philosophy of religion arrives at its goal, by connecting religion to the affects and thus allowing the longing for fulfilment of the destiny of humanity to be transferred into the idea of religious love. The core of this is the transformation of the concept of the Kingdom of God, which already determines the moral religion. This becomes a framework concept of universality. Only this makes possible the recognition of a God who encompasses all individuals and thus truly enables intersubjectivity.

It is important that the doctrine of the five standpoints describes religion as the highest stage of the realization of the destiny of humanity. While the sensual and the legalistic standpoints shift the internal certainty of the absolute to outer dimensions, the moral standpoint, which refers to the autonomous value of all cultural creations and interpretive achievements of humanity, is already directed to the internal self-reflection of freedom. Only religion, however, completes internalization by combining the recognition of others as moral beings with the self-experience of moral freedom. In this recognition, absolute truth and unity is realized in the place of the individual in the execution of faith and represented in the concept of God as love. The genetic reconstruction of the path in the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' forms the fifth standpoint, which, however, does not add anything to religious inwardness.

For the (Christian) religion, the reception of the thought of love as the affective agreement of the individuals in the kingdom of God becomes the centre. Fichte thus distances himself from theological definitions of the nature of Christianity in terms of sin, justification and redemption. Reconciliation is not a renunciation of sin but becomes the fulfilment of humanity in faith. Time-related and changing aspects of self-interpretation are dissolved into the notion of eternity. Fichte only takes up elements of Christianity that allow it to be interpreted as the realization of its unity figure based on the theory of absoluteness and truth.

In summary, it can be stated that Fichte's philosophy of religion provides a rich theoretical toolkit for the comprehension of religion, Christianity and life-world piety. The foundation is a philosophy of consciousness, which, in contrast with the eclectic anthropology of the Enlightenment, ultimately establishes the unity of consciousness. This is undertaken in a truth-related manner that is bound to constructively determining knowledge. This foundation is followed by a concept of religion, one which describes the difference between religion and other forms of consciousness such as morality, sensuality or science. However, and this is what makes Fichte's standpoints special, they are ultimately constructed in a teleological series toward the self-transparency of pure knowledge and thus all deducible from a self-reflexive relation of determinacy. On this basis, in a further step, the internal leading figure for the determination of religion is developed. Here Fichte offers the supermoral certainty of a universal kingdom of God instead of a sin-related construction of salvation. At this point, too, which is clearly already laid out for a certain interpretation of Christianity as the true religion—namely, one that can be substantiated in the theory of consciousness—Fichte's construction, directed at the realization of the determination of man, shows itself to be not really capable of pluralism. The unified construction of science dominates the difference between historical forms of realization. However, in a further step, it should be pointed out that Fichte takes up the search for an empirical–historical history of religion in the various viewpoints. As in the Platner

lectures, this leads to the structuring and classification of the de facto religions of humanity according to moral points of view directed to the self-consciousness of free knowledge. On the basis of the Kantian transcendental philosophy, Fichte brings together Hume's natural history and Lessing's moral pedagogical view, incorporating Rousseau's individualistic understanding of religion. From each standpoint there is also the form of religious self-interpretation that is unique to it, just as the standpoints are again present in a transformed form from the standpoint of religion. Finally, at the end of the religious–philosophical construction chain stands the interpretation of Christianity from its internal heritage. Here, Fichte, like other idealistic and early romantic contemporaries, draws on the Johannine writings of the New Testament and opposes the Pauline–Augustine–Reformation view.

Fichte thus takes up the requirements for a comprehensive theory of religion. What is needed is a definition of the concept of religion, a sorting of religions and the history of religion, a definition of the nature of Christianity, and, finally, a theory of symbols that enables the use of traditional statements in the present and, at the same time, controls them critically. Only with this set of theories can the questions of religion and Christianity be dealt with in the process of social change.

Fichte does not only refer to religion, but to all the knowledge, action and feeling of the world of life, to forms of underlying reflection and transparency of certainty. Thus, his theory is given an unstoppable compulsive and demanding character, which affects the individual. 'Normal' life, which is not aware of its moral, freedom and destiny-related nature, can only be regarded as superficial and dispersed. In addition, the difference between the different modes of participation of the individual in social fields of meaning cannot be adequately represented. Citizenship and participation in the ethical community and in the church are individually charged in a normative way. Thus, the independence of the Church is not conceivable: A socio-theoretically oriented concept of church fails. Fichte does not differentiate between the bourgeois public sphere, the Christian church and the politically controlled community. Thus, he is in good company in idealistic system building. However, for him, the connection between Kantian restriction of cognition, individual participation in the determination of man and unity-related foundations of the cognition system has a particularly aggravating effect. The later systems of idealism work without the unconditional inclusion of the individual, which also opens up areas of freedom. Apart from the special case of Kierkegaard, only the theology of Wilhelm Herrmann followed by the theologies of Karl Holl and Emanuel Hirsch have been comparably strict in this respect.

14. The Theological Reception of Fichte in Speculative Theology

Not only the theological, but also the philosophical reception of Fichte presented peculiar difficulties. One of these is due to the various versions of the system: From the renewed neological thought of God to the moral theological reception of Kant and to the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' and its new idea of God and the kingdom, which becomes visible in the atheism dispute. Since the '*Bestimmung des Menschen*' of 1800, the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' has gained a new absoluteness-related form, which became particularly visible in the '*Anweisungsschrift*' in terms of the philosophy of religion. To which of the versions should this reception refer? Does development not dissolve the idea of a valid version of the final reasoning? Did Fichte sacrifice God to freedom at the beginning, and freedom to God at the end? Another difficulty lies in the language form available in the later versions of the '*Wissenschaftslehre*'. For this does not consistently separate between philosophical absolute constructs and the religious idea of God but uses the concept of God for the philosophical absolute in favour of representability and intelligibility. This raises the problem of whether the theological reception should refer to the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' or specifically to the philosophy of religion. Conversely, philosophers can ask themselves whether the late '*Wissenschaftslehre*' can be philosophically accepted at all or whether it is only a disguise of beliefs. Finally, another question arises from Fichte's separation of philosophical thinking and popular representation. Particularly with regard to the

'*Anweisungsschrift*', it was unclear to contemporaries whether it was a popularization of the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' itself or an independent philosophy of religion.

In the 1840s, Immanuel Hermann Fichte organized an edition of all of his father's works. In his foreword to the religious–philosophical volume, the Fichte reception of the speculative Hegel succession can be easily recognized (Fichte 1845, pp. V–XXXVII). On the one hand, I.H. Fichte places a strong emphasis on the development and the various stages of Fichte's philosophy. He underpins this teleological model of progressive knowledge and reflection. On the other hand, he therefore considers the respective positions to be incomplete. In a positive way, he only emphasizes the critical dimension of Fichte's thinking in relation to the external rationalism of the time. The son understands the transcendental reflexivity of the father as the 'immanentization' of the absolute. I.H. Fichte does not understand the critical reserve in the determinations of absolute knowledge. I.H. Fichte sees the unit functions that have just been granted by Fichte, which become visible in knowledge as basic conditions, only as a break-off of reflection. The son postulates a necessary transition to absolute self-consciousness, which as reflexive knowledge becomes aware of its own self-justification in the form of the generation of determinacy. Fichte's '*Wissenschaftslehre*' thus becomes a point of passage within idealistic speculation via Schelling to Hegel. On the other hand, I.H. Fichte negatively assesses the philosophy of religion throughout. In particular, the '*Anweisung zum seligen Leben*' is criticized as a failed attempt to popularize science. For I.H. Fichte does not admit an independence of religion and theology. In the inwardness of absolute self-consciousness, philosophy and religion are united. The representational indifference between the absolute and the concept of God, already recognizable in Fichte, becomes a matter of principle. Theology as a science becomes a part of the philosophy of spirit, which, when it deals with the absolute spirit, is itself a philosophy of religion. I.H. Fichte's reception thus becomes recognizable as part of a romantic theology in which the derivatives of knowledge operate in the spirit with the same idea of God as the Christianity-related reinterpretations of theology. One can speak of an excess of the construction of generality and objectivity, disguised in the idea of absolute self-consciousness. In the attempts to break down this generality to individuals, I.H. Fichte can then use Fichte's—originally structurally intended—descriptions of certainty and life-world explanations of faith. Theology here becomes a description of the general spirituality of educated bourgeois society. The controllability of theological statements is already lost in the philosophical and speculative statements about the spirit.

15. The Theological Reception of Fichte in New Idealism

After the end of speculative idealism, Fichte disappears from theological–historical consciousness for many decades. The 18th century is even more discredited than in speculative theology and Fichte's moral theology is read as an extension to the theology of the enlightenment.[1] It is not the idealistic philosophy of the system, but the historical way of thinking based on romanticism that becomes a springboard for the present. Until the First World War, approaches to this are seen more with Herder and Lessing than with Fichte. Theology refers formally to Schleiermacher and his separation of religion. However, new questions will be dealt with in terms of content. This deals with the nature of religion in history on the one hand and the nature of Christianity in the context of its religious–historical development on the other. Fichte does not appear to be a promising interlocutor on any of the questions.

This changes on a broad front with the neo-idealist turn around 1900. There is also a smaller movement of neo-Fichteanism. Within this movement, the lifelong occupation of Emanuel Hirsch with Fichte stands out in particular, and was initially inspired by Hirsch's friend Paul Tillich and his philosophical teacher Medicus. Hirsch was not only a theological historian interested in Fichte, but he also read him as a guarantor for a new philosophy of religion founded on the theory of consciousness (Hirsch 1914, 1917, 1920, 1926; 1949a, pp. 337–406). This new foundation of religion became necessary because the moral–spiritual framework surrounding the understanding of religion of the Ritschl and the history of

religious school in the context of modernity around 1900 had been broken. Religion was once again perceived as independent in a new way as it functions derive from its own internal guiding point of view. This could be described in a new way, one that incorporates aspects of religious psychology, sociology and phenomenology. Idealism was increasingly used as a foil for this new understanding of religion. This applies not only to positive reception and connection, but also to delimitation and criticism, for which Fichte, with his clear contradictions, was particularly well suited (Schlatter 1906, pp. 168–78). Hirsch was influenced here by Holl's individualistically deepened reception of Luther's religion of conscience. This was especially true of the construction of God's antinomous function for conscience. With Fichte's philosophy, Hirsch attempts to establish this understanding of the religion of conscience in a transcendental way. To this end, Hirsch assesses the different phases and the development of Fichte's thinking as emerging from a uniform question. This combines the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' as a self-consciousness–theoretical final foundation and the religion–theoretical relationship to the absolute or God. Hirsch sees the overcoming of the ethical–theological Kantian phase of the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' toward absoluteness-related philosophy from 1800 onwards as an indication of the need to expand the ethical concept of conscience in terms of truth theory. In contrast with other interpretations of Fichte, Hirsch sees that Fichte does not want to give up the foundation of philosophy in the idea of freedom. Rather, with the help of the reference to the absolute, it is precisely about the justification of the possibility and the transparency of freedom. In this doubleness of the reflection that sets itself as already determined, Hirsch incorporates the idea of a fundamentally antinomic relation to the absolute in knowledge, which originates from Holl's idea of justification. He recognizes it in the structure of the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' from 1801. For Hirsch, the philosophy of religion in the narrower sense, as presented in the '*Anweisung zum seligen Leben*', is only a direct application of this structure in the conscious life and the way of life of the individual. In this form, Fichte's '*Wissenschaftslehre*' in its middle phase becomes the starting point for a dogmatic theology built up by the concept of the certainty of truth. The relationship between philosophy and theology is reversed: the structures of reflection in the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' become the basis of a new theology, which conceptualizes the internal self-transparency of faith.

This form of a new theology is poured into entirely different linguistic forms by other theologians, using similar patterns of reflection. Karl Barth's revelation–theological development of neo-Kantianism seeks a similar core of religion in the realization of faith. He understands the structure of this process, theologically, with the help of material Christian language images. Because of this self-image of theology as an aid to the preaching of the Church, Karl Barth must determine the relationship between theology and idealism differently. This becomes the point of crystallization of a modern world, which is determined by the reference to the human. Fichte's God is for Karl Barth only a self-describing projection (K. Barth 1948, pp. 113–28).[2] The theory of the self-positing structure of knowledge of the early '*Wissenschaftslehre*' becomes an outward proof of the self-empowerment of modern humanity. This view is applied to the whole philosophy of religious idealism. Fichte's late philosophy of religion and its talk of the absolute must then also be theologically corrected and rethought, as has been attempted several times in the wake of Karl Barth (cf. Jüngel 1977, pp. 170–87; Bader 1975).

16. The Theological Reception of Fichte in the Present

Fichte's reception in contemporary Protestant theology has two roots. On the one hand, it takes up the textual and source-oriented scientific and philosophical–historical research of German idealism, as it developed in Germany after the Second World War. On the other hand, it is a result of the Schleiermacher renaissance since the 1960s, with which the German revelation theology, which was influenced by Karl Barth, was to be overcome in favour of a new orientation toward the general anthropological concept of religion. Both come together within the scope of the critical and complete edition of Schleiermacher, which is edited in parallel with Fichte's and with those of other important idealistic philosophers. In addition

to Günter Meckenstock (cf. also Meckenstock 1993), Ulrich Barth in particular should be mentioned here. His dissertation focuses on a subjectivity–theoretical reconstruction of the foundations of Schleiermacher's theology. In the habilitation thesis, then, in close connection with Emanuel Hirsch's reception of Fichte, the '*Wissenschaftslehre*' of 1801 is examined from an epistemological, reflection–logical and subjectivity–philosophical perspective. Ulrich Barth's reception of Fichte stands in contrast with another line of Fichte's interpretation in theology. He differs from Falk Wagner's depiction of Fichte's philosophy of religion (cf. Mette 2013, pp. 60–110; U. Barth 2015). In his dissertation on the thought of the personality of God, Wagner had argued that Fichte's theory of self-consciousness leads to permanent aporias. That is why Hegel's negation–dialectical determination of the absolute must be passed on as the basis of the theological concept of God. With the assertion of aporias in Fichte's theory, Wagner, like his teacher Wolfhart Pannenberg (Pannenberg 1999; cf. Axt-Piscalar 2023, 254 Anm. 6 and pp. 273–5) referred to an influential essay by the philosopher Dieter Henrich. He had explained that Fichte had the idea of developing a theory of self-sufficiency of the ego from an original act of self-positing. Henrich claimed that, despite several reflexive extensions to the structure of this original act of self-positing, Fichte had failed in this program. Henrich therefore had Fichte's philosophy of unification set against Hölderlin's, with which he himself wanted to go on to a pre-reflexive form of the opening up of self-consciousness. Ulrich Barth, for his part, pointed out that Henrich could also have gained this program with a more adequate presentation of Fichte's '*Wissenschaftslehre*' (1801–1804). In the phase of his habilitation, however, Ulrich Barth himself (following Hirsch) favours a truth–theoretical interpretation of Fichte's philosophy of religion. In his later essays on Fichte's development, he also points out their aspects of philosophy of unity and symbol theory. These different points of view have then been interrogated again in dissertations of Ulrich Barth's students with reference to Fichte's sources (cf. R. Barth 2004; Pecina 2007). In Jörg Dierken, moments of an own speculative connection to Fichte can be seen as he attempts to anchor freedom as individuality within the absolute and with permanent and simultaneous difference to the absolute (Dierken 1998, 2005). Additionally, in the context of Schleiermacher research, the question of the connection to Fichte's foundation of ego philosophy and its inner connection with a feeling theory of the absolute is addressed (Grove 2004, pp. 156–250).

As with Ulrich Barth himself, the reception of idealism in theology in the 20th century itself has become the subject of theological–historical analysis in his wider circle (cf. U. Barth 2014; Graf and Christophersen 2004). Not only for Hirsch, but also for Gogarten, Tillich and other theologians, the connection to Fichte (and other idealistic philosophers) was investigated more closely (cf. Neugebauer 2012; Danz 2012b, 2017). This research helps to separate the later theological use and its intention more clearly from the original concern of idealistic philosophy. In general, it is to be asked whether a Fichte reception can be directly helpful for the understanding of faith, but also for the understanding of 'theology' as a science of faith in the present. If one detaches oneself from an anthropological and self-consciousness theoretical justification and the question of truth that is still inherent within it, other basic concepts for religion, e.g., linguistic–pragmatic, hermeneutic or narratological, are also conceivable.

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Notes

1 Histories of theology that do not mention Fichte or mention him only very briefly include (Schwarz 1869; Kattenbusch 1892; Stephan 1909), with one exception (Pfleiderer 1877, 1891). In Rudolf Haym's interpretation, modernity emerges through the early romantic combination of Goethe's world view and Fichte's ego philosophy, (cf. Haym 1870). Cf. also on this period (Schütte 1965).

2 Karl Barth's '*Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert*' (K. Barth 1946) does not deal with Fichte and Schelling.

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Revolution and Nation: Johann Gottlieb Fichte's Late Philosophy of Religion

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Abstract: Johann Gottlieb Fichte's philosophy of religion combines revolutionary pathos with Christian convictions and transcendental philosophical insights. The result is a bourgeois philosophy of religion that preaches freedom, equality and brotherhood, expects the national upswing of a still-longed-for Germany based on the example of revolutionary France, and praises all this as a continuation of Kant's philosophy.

Keywords: French Revolution; Christianity; nationalism; transcendental philosophy; subjectivity; J.G. Fichte; I. Kant

1. Religion and Politics as a Problem in Fichte

Immanuel Hermann Fichte, the only child of Johann Gottlieb and Johanna Fichte and himself a highly influential 19th century philosopher, recounted from his childhood memories that his father led a brief daily prayer meeting. The meeting usually included not only the family, but also the household staff. It began with piano accompaniment and the singing of a chorale. After this musical prelude, old Fichte would address the congregation and reflect on a passage from the Bible, especially the Gospel of John. Occasionally, his reflections would be interspersed with words of comfort or exhortation, depending on the occasion (Fichte 1862, p. 428f).

In addition to this testimony of Immanuel Hermann, which likely pertains to Fichte's time in Berlin, there are numerous sources attesting that the elder Fichte was deeply rooted in the evangelical-Lutheran pietistic tradition (Cf. Traub 2020). He himself took on the role of a preacher. His popular speeches on religion and politics, which later at least partially found expression in popular books, are rhetorically indebted to the style of preaching.

The edition of his father's writings, which Immanuel Hermann compiled after the father's death, reinforces the image of a deeply religious philosopher who struggled throughout his life for the Absolute, i.e., God. This struggle is an expression of both the fear of God's essence and the will to understand the world and nature only from a divine perspective. Immanuel Hermann has left traces suggesting that his father can be deciphered as a religious mystic concerned with the contemplative reflection (*Einkehr*) of the divine. This impression is strengthened by the fact that Immanuel Herrmann's edition divides Fichte's writings into special sections: The Theoretical Philosophy appears in its own section, separate from the Popular Philosophy and the Political Writings. Such a division is modern. It corresponds to the disciplining of philosophy, a process of differentiation that already gained momentum in the 19th century. It disciplines—and thus defuses—Fichte's philosophy, confining it to a corset of intra-philosophical disciplinary boundaries.

The editorial tendency of his father's writings is clear: to keep Fichte out of the ideological, political, and religious controversies of his time. Such a tendency attempts to impose a timeless, ahistorical position on Johann Gottlieb Fichte, which—especially as far as Fichte's so-called late philosophy is concerned—bears much resemblance to a pre-critical, rationalist metaphysics of being. In particular, the Atheism Controversy is defused in terms of its escalation and impact. At the center of Fichte's philosophy is the *Wissenschaftslehre*,

the religious significance of which is emphasized, while the popular philosophy seems to be marginalized: the popular treatises are occasional writings whose political significance lies primarily in the nationalist spirit they seek to spread.

Recent research, by contrast, rightly outlines the *whole* Fichte (Cf. Oesterreich and Traub 2013; Zöller 2013). Such an outline has been made possible by the fact that the complete edition of Johann Gottlieb Fichte's writings, which has been available for several years now, follows a strictly chronological approach and—in contrast to the edition selected by Fritz Medicus at the beginning of the 19th century—also includes all existing texts. Following such a synthetic view of Fichte's work, it is no longer surprising that, according to his son's testimony, the private Fichte attached great importance to a lively religiosity during his time in Berlin, although he had been accused of atheism a few years earlier.

This essay attempts to understand Fichte's late philosophy of religion as an integral part of his philosophical work, which was more strongly influenced by the course of time than Kant's work, for example. It is important to bear in mind that Fichte did not want to pursue a book philosophy that progressed in propositions, but rather a practical philosophy of freedom (Cf. Asmuth 2007b; Danz 1997, 2012). His doctrine of science is aimed at action, the transition into life: lived morality. His philosophy of religion therefore developed into a political theology in response to the political events of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. His work thus fell into a field of tension between his fundamental pietistic convictions, his support for the French Revolution, his rejection of feudalism and monarchism, and his desire to see Germany become a nation.

2. The So-Called Atheism Controversy

The starting point of the Atheism Controversy, which from a journalistic point of view was extremely far-reaching, was the religious-philosophical work *On the Ground of Our Faith in a Divine Government of the World* (*Über den Grund unseres Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung*). It must be admitted, however, that Fichte's work had little influence on the confrontation that ensued. A sum of very different interests, moral and religious ideas, political attitudes, and personal conflict strategies determined the direction and severity of the confrontation. Fichte's argument consisted in presenting a philosophical concept of God that conceived of the Absolute as a *moral world-order* (*moralische Weltordnung*). The reduction of God to the realm of morality made Fichte the spearhead of a modern theology that jettisoned the metaphysical foundation and saw religion as a practical dimension of human existence. Such a reduction meant that traditional theological attributes of God were suspended, such as the personality of God, His transcendence, the immortality of the soul, the forgiveness of sins, and so on. Fichte's new understanding of God was even offensive because it transformed Kant's critical reservations—namely, that the existence of God could not be proven, and that the immortality of the soul could not be discussed scientifically—into positive but dismissive assertions. Those who already sensed danger for orthodox Christianity in Kant's critical philosophy read Fichte's reduction of theology to morality as confirmation of their suspicions (Danz 1999).

Fichte's philosophy originally drew on various sources. At first, *before* he adopted Kant's Critical Philosophy, Fichte was inclined towards causal determinism (Cf. Wildfeuer 1999). However, morality and responsibility could not be justified in a deterministic framework, as the freedom of the individual would then be a mere appearance and the will would be reduced to a mere state of consciousness. At the same time, determinism arose from a political feeling of despair: truly *profound* changes to the social situation could not be caused by the individual's ability to act. A consistent causal determinism views society and its progress as analogous to natural entities that are determined by regular natural forces. Fichte himself outlines a philosophical representation of that position in his treatise *The Vocation of Man* (*Bestimmung des Menschen*). In this text, Fichte characterizes determinism as a worldview to be overcome, an overcoming that is only possible through the immediate awareness and feeling of freedom.

Fichte discovered such a consciousness of freedom in Kant's practical philosophy. The evidence we have suggests that Fichte's transformation from determinism to freedom-consciousness took place in August 1790 (Asmuth 2001). For him, the transformation also marked the end of his political concession. Looking at Fichte's development from this synthetic perspective, one can no longer separate his philosophy of religion from his political philosophy. Fichte's early political philosophy is entirely focused on the French Revolution. In a way, it is astonishing that Fichte continues to defend the Revolution for so long, even when it becomes clear that the Revolution is turning into a Reign of Terror, as Georg Büchner puts it in the mouth of his *Danton* on the scaffold: "I know well—the Revolution is like Saturn, it eats its own children." (Büchner 1835) Of course, Fichte does not defend the Reign of Terror, but he does defend the aims and the necessity of a bourgeois revolution. The transformation also changed Fichte's view of the theological situation of his time. *Freedom* is the keyword under which his philosophy can now be subsumed (Cf. Fichte et al. 1973, p. 182). Fichte's contemporaries also deciphered his groundbreaking work, with the programmatic title *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (*Grundlage der gesammten Wissenschaftslehre*), within this context. Although Fichte did not speak of God in this treatise, the argumentative figure of the self-positing I is revealed to his readers at the same time the empowerment of the subject over God and the worldly ruler. And in the formulation that God is nothing other than the moral world order, they saw the removal of God and His transformation into an inner-worldly morality: an atheism through the secularization of God! Ultimately, Fichte's conception in Jena and later in Berlin is very similar to the religious cults of the French Revolution, the cult of reason (Hebertists) or, for example, the cult of the Supreme Being, which was inaugurated by Robespierre in the spring of 1794, but had already been laid down in the preamble to the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789. The cult of the Supreme Being was intended to break the hegemony of Catholicism in France, but also to prevent atheism while guaranteeing religious freedom. Since his time in Jena, Fichte's philosophy of religion had been fused with political motives. The image of the private man and citizen at the piano, singing a chorale for his family and home, emphasizes the philosopher's personal piety. But Fichte's concern was different! He was concerned with the development of a political theology.

3. The Wissenschaftslehre in Berlin

After the Jena system, Fichte underwent two further important phases in the consolidation of his philosophy. The first phase took place in the years 1804/05 (Cf. Asmuth 2007a), when Fichte lectured four times on the *Wissenschaftslehre*, three times in Berlin, and one semester in Erlangen. In this framework, he also lectured on the principles of God, morality and right (*Sitten- und Rechtslehre*), as well as on logic and metaphysics. In his popular lectures in Berlin during these years, Fichte devoted himself to the *Essence of the Scholar* (philosophy of education), the *Characteristics of the Present Age* (philosophy of history), and *The Way Towards The Blessed Life* (doctrine of religion).

Without relying on any particular one of the numerous versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, in the following I will summarize the main ideas of the Berlin *Wissenschaftslehre*. First of all, it must be emphasized, especially in view of the frequent use of the word 'Absolute', that Fichte's Berlin *Wissenschaftslehre* focuses on the *finite rational being*, humans, who assure themselves of their infinite ground in the Absolute through rational finite thinking. But in Fichte's view, the Absolute is not a metaphysical, superhuman entity, but nothing other than reality itself, which for Fichte is the rational in its absolute unity. By turning to this rational ground through *their own* reason, human beings, who remain finite in their finiteness, discover their infinity. Such infinity is more than what every finite human being find in himself or herself. Since such infinity is common to all individuals, there is a unity and rationality that unites all and everyone into one humanity, into one reason—a philosophical foundation of "freedom, equality, brotherhood". Reality, unity, and reason stand under a unity focus, and are themselves nothing other than unity—a legacy of Kant's transcendental apperception and the 'I' of the early *Wissenschaftslehre*.

Therefore, all difference is a difference of form, but not of one absolute content. Difference is a matter of view, difference is a matter of perspective; Fichte's philosophy is therefore a theory of perspective referring to itself. Knowledge is always fanned out in perspective, but, insofar as it is knowledge, it is committed to unity. In this, Fichte's concern differs from that of Hegel, whose system construction always includes the overview., i.e., the perspective of the whole.[1] Fichte, on the other hand, insists that even the overview is only a certain view of the whole, but by no means the whole itself. In addition to the unity of *the Absolute*, there is therefore the duplicity between the *view of the Absolute* and the multiplicity *of views of the Absolute*, a moment of tension that characterizes Fichte's entire philosophy. It is in this tension that the duplicity of the ideal and the real and their ideal duplication in idealism and realism belong (Cf. Zöller 2006, 2008; Further: Asmuth 1999, 2009). It also includes Fichte's theory of the fivefold world view, in which the world with its infinite forms and shapes is viewed in a fivefold way, world-views (*Weltansichten*), which underlie all experience a priori.

In doing so, Fichte always remains committed to the program of transcendental philosophy. Regardless of how one views Fichte's philosophical development, whether he *distances* himself from his philosophical beginnings and from Kant's critical philosophy, whether he dissociates himself from the philosophy of the I, which he elaborated in the *Foundations of the entire Wissenschaftslehre*, or whether he fundamentally *revises* the entire Jena system, one thing should be clear: there is no explicit textual evidence that he restructured his transcendental philosophical concept in favor of an ontology or metaphysics, for example. On the contrary, the late *Wissenschaftslehre*, paradigmatically and explicitly the *Wissenschaftslehre of 1810*, radicalizes transcendental philosophy and develops a new variant of this line of argument.

Kant's critique of reason searches for the conditions of possibility of cognition and, as a result, obtains a construct of conditions of possibility without an ontological substrate, the validity of which is independent of both empirical conditions and metaphysical-theological presuppositions. However, whenever there is real cognition, the conditions of possibility are also given, i.e., real (*wirklich*) and—in relation to the knowledge of rules—valid (*gültig*).[2]

Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* stands under the primacy of practical reason: Knowledge itself is practical, is a living process. There is no substantial difference between philosophy and revolution. At the same time, the contrast between theory and practice is implemented and dissolved in the interrelationship between the I and the world. The *Wissenschaftslehre* deduces both how the I sees itself as necessarily determined by its external world and how the I is given freedom of action in this necessarily determined world, i.e., how the I is not *determined* but determining. One should not be deceived here by the rhetoric of freedom: for Fichte, freedom goes hand in hand with necessity. A pluralistic concept of freedom is not part of his philosophy. Human beings are free when they act in accordance with reason, which in turn is not *their individual* reason, but *one* rationality in all, *one* moral law for the freedom *of all*.

4. *The Way towards Blessed Life*—Fichte's Berlin Philosophy of Religion (1806)

The Way Towards Blessed Life (*Die Anweisung zum seeligen Leben*)—even his contemporaries were surprised by the title and scoffed that Fichte himself must be blessed if he promised to show the way to the blessed life.[3] The enlightened Berlin society did not like the tone in which they were being taught about the blessed life. The audience consisted of government officials, professors, artists, "enlightened Jewish men and women, state councillors, Kotzebue", as Hegel once disparagingly remarked (Hegel 1986, p. 413).

The Way Towards Blessed Life has two main parts, the consistency of which is not always clearly recognizable (Cf. Anweisung: Asmuth 1999, 2000; Medicus 1928; Plachte 1922; Schmidig 1966; Seyler 2014; Verweyen 1995; Traub 1992; Seidel 1996). After an introductory and a methodological lecture, Fichte presents the results of his *Wissenschaftslehre* in a first major section—including his doctrine of the *five world-views* (*fünf Weltansichten*). This is followed by an excursus on the Gospel of John. The second part contains Fichte's theory of love, a love with which God loves himself, unfolded in *four stages* of blessedness.

"The very first task of this thinking is: *to think being sharply*." (Fichte et al. 1995, p. 85) Fichte's summary presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* begins with the actual and true being *in nuce*. With this opening sentence, Fichte summons the reader to the task. Anyone familiar with Fichte's philosophy knows that the summons (*Aufforderung*) as summons plays a central role in his philosophy. For example, the I can only become a person through reciprocal summoning and being summoned. Here Fichte summons the reader *to think being sharply*. According to Fichte, being should be thought of from two perspectives. *Externally*, it is unchangeable, not becoming, not emerging from something else or previous. It is of itself, from itself, through itself, completely autonomous and unconditioned. *Internally*, being is also unchangeable and eternal, i.e., without reference to time. It does not change and does not become something new. It remains what it was and becomes what it is. Being always remains the same, externally and internally. Being, as Fichte summarizes, must be conceived as one, as "a self-enclosed and perfect and absolutely unchangeable unity" (Fichte et al. 1995, p. 86).

Completely different from this *notion of being* (*Gedanken des Seins*) is the *notion of the existence of being* (*Gedanke des Daseins des Seins*). According to Fichte, *Dasein* or existence means consciousness, representation, revelation, image. Existence is a representation; it is not itself what it is, but has it from another, which it is *not* itself. It refers to something different from itself; it refers to being. Existence is the being of being outside of being. But what does this mean for the notion of being that Fichte summoned us to perform? We have skipped over existence and only believed that "we have come into being itself...; yet we remain, always and forever, only in the forecourt, in existence" (Fichte et al. 1995, p. 87). We have not considered that we think in the thought of being itself, i.e., that we are existence, consciousness. A possible consequence arises here that would be fatal for the concept of *The Way Towards Blessed Life*: there could not be just one single form of the existence of being, but many or even an infinite number of different forms. Being would be different in every existence, and thus also different from itself; for being is absolute *unity*, but existence is *diversity*. Existence is different from every other existence and therefore also different from being. Between being and existence "would rather result in an immeasurable gulf" (Fichte et al. 1995, p. 87). The union between us, existence, and the Absolute, Being or God, would be impossible—impossible for us to attain blessedness.

Existence or consciousness should be the only possible form of existence of being (Cf. Fichte et al. 1995, p. 87). There is a close relationship between being and existence. They appear like two sides of the same coin. Yet they are different, but not in such a way that they completely fall apart. There must not be an unbridgeable gap between them. Fichte formulates the task as follows: Being should be there (*soll da sein*), but it should not lose its absolute character. It should continue to be the Absolute, just as we—under Fichte's guidance—necessarily had to think it. But what kind of thought can manage to sharply separate being and existence on the one hand and make their unity possible on the other? Being, states Fichte, must be "distinguished from existence, and opposed to it; and indeed,—since apart from absolute existence there is nothing else but its existence,—this distinction and this opposition must occur—in existence itself."[4] Thought has made the same mistake as before by skipping over existence and rushing straight to being. We have forgotten ourselves, our thinking and our activity. The distinction between being and existence does not occur somehow, but is only for us and through us. And in distinguishing between them, existence is the active factor. "Existence must grasp, recognize and form *itself* as mere existence (*Das Dasein muß* sich *selber als bloßes Dasein fassen, erkennen und bilden*). The distinction falls in the perspective of existence, which unburdens the absolute being from having to contain a distinction. For absolute being is one, internally and externally without distinction. If one says: existence is distinct from being, then one violates the content of being. Now the distinction does not affect the perspective of being, but that of existence. Existence conceives of itself as existence. What is existence? It is consciousness, imagination, revelation, image, nothing original, but something derived. It exists only in the reference to its original, first, archetypal: being. Just as existence therefore understands

itself as existence, it understands itself as the existence of being: it "must, in opposition to itself, posit and form [*setzen, und bilden*] an absolute being, whose mere existence is itself" (Fichte et al. 1995, p. 88). This means that the distinction between being and existence occurs in existence and not—one might add—*in being*. Thus we reach the basic dynamic situation of any *Wissenschaftslehre*: maximum difference with simultaneous maximum pressure for unity, a basic situation that, according to Fichte's program, can only be mediated by Ought (*das Sollen*), an Ought, in turn, that can only be redeemed in the actual act.

Characteristic of Fichte's philosophical language in the years around 1804 is the formulation: existence "must annihilate itself (*sich vernichten*) through *its own* being—in opposition to another absolute existence." This emphatic statement of *self-annihilation* does not mean the radical eradication of consciousness, but is rather intended to indicate that existence or consciousness is nothing independent in itself. Consciousness is *annihilated* insofar as it recognizes itself as consciousness and knows that it means nothing in itself and has no validity.

Existence recognizes itself as existence; existence is consciousness; consciousness recognizes itself as consciousness. It is therefore "self-consciousness of itself (of existence), as a mere image, of the being that exists absolutely in itself."[5] But because it has no meaning in itself, existence cannot jeopardize the unity of being. Existence is the only possible form of being.

Existence conceives of itself. However, it only conceives the factuality of its existence and not how it emerges from the being that is enclosed within itself. For existence cannot comprehend itself beyond itself. It is impossible to ask: What was existence before it was what it is? Fichte states: "[. . .] and so, through the absoluteness of its existence, and through its bondage to this existence, it [=existence] is cut off from all possibility of going above it, and, beyond it, of comprehending and deriving itself...: everywhere it is, it finds itself already there."[6]

Now, if existence cannot emerge from within itself, how does it come to understand itself as the existence of being? Where does existence get the being that is completely independent of and presupposed by it? Outside of being—this is again the beginning of the argument—is nothing and nothing is there. If something is there, then it is there through absolute being. Being and existence are identical in their highest point. "The real life of knowledge is therefore, in its root, the inner being and essence of the Absolute itself, and nothing else; and there is no separation at all between the Absolute, or God, and knowledge, in its deepest root of life, but both merge completely into one another." (Fichte et al. 1995, p. 88)

Fichte's five world-views (*Die fünf Weltansichten*) are: sensuality, lower morality (*Sittlichkeit*), higher morality, religion, and science, i.e., philosophy or: *Wissenschaftslehre* (Cf. Asmuth 1995). These world-views are arranged hierarchically. Fichte emphasizes that each higher form cancels out the validity of its respective lower form. There is thus a clear hierarchy of world views, not a plurality of symbolic forms or versions of the world, as in later considerations of other authors (Cf. Asmuth 2010). Fichte associates lower morality with Kant's practical philosophy and his *Categorical Imperative*, whose function Fichte sees in the fact that the freedom of all can coincide, but lacks positive determinations. The result of low morality is only that I do not have to hold myself in contempt.

Higher morality, by contrast, requires a positive doctrine of ideas, the ideas of the good, the true, and the beautiful, to be pursued for the sake of these ideas themselves. Fichte associates such a doctrine of ideas with the names of Plato and Jacobi: he states that Plato had a notion of it, and Jacobi—one hears the bitter, almost spiteful undertone—sometimes touched it (Cf. Fichte et al. 1995, p. 110). Ultimately, religion consists of recognizing that ideas are grounded in God, that they are nothing more than appearances of God in us, "His expression and His image, totally and absolutely and without any subtraction, thus as His inner being is able to appear in an image." (Fichte et al. 1995, p. 110) But for Fichte, religion does *not* exhaust itself in a mere cognitive position. Instead, religion undermines the discursiveness of theology; indeed, according to Fichte's understanding, religion must

annihilate theology. For the proposition under which all theology, at least that which Fichte knew, must be subsumed, is the proposition—God alone is, and apart from Him there is nothing—this proposition makes God a concept, an empty concept, a meaningless shadow concept, as Fichte insists. But God, Fichte argues, is not a concept at all, but pure life. We ourselves, in so far as we think, are this divine life.

Fichte's view of religion is very similar to various forms of mysticism. And so it is not surprising that some interpretations have devoted a great deal of attention to this similarity (Barion 1929; Ceming 1999. Zur Gegenposition: Cf. Janke 1994; Lasson 1968; Messer 1923). But Fichte's philosophy does *not* end with religion. It does *not* lead to the last wordless word of a path into the absence of language and philosophy in immediate faith and life. In the first part of the *The Way Towards Blessed Life*, Fichte shows that the *Wissenschaftslehre* goes beyond the standpoint of religion, that God is not only manifested in the execution of the moral order of the world, but that He—which is higher—can be clearly seen in pure thought. It is only in philosophy that the genetic connection of all forms of knowledge appears: "Religion, without science, is somewhere a mere faith, even if unshakeable: science abolishes all faith and transforms it into sight."[7]

For Fichte, the standpoint of religion is therefore not an instance at which or towards which one can develop a *philosophy* of religion. Rather, the philosophy of religion is opposed to religion due to its reflective approach. Only the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a universal project embraces the contents peculiar to religion and makes them transparent for knowledge. This is the reason for the ambivalent relationship between the *Wissenschaftslehre* and Christianity. On the one hand, Fichte's writings continue the tradition of the Enlightenment. On the other hand, Fichte strives for a renewal of religion, for a religion of reason. Criticism of religion, criticism of the church, of the clergy, of the tradition and ritual are just as central to Fichte's reflections on Christianity as his efforts to transform Christian beliefs. However, this renewed Christian doctrine is not a reformulated ontology or even metaphysics, but a *Wissenschaftslehre*. This shows the field of conflict in which Fichte's writings on Christianity are situated: the only criterion by which Christianity must be measured is reason. Christianity is true only insofar as it can stand up to philosophy or the *Wissenschaftslehre*. In his diary of 1813 (*Diarium 1813*), Fichte clearly states: "Only the principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre* makes Christianity comprehensible—." (Cf. Meckenstock 1973, p. 67; Danz 2009)

5. The Republic of the Germans

One year after *The Way Towards Blessed Life*, i.e., 1807, probably in the spring shortly before his 'escape' from Berlin to Königsberg, Fichte wrote a manuscript: *Science Fiction*: *The Republic of the Germans at the Beginning of the Second and Twentieth Centuries under its Fifth Reich Governor* (*Die Republik der Deutschen zu Anfange des zwei u. zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts unter ihrem fünften Reichvogte*). In the fall of 1806, Prussia had suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of Napoleon's troops (Cf. Asmuth 2021). The old Prussian state collapsed after the double battle of Jena and Auerstedt in October 1806. The court fled to Königsberg. It was only after the decisive defeat against Napoleon at the Battle of Friedland that the war ended for the time being and the Peace Treaty of Tilsit was signed on 9 July 1807, with Prussia losing almost half of its territory. Fichte's strange manuscript, which we know from Fichte's estate, falls within this time frame and provides a good insight into Fichte's thinking between 1805 and 1807. Fichte imagines a historian of the future who looks back on Fichte's present age. He leaves no good hair on the present: "egotistical selfishness", "general wickedness", "Concession", "lack of understanding", "avoidance", "imprudence", "high treason", "heresy", "disgusting flattery": these are the keywords with which the historian of the future looks back. In a kind of report, the historian comments on the reforms that had improved the old bad state of the Germans. These include: "Beauty of public buildings, canals, streets. Churches, schools, avenues. Gardens. This is very important in the cultivation of the country. The Olympic Games. I should be thinking of the designs." (Fichte et al. 1994, p. 389)

"Olympic Games"—Fichte's idea is exceptionally early. In fact, the modern Olympic Games were born in Greece, in the Greek poetry of the publisher Panagiotis Soutsos, who presented the Olympic Games as a symbol of ancient Greek culture in a poem in 1833. Following Greece's independence from the Ottoman Empire (1828) and the intervention of the major European powers, Otto I, a Bavarian prince, ruled Greece as king for 30 years from 1832. Soutsos' efforts were not crowned with success. It took until 1859 for a successful Greek merchant, Evangelos Zappas, to finally organize the first Olympics in Athens with Otto I's permission. Only Greeks were allowed to participate. These Olympics were embedded in a program that offered an industrial and agricultural exhibition, behind which the sports had to take a back seat. The model was the Munich Oktoberfest, also in the middle of the 19th century, an agricultural exhibition accompanied by sports competitions.

Obviously, Fichte's idea differed conceptually from *those* Olympic Games that we have known since 1894. Pierre de Coubertin conceived them as a "meeting of the youth of the world". Fichte was not thinking of a major international sporting event, but was following an antique ideal. His vision follows classicism. The idea is "Olympic Games" of the German states, analogous to the games of the Greek city-states of antiquity. The aim is to form the Germans into a people, into a nation, as Fichte would later propagate in his *Addresses to the German Nation*. He is concerned with nation-building, a unification of the German states and small states under the leadership of Prussia as a counterweight against France and Napoleon. Fichte hoped that German unity would lead not only to a German state with a German constitution, but even more to the unity of the Germans, which he saw as a spiritual unity. Another concern was the military training, a motif that would later become central to Johann Friedrich Ludwig Christoph Jahn, the notorious father of gymnastics, who wanted to revive the *Deutsche Volkstum* through the paramilitary "art of gymnastics". What Fichte conceived entirely out of the depression of Prussia's defeat turned into sheer *völkisch* nationalism. Karl Immermann captured this wonderfully in his *Memorabilien* of 1838/39: "In one of his speeches, Fichte had referred to a closed youth state as a means by which the education of the future generation could become possible. Jahn, who often behaved like Fichte's unconscious monkey, made this fantastic state a reality for a while. It was dominated by an aristocracy of wrestling, swinging, running and gymnastics. The art of gymnastics is a prime example of how a very simple thing can be corrupted and made confusing." (Fichte et al. 2012, p. 265)

The same wind is blowing in Fichte's philosophy of religion, especially that from 1806. Fichte is by no means concerned with an epistemic explanation of acts of faith, nor with a mystical transformation of the Christian religion, nor even with an intellectualistic revision of traditional beliefs (Cf. Asmuth 2022). Instead, Fichte is concerned with an identity-political reformation, if not revolution, of the religious faith of the Germans. The aim is the unity of the German nation in its natural external borders and in its inner consciousness, as he later calls for in his *Addresses*.

In the *Republic of the Germans*, Fichte states that the legislature of the future state had therefore found it necessary—after consulting the scholars, of course—to introduce a fourth confession into the state alongside the Roman-Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed confessions: the confession of the *General Christians*, and to "elevate them to the proper civic religion, i.e., to the legitimate religion for the task of the state. The *General Christians* recognize the doctrine of God of Christianity, but only insofar as it corresponds to reason (Cf. Die Republik der Deutschen, Fichte et al. 1994, p. 397). As good Fichteans, the *General Christians* consider anything historical about religion to be non-essential. This also applies to Jesus Christ. *General Christians* are not overly interested in the historical person of Jesus. They regard historical controversy as "silliness" (*Albernheit*) (Fichte et al. 1994, p. 397). The center of their religion is reason, the I, "because we ourselves, as the essential, firmly believe to be Christian."[8] This creed is deeply anchored in the constitution of the *Republic of the Germans*, which states, according to Fichte: "The first condition of human education is unrestricted independence, and this consists of recognizing no barriers other than those set by one's own clear insight and firm will. He who must will according to another's

insight is not free. The system of blind faith in authority arises, if not from despots, then certainly from slave minds. But no constitution for a free people may either establish as a constitutional condition of citizenship, or even leave implicit, any decree that appears to set limits to its own insight." (Fichte et al. 1994, p. 414)

Notwithstanding the commonly voiced, Fichte did not derive the idea of an inner national identity from *völkisch* principles like Jahn (Cf. Jahn 1810), nor ultimately from patriotic premises like Ernst Moritz Arndt (Arndt 1806), nor from an anti-Jewish resentment, as Saul Ascher suspected (Cf. Ascher 1794). Instead, the idea stems from a pathos of freedom and reason that is entirely indebted to the style of the French Revolution, which is also fed by transcendental philosophy and thus combines a radicalized and systematically sharpened sense of autonomy in the Kantian sense.[9] In this homogeneous state, there are only *General Christians*. After Fichte's death in 1815, there was a clear break between his view of religion and the identity-political demands of the generation almost fifteen years younger: the Battle of Waterloo led to France's complete military collapse and the Second Peace of Paris in November 1815. The Restoration began, the fraternities and the Germanomaniacs (Cf. Ascher 1815) formed and sharpened the political and nationalist fronts. Karl Immermann can probably be agreed with here, as he sympathetically confessed in his memorabilia: "If anyone died at the right hour for his rest, it was Fichte." (Fichte et al. 2012, p. 265)

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Notes

1 "The spirit [*Geist*] requires a general conception [*Vorstellung*] of the purpose [*Zweck*], of the determination of the whole, in order to know what to expect. One wants to have a general view of the landscape, which one then loses sight of when one begins the journey into the various parts" (Hegel 1986, p. 25, Anm. 10).

2 Cf. for the justification of this view: (Asmuth 2018).

3 This was reported by Fichte's wife, Marie Johanne. See: (Fichte et al. 1981, p. 276).

4 (Fichte et al. 1995, p. 87f): "Es muß von dem Daseyn, unterschieden, und demselben entgegengesetzt werden; und zwar,—da außer dem absoluten Seyn schlechthin nichts anderes ist, als sein Daseyn,—diese Unterscheidung, und diese Entgegensetzung muß—In dem Daseyn selber—vorkommen."

5 (Fichte et al. 1995, p. 88): "Selbstbewußtseyn seiner (des Daseyns) selbst, als bloßen Bildes, von dem absolut in sich selber seyenden Seyn".

6 (Fichte et al. 1995, p. 88): "und so ist ihm denn durch die Absolutheit seines Daseyns, und durch die Gebundenheit an dieses sein Daseyn, alle Möglichkeit über dasselbe hinauszugehen, und, jenseit desselben, sich noch zu begreifen, und abzuleiten, abgeschnitten . . .: allenthalben wo es ist, findet es sich schon vor".

7 (Fichte et al. 1995, p. 112): "Die Religion, ohne Wissenschaft, ist irgendwo ein bloßer, demohngeachtet jedoch, unerschütterlicher, Glaube: die Wissenschaft hebt allen Glauben auf, und verwandelt ihn in Schauen".

8 (Fichte et al. 1994, p. 398): "weil wir selbst, als dem Wesentlichen, Christuße zu sein fest glauben".

9 On the systematic significance of transcendental philosophy cf.: (Asmuth 2023).

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Schleiermacher's *Speeches* and the Modern Critique of Religion

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Abstract: Friedrich Schleiermacher is often credited with playing a foundational role in the development of the modern concept of religion. His epoch-making *Speeches* on religion, published in 1799 amidst the widespread social and intellectual upheaval of the *Sattelzeit*, present a novel description of religious feeling and religious communication, which mark a turning away from the rationalistic treatments of religion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and which served as both inspiration and foil for scholars of religion throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This essay suggests a reading of Schleiermacher's *Speeches* that is organized around two interrelated claims. First, the text does not proceed as speculative philosophical treatise aiming to establish an overarching theory of religion but as a critical dialogue that inquires into the distinctive particularity of religion and religious expression. Second, religious piety, as depicted in the *Speeches*, is not found in the isolated inwardness of individual experience but in coordinated tension with sociality, in communications of religious feeling that are bound together with a living apprehension of the world. On this account, religion for Schleiermacher, though rooted in feeling and self-consciousness, is nonetheless no private affair; it is realized within the developing complex of social and historical living.

Keywords: Schleiermacher; German Romanticism; critique; characterization; feeling; intuition; particularity; religious communication

1. Introduction

Questions of the origin and limits of modern understandings of religion have drawn growing interest in recent years. Scholars of both theology and religious studies have produced detailed studies of the gradual rise of the concept of "religion" in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, as it emerged together with evolving notions of the nation, the state, and race. Where the term *religio* was used frequently in ancient Rome to refer to a wide variety of social obligations, and in the medieval period to indicate the virtuous disposition accompanying the proper observance of practices of worship and ritual, the category of "religion" indicates a distinctly modern sensibility, which signals a shared and essential dimension of human existence and interiority, establishing a universal genus of human living to be filled out by particular individual religions (cf. Cavanaugh 2009, pp. 60–82; Nongbri 2013, pp. 16–34; Vial 2016, pp. 2–9).

Within these narratives of the provenance of modern "religion", Schleiermacher's *Speeches* often play a central role. The text's evocative descriptions of religious feeling and intuition mark a turning point, away from the generalized and rationalistic treatments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which tended toward depictions of natural and universal religion more conducive to morality and ordered civil society. Instead, the text highlights the individual character of religious experience and its various manifestations and expressions in history. As Leora Batnitzky, for example, argues: "no single thinker did more to define the modern concept of religion than Schleiermacher" (Batnitzky 2011, p. 25; cf. Vial 2016, pp. 55–56).[1]

Yet Schleiermacher's *Speeches* is also among the more contested and criticized texts in the modern academic study of religion. Treatments of the work, among scholars of both theology and religious studies, have tended towards a clear pattern, with Schleiermacher's thought upheld as a representative example of German Romanticism or Idealism, or some

mixture of the two, and serving as a foil for later historical and critical advances in the academic study of religion and theology. In his descriptions of pious self-consciousness and feeling, for example, Schleiermacher is often interpreted as pioneering a naïvely Romantic emphasis on inward subjectivity or religious experience. In the context of theology, this interpretation was initially spotlighted by Emil Brunner, Karl Barth, and other dialectical theologians critical of attempts to tether Christian revelation to philosophical analyses of anthropology or human experience (cf. Jones 2023, pp. 541–48). It has, however, endured as an almost canonical reading of Schleiermacher, which recurred in methodological debates of the late twentieth century and still finds frequent expression in standard surveys of modern theology.[2] Similarly, scholars of religious studies such as Wayne Proudfoot and Russell T. McCutcheon have characterized Schleiermacher's position as centering on the "immediacy of religious experience" or "a deep feeling" that is independent of particular beliefs, practices, or rational argumentation (Proudfoot 1985, p. 3; McCutcheon 2001, p. 4). This interpretation, too, is frequently echoed in methodological surveys of the field. As one account in a recent textbook in religious studies reads: "Schleiermacher . . . focused his attention on rehabilitating the emotive, nonrational element within religion" (Herling 2007, p. 62). In the eyes of many later interpreters, then, Schleiermacher's *Speeches* mark the paradigmatic example of the modern turn to a private, internalized notion of religion that is shielded from historical criticism and rational debate.[3]

This reductive interpretative tendency among Anglophone scholars has proven stubbornly persistent, even in the face of a growing number of critical treatments of Schleiermacher's writings that have repeatedly demonstrated the complexity of his analysis of religion and the lack of evidence for this one-sided view in Schleiermacher's own texts.[4] The difficulty of dislodging these long-standing misinterpretations of Schleiermacher's *Speeches* in part reflects their connection with the founding narratives of both modern religious studies and modern theology, and the continuing usefulness of such a "caricatured Schleiermacher" in polemics against privatized conceptions of piety or faith (Dole 2023, p. 629). However, set within its own context, in the original and creative understandings of religion developing within German Idealism and Romanticism, Schleiermacher's *Speeches* advances a subtler approach, which outlines an inquiry that centers not on an essentialist account of individual religious piety but on the historical particularity of religion and on the communication of religious insights and experience.

This essay offers a reading of Schleiermacher's *Speeches* that is organized around two interrelated claims, each of which runs contrary to lingering interpretations of Schleiermacher's *Speeches* as foregrounding an essentialized account of privatized religious experience. The first of these is that Schleiermacher's *Speeches* does not primarily aim to establish an overarching theory of religion itself, and still less a theoretical treatment of religious interiority, but instead outlines an unfolding critical inquiry into the distinctive particularity of religion and religious expression. The text does not proceed as a speculative philosophical treatise but as a critical dialogue that seeks to engage a specific audience and elicit a particular response. The second claim is that religious piety, as Schleiermacher describes it, has its place not in the isolated inwardness of individual experience but in coordinated tension with sociality, in communications of religious piety that are bound together with a living apprehension of the world. Religion for Schleiermacher, though inherently personal, is nonetheless no private affair; it is realized within the developing complex of social and historical living.

The success of the *Speeches*, on such an account, lies not in creating a specific school of followers or a particular theory of religion but in generating an ongoing critical inquiry that continues even many generations later: "what is religion?" (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 18), and how can it be responsibly studied as a phenomenon of human social and cultural life? In this respect, the many advances in theology and religious studies trained on overcoming or moving beyond Schleiermacher still bear important traces of his influence.

2. Early German Romanticism and the Art of Criticism

"Religion never appears pure" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 160)

The publication of Schleiermacher's *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* in 1799 introduced a number of important innovations into modern understandings of the nature of religion.[5] The title of the work itself, which centers on the category of religion, marks an important shift from the focus of earlier philosophical and theological treatments, which typically began with the concept of God.[6] Furthermore, the text situates the discussion of the nature of religion within broader discussions of the education or "cultivation" (*Bildung*) of humanity, both as this relates to the self-cultivation of individuals and to the cultivation of society and the "progress of humanity" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 203). The work was moreover influential in highlighting the subtle connections of art and religion, and was the first to formulate the concept of "religion of art" (*Kunstreligion*) (cf. Kelm 2023, p. 204; cf. Busch 2023). And the text presents a sharp rebuke of the "meager and lean" conceptions of a universal "natural religion" (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 109), arguing instead that religion can only be "seen" or perceived amidst the "multiplicity of religions", the seemingly unending series of specific manifestations of religions existing in history (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 97).

Among these various contributions, however, it is Schleiermacher's emphasis on the relation of religion to "feeling" (*Gefühl*), particularly as outlined in the second speech, that has most captured the attention of later interpreters. In his descriptions of pious self-consciousness and feeling, for example, Schleiermacher is often interpreted as pioneering an emphasis on inward subjectivity or experience, expressing a naïve Romantic preoccupation with individuality, interiority, and emotion that stands in counterpoint to the cold rationalism of the Enlightenment (cf. Lindbeck 1984, p. 16; Otto 1970, pp. 9–10, 145–50).

A number of passages in Schleiermacher's *Speeches*, at a quick glance, might seem to lend support to this reading. Piety, Schleiermacher writes, "has its essence in feeling" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 183). Furthermore, he notes that the understanding of religion does not first follow from the contemplation of the outward natural world but from contemplation and "comparative reflection" on religious feelings: "the heart for us is as much the seat of religion as it is its nearest world" (Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 212, 197). In this regard, religion is distinguished from both speculative knowing and morality. Knowledge, as it pertains to religion, is in this respect "a knowledge about feeling" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 187).

Notably, however, for Schleiermacher's contemporaries, the most striking feature of the *Speeches* concerned the work's dialogical and critical approach. As Daniel Whistler has argued, the publication of Schleiermacher's *Speeches* in June 1799 was set within the context of broader attempts by early German Romantics to reconceive or recover a sense of the individuality and "positivity" of religion over against a generalized conception of rational or natural religion, insofar as living historical religions are "posited" above generic considerations of such a universalized concept of religion (Whistler 2023, pp. 239–43).[7] The *Speeches* marked the first of a series of texts written by German Romantics at the turn of the nineteenth century, followed by Novalis's *Christianity or Europe* (1799) and F. W. J. Schelling's *Heinz Widerporst's Epicurean Confession of Faith* (1799). And it proceeds by engaging in a particular Romantic mode of critique that centered on the concept of "the characteristic" (Whistler 2023, p. 240).

This "art of criticism" aimed to determine the inner character or the distinctive particularity of a given work, movement, or phenomenon. It is the critical enterprise of uncovering the distinguishing features or individuality of a particular field or subject matter. For Friedrich Schlegel, this "philosophy of the characteristic" itself signaled a distinguishing aspect of the new forms of thinking emerging among thinkers of the Berlin circle of Romantics contributing to the journal *Athenaeum*. The proper task of critique, as he notes in *On the Essence of Critique*, is "to understand a work or a spirit", a practice "we call 'to characterize'" (Whistler 2023, pp. 242, 250–51). Schleiermacher describes the function of critique in similar terms. The aim of criticism is to distill or identify the "distinct character"

or "individual character" of a given work or movement. Such a critical approach operates, then, as a labor of characterization (Whistler 2023, p. 252).

The form and organization of Schleiermacher's *Speeches* exemplifies this critical enterprise. Even in its stated role as a work of apologetics, it offers a particular critique of religion that aims at characterizing the distinguishing features of religious piety and religious communication. The work thus outlines a gradually unfolding methodical inquiry into religion that seeks not to isolate or abstract religion in its universality but to reclaim what is individual, distinctive, or singular in positive religion.

Descriptions of what is "characteristic" of religion, of the "character" and "tone" of genuine religious life, and of what is "distinctive" and "peculiar" in positive religions recur frequently throughout the *Speeches*, particularly in the first edition.[8] Instead of presenting "only a general concept of religion", the text aims toward "considering religion in its determinate forms" (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 111), seeking "to understand it in its reality and in its manifestations" (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 97). It looks not to what is general and abstract in religion but returns to the historical particularity of religious traditions, seeking to distinguish the unique "character of a particular religion" in its "peculiar life force" (Schleiermacher 1996, pp. 101–2). In this respect, Schleiermacher argues, "religion never appears pure" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 160). It can only be perceived "in an infinite succession" of changing forms (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 104). The text thus encourages readers not to seek religion in what is general and universal but in historical particularity: "in the religions, you are to discover religion" (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 96; cf. Schleiermacher 1994, p. 211).

The work's critical procedure is further apparent in Schleiermacher's pointed rejection of the idea of rational and "natural religion" so preferred by earlier Enlightenment theorists. "The essence of natural religion", he writes, "actually consists wholly in the negation of everything positive and characteristic in religion and in the most violent polemic against it". The idea of natural religion itself, moreover, is a "contentless, formless thing" that exists only as "indefinite ambiguity" (Schleiermacher 1996, pp. 109–10). In contrast to the "strong features" and "very marked physiognomy" of the positive religions, this "so-called natural religion" is a mere amalgamation of philosophy and morality that "allows little of the unique character of religion to shine through" (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 98). "It is as if religion had no pulse of its own . . . no character" (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 108).

Schleiermacher similarly argues against the notion of a fundamental uniformity in religion and the "fanciful idea . . . of a universality of one religion and of a single form to which all others ought conform, as the false to the true" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 180). In contrast, he maintains that religion is "infinite on all sides" and virtually unlimited in expression: "Religion does not seek, not even once, to bring those who believe and feel under one belief and one feeling"; it "flies with aversion from the bleak uniformity that would again destroy this divine superabundance" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 181; cf. Schleiermacher 1994, p. 212). The "universe presents itself as totality", but it does so as "unity in multiplicity" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 220). Properly conceived, religion "is the sworn enemy of all pedantry and all one-sidedness" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 183).

The characterization of religion offered in the *Speeches* seeks to distance itself from earlier approaches of "rigid systematizers or superficial indifferentists". "Religion can only be understood through itself", Schleiermacher maintains, as "its special manner of construction and its characteristic distinction" only become clear through critical consideration of existing religions (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 113). Accordingly, where Schleiermacher does offer his own "definitions" of religion in the text, as in his oft-cited formula of religion as the "intuition of the universe" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 222), these do not seek to supply a generalized, universal concept for religion but to locate or clarify its distinguishing or individuating principles.[9]

Recognition of this critical approach thus suggests an important corrective to the still widespread depictions of Schleiermacher's Romantic treatment of religion as a "protective strategy" that withdraws from history to "privatized experience" and a domain of religious

interiority that is "invulnerable to rational and moral criticism" (Proudfoot 1985, pp. xv–xvi; cf. Lamm 2021, pp. 210–12). The Romantic critique pursued in the *Speeches* does not mark a retreat from historical inquiry in the study of religion but expresses a particular approach to it, an exercise in grasping the distinctive and individual elements that characterize existing historical religions. This manner of proceeding also signals an important dimension of the logic of the work as a whole. The universal aspects of the "essence" of religion, the focus of the first and second speeches, are only fully grasped together with the individual aspects of positive religion outlined in later speeches. As within the human person religion emerges in the continuing oscillation between feeling and intuition, so too in human history religion is expressed in the reciprocal tension between what is universal and what is singular (Whistler 2023, p. 253). The work's distinctive emphasis on feeling and intuition, as well as its unique form and rhetorical strategy, find their place within this context.[10]

3. Feeling and Intuition: A Sense for the World

"Religion certainly begins and ends with history" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 205)

The language of feeling (*Gefühl*) and of intuition (*Anschauung*) lies at the center of Schleiermacher's characterization of religion in the *Speeches*. As he writes in the 1806 edition: "This is indeed the one and all of religion: to feel everything moving us in feeling in its highest unity as one and all, and to feel everything individual and particular as imparted through this, and therefore to feel our existence and life as an existence and life in and through God" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 176). All subsequent reflection on religion, in attempts to establish specific religious principles, formulas, or concepts emerge from these "living intuitions and feelings from which they were originally derived" (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 81).

Feeling unites the "I" with the "world". It reflects the original unity of consciousness that underlies each conscious act, the "original being-one" of subject and object and of individual and whole that exists in each moment of life, prior to their inevitable separation or "divorce" in individual acts of thought and action (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 169). Though "only traces" of this "first beginning" of consciousness remain,[11] it is through the determinations of feeling and intuition that one arrives at a sense of "humanity's existence in the whole", and of the "great unity" and the "harmony of the universe", which is disclosed not in uniformity but in infinite variety, appearing "in the most manifold ways" (Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 169, 198–99). Feeling, in this regard, is distinct from the operations of knowing and acting, even while remaining inseparable from them (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 169).

This focus on feeling, as later interpreters have noted, serves to distinguish Schleiermacher's treatment from a theoretical treatment of piety or a system of religion. Schleiermacher signals resistance to such a theory or system of religion throughout his *Speeches*. "A system of perceptions and feelings—are you able to imagine anything more fantastical?" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 178). These "concepts and precepts", he writes, ". . . are foreign to religion in itself" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 172). Such attempts at systematization would subject the characteristic features of religion—"what is individual in religion"—to something seen as higher or more universal, seeking a fixed religious principle (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 179). The "scientific treatment of religion" resulting from such an approach may offer knowledge about religion but it would do so at the cost of losing living religion itself, which cannot be directly grasped. Such treatments cling instead to aspects that are only a "decomposition of the religious sense" (Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 173–74). What is left in the wake of this "miserable obsession with system" is only a "bleak uniformity", inundated with a "host of concepts" and precepts (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 181).

The role of feeling, and its close relation to intuition, is also a point that Schleiermacher sought to clarify substantially in subsequent editions of his *Speeches*.[12] In the original 1799 edition, he referred to the "intuition of the universe" as the "highest and most universal formula of religion", and as the "hinge" or touchstone of his second speech on the essence of religion (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 24). And, fittingly, references to the "intuition of

the universe", "intuition of the world", or "intuition of the infinite" appear frequently throughout the text.[13] In his revised edition of 1806, however, he omitted this definition of religion as the "intuition of the universe", referring instead to "the original relation of feeling and intuition" as the touchstone of his argument (Lamm 2021, pp. 154, 210; Schleiermacher 2014, p. 168).[14] Notably, from this point forward, he also used the language of "intuition" with significantly less frequency, and where he continued to employ the term he did so in a more precise and disciplined fashion.

As Julia Lamm has argued, this effort to clarify the relationship between feeling and intuition largely follows from Schleiermacher's careful study of Plato, and his use of "intuition" in the *Speeches* from the second edition onwards aligns with his descriptions of intuition in the introductions to his Plato translations, which he began preparing shortly after the publication of the first edition of his *Speeches* (Lamm 2021, pp. 187–226, especially 207–215). Here, the distinction between feeling and intuition does not refer to a difference in cause or origin. Both terms signal a foundational receptivity and responsiveness to reality or the infinite, to the universe as a whole. Yet in this relation, intuition represents the more "outward-moving vector" that tends toward cognition or objectification, a living grasp or apprehension of reality that shapes one's perspective of the world (Lamm 2021, pp. 215–16). Feeling, by contrast, represents a more "inward-moving vector" that shapes one's entire being and so shapes "one's way of being in the world" (Lamm 2021, pp. 215–16). Feeling and intuition, in this sense, exist in an active tension and reciprocity, as "closely bound together yet distinct" (Lamm 2021, p. 216; cf. Korsch 2023, p. 448). The revised language of the second and subsequent editions of the *Speeches* reflects this more precise terminology (Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 168–70; Schleiermacher 1994, pp. 42–44).

These modifications, in more closely specifying the connection of feeling and intuition, also serve to clarify the inherently relational character of feeling. Feeling is nowhere found in separation or isolation, and it cannot be grasped in its pure immediacy. It is instead always paired with a "sense for the world" and an "instinct for the universe" (Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 197, 211). To the inwardness of feeling, then, always corresponds a certain apprehension of the world and one's place within it: religious awe is "that magnificent feeling of our relation to the whole" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 193). And "true religion is sensation and taste for the infinite" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 165).

In this sense, Schleiermacher writes of "the world entering people through intuition and feeling" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 214). Feeling oscillates "between two points" of the "I" and "the universe"; it "hovers . . . between the world and the individual" (Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 209, 205). Feeling yearns for the world and makes possible "that universal linking with the world" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 216). Although the heart is the "seat" of religion, it is also marked by "the yearning for the world", and "if it is to generate and nourish religion, the human heart must also operate on us as world and as in a world" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 197). Religious piety is not concerned with solitary inwardness, then, but "with our entire being", with a sense of "how we confront the world and are at the same time in it" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 217). Accordingly, the "feeling of the universe" brings to clarity "a person's overall relationship to the world", and to religion always belongs a living apprehension of reality, some "intuition of the universe" (Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 219, 209).

This yearning for the world precludes any true isolation of individual religious feeling. This feeling "clings nowhere to the individual" alone (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 222). Reflecting on the biblical creation story of Genesis 2, "one of the most ancient sources of poetry and religion", Schleiermacher notes the significance of the textual detail that the sense for the world arises not with the initial, solitary human being but only first with the creation of a partner. "Everything is in vain for those who place themselves alone". It was only in and through exchange with another that the individual discovered humanity, "and in humanity he found the world" (Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 197–98).

Taken in this sense, feeling and intuition invariably entail a principle of sociability, an interpersonal dimension of religious living that is reflected both in "human nature"

and in the "nature of religion". Religious persons exist with one another in a "continuous reciprocity" and seek from childhood on to "to communicate these intuitions and feelings" to one another (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 73). In this "free sociability of religion", each "steps forth to present [their] own intuition as object for the rest" and "to implant [their] holy feelings in them". And each in turn, in mutual communication, "expresses the universe" (Schleiermacher 1996, pp. 75–76). In Schleiermacher's own succinct formulation: "Once there is religion, it must necessarily also be social" (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 73).

Already in the first edition of his *Speeches*, then, Schleiermacher develops the emphasis on "free sociability" that will characterize his later mature philosophical and theological writings (cf. Moxter 2023). With this "principle of religious sociability", religious piety is not "merely a private affair of the individual", but religious feeling and intuitions unfailingly give rise to communication (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 77). In consequence, religion has a necessarily "social drive", and each community forms its own "social institutions" that aim at shaping and mediating the mutual "communication of religion" (Schleiermacher 1996, pp. 92, 72). "The more each person approaches the universe", Schleiermacher writes, "the more he communicates himself to others", with each "going out beyond themselves" (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 94).

In this respect, the open and pious heart that reflects the interior and affective dimension of faith has its place in a fully social life (cf. Schleiermacher 2014, p. 57). It is endowed with an "effusive and accomplished . . . sociability" that "realizes itself in the whole" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 154). This "wholly different form of sociability" (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 79), in turn, highlights both the diverse forms of individuality and the interdependency of human living. As Schleiermacher writes in the 1806 edition, "all humanity is interwoven with one another and made dependent on one another" and "every individual is . . . a necessary supplement to the perfect intuition of humanity" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 201).[15] Such a view offers a clear contrast not only with notions of privatized individual piety but also with universalized conceptions of individual persons as being "really all the same" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 201), the "old desire" of the enlightened, "to have humanity everywhere cut out of one, ever recurring piece" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 211).

Through aiming to depict what is particular in religion, then, in his descriptions of the character of religious feeling and intuition, Schleiermacher does not establish religion as a timeless or ahistorical principle but emphasizes the seemingly endless and infinite variety of its historical expressions and manifestations. In this respect, he maintains, "religious people are thoroughly historical" (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 112). Where Hegel related religion only to the prior inwardness of subjectivity, arguing that "what is historical is not religion" (Hegel 2019, p. 480), Schleiermacher contends that "religion begins and ends with history" and that history is "the highest object of religion in the most proper sense" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 205).

4. The Dialogical Form of the *Speeches*

"Communication of religion cannot be other than rhetorical" (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 26).

These considerations of the critical approach in the *Speeches,* and of the associated social and historical dimensions of feeling and intuition, serve in turn to illuminate the distinctive features of work's unique style. The text's rhetorical form, conversational addresses to an audience of educated peers, closely matches its conceptual content. It serves as a performative example of religious communication, an ordered expression of religious feelings and intuitions. In such an approach, it differs sharply from the mode of an academic lecture or from speculative or theoretical treatises that would begin with a fixed definition of religion or establish a set of foundational concepts or principles. Yet it also contrasts with other creative forms of writing, such as Schleiermacher's *Monologen*, or *Soliloquies*, which were written one year later in 1800 and present the extended self-reflection of a mind's conversation with itself.[16] The *Speeches* takes up an unmistakably dialogical and interrogative form that proceeds by addressing the perceived assumptions and questions

of its audience of "cultured despisers", providing examples and illustrations that challenge their preconceptions and invite them to deepened reflection and contemplation, circling back to respond to potential objections or criticisms, and gradually narrowing towards a consideration of the "essence", or the distinguishing characteristic, of religion and the unceasing variety of its historical expressions (Korsch 2023, pp. 446–48).[17]

In this fashion, the *Speeches* does not seek to impart knowledge about religion or convince its audience by means of a philosophical argument but to stimulate a critical response: "all communication of religion cannot be other than rhetorical" (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 22). The text aims to lead the reader to the practice of "contemplation", to recognize in their own person the "stirring of religion" or "quiet longing", a sense of how "our own self is universally surrounded by the infinite" (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 63; cf. Lamm 2021, pp. 210–12). This interpersonal and rhetorical character of the *Speeches*, and its orientation to the specific concerns of its immediate audience, is difficult to overlook.[18] It reflects a clear oral and communicative dimension that intends to engage and elicit a particular response from its readers, communicating Schleiermacher's understanding of his own piety, and in so doing stimulating reflection on religious piety, freedom, and social living. The work contours the "flow" and "movement" of religion within a fully human life, which itself is always dialogical and social (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 55; cf. Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 39–40). The form and style of the *Speeches*, therefore, as engaged in the actual process of communication, bears a fundamental relation to the substance of its argument (Korsch 2023, p. 444).

This oscillating movement of religion is, for Schleiermacher, a central feature of any well-formed human life. "A person is born with the religious capacity as with any other", he writes, "and if only his sense . . . is not blocked or barricaded, then religion would have to develop unerringly in each person" (Schleiermacher 1996, p. 59; cf. Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 38–41). Each person has a basic capability for religious communication, and the expressions and utterances of religious sensibilities provoke or arouse others to articulate and disclose their own accompanying feelings and intuitions of the world. At the same time, religion also remains always and everywhere a historical phenomenon, and its expressions vary widely according to historical context and circumstance.

Underlying the presentation of the *Speeches*, in this sense, is not a foundationalist theory of religion as such but an understanding of religion as fundamentally oriented towards the practice of communication, thematized and brought to consciousness in the lively exchange of discourse and language. The peculiar status of religious communication serves to mediate between the individuality and sociality of human living, bringing to language the various ways in which a person meaningfully grasps and expresses their relation to the whole. The seemingly infinite variety of expressions of existing historical religions, and the developing social institutions that struggle to bind and stabilize them, serve then to indicate particular fields of ongoing religious communication. In this sense, as more recent interpreters have suggested, the *Speeches* sketch an account of religious communication that in important respects anticipates the later treatments of religion developed by Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann (Korsch 2023, p. 446; Gräb 2023, p. 673; cf. Habermas 2022, pp. 428–67). Notably, Habermas, in his 2022 *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, highlights Schleiermacher's significance on just this point, as a language theorist whose thought is foundationally important for understanding the influence of religion in shaping modern public discourse. Habermas objects, however, to the transcendental analysis of subjectivity that Schleiermacher develops in his philosophical and theological writings (Habermas 2022, pp. 428–67).[19]

Accordingly, and in spite of repeated language of "essence" and "nature", the *Speeches* do not present an essentialist account of religion but fashion a framework for critical inquiry into religion that presumes change and development over time, one that continually refines its categories and corrects conceptual tools and assumptions. The first edition of the text itself reflects the shifting role of religion within a specific historical situation, shaped both by the rapid social and political transitions that followed the French Revolutionary Wars

and by the emerging "public sphere" of reasoned debate and critique that found concrete expression in the bourgeois salon culture of Berlin (cf. Aaslestad and Hagemann 2006; Junker-Kenny 2022b). However, in its subsequent editions Schleiermacher noted that if he were to begin such a work again, he would need to take up a notably different set of questions and assumptions and address the work to a new audience.[20] In the preface to the 1821 edition, for example, written in the wake of the Wars of Liberation and amidst the German Religious Awakening (*Erweckungsbewegung*) and the Restoration movement, he noted that religion's educated and "cultured despisers" were increasingly hard to find, with superstitious "slaves to biblical literalism" taking their place (Schleiermacher 1821, p. xiv; cf. Kloes 2019, p. 80; Vander Schel 2023).

5. Conclusions

This short description of the novel critical inquiry into religion pursued in the *Speeches* signals several important implications for situating Schleiermacher's work within the developing discourse on religion in German Idealism and German Romanticism. It first of all indicates that the modern category of religion was both firmly established and frequently contested at the time of the text's publication. The structure and enterprise of the *Speeches* itself presumes the modern discussion of the concept of religion, so much so that the topic has become tiresome for educated contemporaries. As Friedrich Schlegel notes in his anonymous review of the *Speeches*, published in the journal *Athenaeum* in 1799, "Religion . . . [is] one of those things of which our age has lost the concept" (Schlegel 1967, p. 275; quoted in Whistler 2023, p. 242). The epoch-making significance of the *Speeches*, then, lies not in fashioning or constructing a new modern concept of religion but in reinvigorating the debate—already well underway—about the character of religion and its role in emerging social and public discourse.

Viewed in this perspective, the *Speeches* find its place in the context of the emerging Romantic debates concerning religion, which had grown critical of Enlightenment conceptions of universal or natural religion tethered to the dictates of reason and postulates of morality, and which sought to recover the characteristic individuality and particularity of historical religious traditions. Insofar as the text marked a revolution in modern understandings of religion, in its exploration of religious self-consciousness and expression, this is not oriented to purely inward and privatized understandings of religious faith but towards the positive and specific communication and expressions of religion. Contrary to later interpretations of the text as a retreat from historical or rational reflection, the *Speeches* illustrates a posture of ongoing critical and comparative inquiry into existing religious traditions and the dynamics of religious reflection in human communication. And, at least in this respect, later developments in the academic study of religion that have moved towards greater critical and historical research have not advanced beyond Schleiermacher's legacy but lie yet within it.

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Notes

1 As Michael J. Lesley has argued, however, it was first Johann Salomo Semler, rather than Schleiermacher, who played the foundational role in establishing the modern concept of religion in modern German theology (cf. Lesley 2023).

2 The interpretation of Schleiermacher as originating a theology of subjective feeling resurfaced, for example, in the Chicago-Yale debate of the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in the works of David Tracy and George Lindbeck (see Jeanrond 1994). Alister McGrath's *Christian Theology: An Introduction* offers a contemporary "textbook" example of Schleiermacher's position: "Schleiermacher argued that religion in general . . . was a matter of feeling" (McGrath 2011, p. 70).

3 In the North American context, as Andrew C. Dole notes, this interpretative tendency not only reflects a selective reading of the text itself but also the emerging politics and anxieties surrounding the study of religion in North American universities, specifically in the polemical concern to distance the discipline of religious studies from scholarship in theology (see Dole 2023, 2008).

4 More recent scholarship on Schleiermacher has been united in its rejection of this view, highlighting the originality and complexity of his argument in the *Speeches*, as well as the work's unique structure in uniting an analysis of individual religious piety to the recognition of religion as a social phenomenon (see, for example, Sockness 2003; Barth 2004; Dole 2008; and cf. also Proudfoot's more nuanced discussion of Schleiermacher's position in Proudfoot 2010). More broadly, a growing number of scholars have highlighted the central role of sociability and the historically and socially mediated character of religious piety in Schleiermacher's thought (see, among others, Sockness 2003; Gräb 2018; Robinson 2019; the essays analysing Schleiermacher's "hermeneutics of culture", in Sockness and Gräb 2010, pp. 273–348). The analysis here has been significantly informed by these works.

5 The challenge of interpreting Schleiermacher's *Speeches* is complicated by the differences, at times significant, between the original 1799 text and revised editions published in 1806 and 1821 (cf. Schleiermacher 2012). Complete English translations are available for the original 1799 text (Schleiermacher 1996) and the 1821 edition (Schleiermacher 1994). From the 1806 edition, only the second speech is available in English (Schleiermacher 2014).

6 On this point, Dietrich Korsch notes: "If we retranslated 'On Religion'—a title that was still quite uncommon in German during that period—as *De religione*, we can see the title as an alternative to the more familiar *De Deo*, 'On God'" (Korsch 2023, p. 434).

7 I am indebted on this point, and throughout this section, to Whistler's analysis of the significance of this *ars characteristica* in his essay "Early German Romanticism and the Characteristics of Religion", in *The Oxford History of Modern German Theology*, vol. I. As Whistler indicates, the *Speeches* marked a "religious turn" in early German Romanticism, which is apparent in publication history of the journal *Athenaeum*.

8 This language of characterization is also retained, however, in revised editions of the *Speeches* (see, for example, Schleiermacher 1994, pp. 90, 109, 128).

9 In this sense, the *Speeches* offer a number of "definitions" of religion, yet each of these again seeks to distinguish or characterize what is particular to religion. In the 1806 edition of the second speech, for instance: "The universe exists in uninterrupted activity, revealing itself to us every moment . . . And so to take up into our life all that is individual as a part of the whole, all that is limited as a presentation of the infinite, and let ourselves be moved by this—this is religion" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 175).

10 This organizational logic is also reflected in Schleiermacher's later *Glaubenslehre*, in the reciprocal relationship of the works first and second parts.

11 Of this elusive unity, Schleiermacher writes: "it is barely in time, it hurries so; it can barely be described, so little is it actually there for us" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 169).

12 See, for examples, Schleiermacher's accompanying "explanations" in the 1821 revision (Schleiermacher 1994).

13 Such language appears in each speech of the 1799 edition (see, for example, Schleiermacher 1996, pp. 58, 68, 69, 77, 95, 104). This use of the language of "intuition" in early Romanticism also reflects the early Romantics' esteem for Plato and a preference for "intuitive forms of reason over discursive ones" (Beiser 2014, p. 37; quoted in Lamm 2021, p. 11, n. 29).

14 Julia Lamm's detailed 2021 study, *Schleiermacher's Plato*, which offers the first careful analysis of the 1806 revision of the *Speeches* in light of Schleiermacher's ongoing work in translating Plato's dialogues, makes an important contribution in this regard, substantially clarifying the subtle distinction and relation of feeling and intuition in Schleiermacher's later works. I am indebted in this section to Lamm's analysis on this point (see Lamm 2021, pp. 187–226).

15 On this point, note also the description of Schleiermacher's "highest intuition" in his *Soliloquies* (Schleiermacher 1988, pp. 17–18; cf. Moxter 2023, p. 156).

16 The *Speeches* also present a marked contrast with the characteristic didactic form of Schleiermacher's later university writings, which he adopted in his *Grundlinien einer Kritik der bisherigen Sittenlehre,* published in 1803, following his exile to Stolpe.

17 On the significance of the uniquely dialogical structure of the *Speeches* and its orientation towards communication, see in particular Korsch's illuminating essay "On Religion" in *The Oxford Handbook of Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Korsch 2023; see also the discussion of dialogical form in Lamm 2021, pp. 227–230; the editor's introduction in Schleiermacher 2014, pp. 38–42).

18 In many cases, Schleiermacher addresses this specific audience directly: "Let's deal honestly with one another. You do not like religion" (Schleiermacher 2014, p. 159).

19 Maureen Junker-Kenny's instructive 2022 monograph *"The Bold Arcs of Salvation History": Faith and Reason in Jürgen Habermas's Reconstruction of the Roots of European Thinking*, offers an extended and critical engagement with Habermas's interpretation of Schleiermacher's contributions to the theory of language and postmetaphysical thinking (see Junker-Kenny 2022a, pp. 202–31, 253–62).

20 In his explanations appended to later editions of the text, Schleiermacher sought to contextualize the historical situation of the first edition in significant detail (see Korsch 2023, p. 455).

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Article

Religion in the Thought of the Young Hegel

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Abstract: Religion is one of the central themes of the young Hegel. This is where intellectual problems arise, the treatment of which led him to discover his speculative way of thinking. Starting in the footsteps of Kant's ethicotheology, Hegel quickly realized that religion cannot be a vehicle for introducing autonomous morality. Under titles such as love and life, he then develops a kind of Spinozist thinking of unification of everything, including the finite and the infinite. However, it turns out that the quasi-divine performance of unity cannot be thought of as such, since thinking is bound to discursive forms of reflection that are always mediated through differences. As soon as the religious performance of unity is to be thought of, it slips away from the form of reflection. This problem can be solved if, on the one hand, the differential form of thinking is brought into a self-application and, on the other hand, difference itself is put into the performance of unity, even if it is named as absolute. The former becomes the nucleus of the figure of negation characteristic for Hegel's speculative thinking; the latter leads to an understanding of the absolute as spirit, which, according to its self-being, which encompasses difference, is always for the other and is known by the other. Religion brings this to mind in the form of imagination, according to Hegel's later concept of religion.

Keywords: religion; reflection; unity; difference; the absolute; immanence; transcendence; spinozism; criticism; spirit

1. Ethico-Theological Beginnings and the Problem of Positivity

As with many other contemporaries who stood out positively as students, the young Hegel went to Tübingen to study theology. From his parents' point of view, he was to pursue a career as a pastor, and the path to the corresponding Württemberg educational institutions was thus marked. In 1788–1793 he was a resident of the Abbey, the most important cadre school of the Württemberg Protestant clergy. In Tübingen, on the one hand, he went through a university education influenced by late orthodoxy, but also by Württemberg pietism. On the other hand, the political events surrounding the French Revolution and the debates on Kant's philosophy also radiated to Tübingen, among others, through younger monastery repetitors.[1] Thus, life-long themes of Hegel's work, such as freedom and critique, became present. They were equally significant for political-social life as well as for conceptual thought. The authoritative patterns of piety, which were omnipresent through the spiritual exercises built into the monastery's daily life, formed a stark contrast. Yet the monastery also opened up one of the most fruitful intellectual constellations through Hegel's parlor companionship with Friedrich Hölderlin and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling. It had a lasting influence on the educational path of all three friends—even and especially through their differences. In addition to the critical debates about the Tübingen educational impulses, great figures of thought from antiquity, modern times, and the present were read and discussed. The confrontation with academic theology took place in the light of Greek classics, but also Spinoza, Rousseau, Lessing and—of course—Kant. Late orthodox theology was perceived in heterodox counter-lights. Religion—which for Hegel was one of the "most important matters of our life" (Hegel 1989k, p. 9)—and its theological doctrines were discussed in contexts of politics and culture.

Without the connections with critical epistemology and social theory, artistic-poetic attempts and practical will to shape social life, the topic of religion cannot be understood in the young Hegel. As is well known, it led him on his intellectual path out of specialized theology into philosophy, from which he then claimed to understand religion in a new and better way than was possible for traditional theology. Tensions and breaks in Hegel's early intellectual concepts of religion led him to seek fundamental reorientations several times, and they finally also led him to the central elements of his later concept of philosophy. The tense relationship of the terms 'reflection' and 'speculation' circumscribes the exits of Hegel's reorientations; the constellation of terms also reveals a central systematic point of transition to the figures decisive for Hegel's later thought.

After his theological exams, Hegel did not go into parish ministry, but worked as a tutor in Bern until 1797. There he began his literary production with meditations on a folk religion, which was supposed to socially integrate moral-religious reason in the hearts of the faithful.[2] It was thoroughly understood along Kantian lines and was to function as an introductory vehicle of the moral law. However, in the context of his elaboration, Hegel comes more and more clearly to the insight that such a program has considerable internal contradictions. Of these, two may be mentioned. On the one hand, the very fact shows that a morality founded in reason autonomy can by no means realize itself autonomously if it requires religion as an aid. Unlike, for example, a "republican" who sets himself an end, "the realization of which depends entirely on him and therefore requires no aid" (Hegel 1989d, p. 196). The good will constituted by the categorical imperative is dependent on external aid if its realization can only be conceived through religious postulates. If it even requires a church as a planting ground, ultimately our religiously based morality of freedom is "built on dependence on the deity" (Hegel 1989d, p. 179). Second, even a moral religion does not escape the problem of 'positivity', which Hegel considered intensively and critically. As Hegel learned from orthodox versions of Christianity, a subordination of the subjective life of faith to 'positive', thus pre-given and counter-objective doctrinal contents is precarious for their self-fulfillment. Doctrinal teaching in its positivity misses its goal, the living out of faith. This is also true if the doctrinal content—as in the case of the morality of Kantian provenance linked by Jesus to his person (cf., on this motif, Hegel 1989b, pp. 205–79)—is supposed to be correct as a liberal one. Via morality and its ethico-theological conceptualization in the teaching of Jesus authenticated by his life, Hegel addresses the dilemma of the 'positivity' of concepts, which themselves as practical concepts precisely do not pass over into the consummation of their content. The critique of the folk-pedagogical moral religion and its positivity thus reveals a fundamental problem of thought. Even the "positive moral concept" standardizing the subjective living will may be capable of "losing the character of positivity when the activity it expresses is itself developed and acquires power" (Hegel 1989i, p. 6). But as a mere concept, it is precisely incapable of developing that activity as such and of giving it the power of self-actualization. This is all the more true when the moral concept takes the form of an imperative. Rather, it reinforces the structural difference in relation to its execution (cf. Dierken 1996).

2. Unification in the Mode of Feeling and Conception and the Problem of Reflection

In view of these breaks in the Kantian conception of an ethical theology orchestrated by popular religion, Hegel searches for more comprehensive figures of thought. His mental experiments lead him to the motifs of a far-reaching unification thought (cf. Timm 1979). The keyword 'unification', which already appears in a tentative form in texts from the Bern period, marks the thematic center of Hegel's texts on the philosophy of religion from the following Frankfurt years from 1797, in which he again came into close exchange with Hölderlin (cf. Jamme 1983). Hegel's meditations on love, life, and religion, originally written in Bern but then revised in Frankfurt, revolve around a concept of the "union of subject and object, freedom and nature, the real and the possible" (Hegel 1989j, p. 9). Hegel finds the key to such a program of unification, which can hardly be surpassed in its breadth of content, in love. In this way, he follows up on the motif that had already emerged earlier,

namely that man "finds himself in the other" in love—which is analogous to reason and, from its empirical character, leads into an "intelligible world" (Hegel 1989a, p. 30). Love, as the center of the subjective consummations of religion, opens up a dynamic of unification in the intersubjective that still encompasses the empirical and intelligible world. In Hegel's intellectual development, the unification motif soon assumes a central position. 'Love', then 'life', and finally 'spirit' are considered conceptual dressings of this motif in the further stages of his philosophical development. In order to understand it more precisely, however, the subjective-mental forms, which are claimed in these dressings, have to be considered as well. In particular, this concerns feeling and intuition—forms that Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher focuses on in his early 'Speeches' *On Religion* of 1799 (cf. Schleiermacher 1984b).[3] The ability to conceptually capture the unification motif and these forms confronts Hegel in an increasingly subtle way with the problem of reflection: in the attempt to think unification as such and to grasp it in conceptual form, it is measured precisely against something else and lets it slip away as such. In its conceptual determination, unification is thus measured against the negative foil of difference.

If the center of Hegel's religious unification thought is marked by an aesthetically imagined morality, this is not exhausted in an imperative, but coincides with the connection between subjectivity and sociality. Hegel can therefore parallel morality with the happening of love. Such love is "nothing 'limited' or 'finite'"; rather, an inner infinity dimension is inherent in it (Hegel 1989m, p. 84). Therefore, love is not "reason" or "understanding," whose synthesis is always accompanied by a determining negation, but "a feeling" (ibid.). The feeling (*Gefühl*) stands for the inner infinity of love. This infinity corresponds to a dynamic of inner dissolution of boundaries of feeling that subverts differences of self and other. Behind the multiplicity of individual feelings, there is ultimately a whole. Hegel describes it with the concept of life, which is found in love itself: "True union, real love, takes place only among living beings" (op. cit.). Love becomes an organ of the process of life, which is mentally always already presupposed and claimed in every act of love: the processuality of life appears in the happening of love—and *vice versa*. Since this reciprocal relation is, for Hegel, the inner structure of reality, it has an ineluctable, as it were absolute character. Its intersubjectivity congrues with the synthesis of subject and object, freedom, and nature (cf. Hegel 1989j, p. 8f). Therefore, for Hegel, it is 'being' and has a divine status. Although religion as the consummation of love is the ultimate unity of life, it is presented in a roundabout way via a divine object: through "imagination" a "divinity" is brought forth, which becomes the "object of every religion" as an "ideal" (op. cit.). This brings up the problem that even the divine, if it is somehow represented or imagined, assumes the status of an objective counter-state in relation to the subjective consummation of unification in the religion of love and life. The divine thus falls into the clutches of the reflection distinction that sets it apart from everything else. Between the reality and the representation of divinized union steps the difference of reflection. With this, however, the divine is no longer what it was first intended to be: the whole. Hegel attempts to circumvent this problem by means of the form of feeling, insofar as it subverts any determining difference. In feeling, form and content, subject and object are actual indistinguishable. Therefore, feeling functions for a thinking of unification, for which the absolute becomes the epitome of all-embracing unity in acts of life and love. Intuition (*Anschauung*), too, can be understood in the sign of such dissolution of boundaries. Already in the poem *Eleusis of* 1796, addressed to Hölderlin, Hegel describes that sense, i.e., the sensual, is lost in "Anschaun": "What I called mine fades away,/I give myself to the immeasurable there,/I am in it, am everything, am only it" (Hegel 1989e, p. 400). Intuition as well as feeling carry a non-theistic religiosity of the all-one life, which is present in manifold modifications and is found again in their love events. The conceptual characteristic of this—*cum grano salis*: Spinozistic—religiosity is, however, that the principles of the living all-unity elude the concept.

This antinomy is increasingly elaborated in Hegel's further Frankfurt writings, but not overcome. In the probably most important fragments of the philosophy of religion of the pre-speculative Hegel, which were collected and became known under the title *Geist*

des Christentum und sein Schicksal (*Spirit of Christianity and its Destiny*),[4] the conceptuality of life and love is further enriched by beauty and image as well as spirit and figure. The divine is imagined in images as the beautiful, and it is the spirit which is contemplated in figures. Through both, a pattern of imagining emerges that will later shape Hegel's understanding of the religious. At the same time, however, the "oneness with God" remains to the "intellect... the most incomprehensible thing"—just as, conversely, "the distance from God" is incomprehensible to the mind (Hegel 1989c, p. 273). The mystical participation, as it were, and union with the Godhead does not succeed through mental faculties close to the concept, but is connected with the 'mind' and its love-performances. In this, feeling and intuition play a role. "To love God is to feel oneself boundless in the infinite in the all of life" (Hegel 1989d, p. 231); love is the "feeling of life that finds itself again" (Hegel 1989d, p. 196). The "life looked at again" that returns to itself from fateful disunion also stands for such an inner arc of re-reference (Hegel 1989d, p. 195). However, these pre- and post-reflexive unities of feeling and intuition show fine fissures and cracks. Feeling, as can be guessed from the longing for what is lost, can also announce itself in the negative of the "loss of life" (op. cit.), and intuition fixes its image, at least momentarily. Exemplarily, the Lord's Supper shows for Hegel that the beheld elements remain mere bread and mere wine, and precisely do not make the divine present through the negation of their external form in sensual appropriation. The unification of "intuition and feeling" in the "imagination" is thwarted by the isolated objectivity of host and chalice: bread and wine looked at and enjoyed "cannot awaken the sensation of love," and the "feeling [...of] really taking in" such "looked at objects" contradicts itself in the process of their "becoming subjective" (Hegel 1989d, p. 243). In the end, it remains with the hiatus of "reality and spirit" (Hegel 1989h, p. 325). This hiatus has its reason in the insurmountable reflection: it "separates" life and must "distinguish it into the infinite and the finite"; "outside of life, in truth," this separation does not take place (Hegel 1989g, p. 260). If with this figure of thought, meant as a critique of reflection, truth is located in the outside of life, a distinction of reflection is thereby already claimed. This has the consequence that the "connection of the infinite and the finite" designated as "life itself" becomes a "mystery" (op. cit.)—and thus again the other of reflection.

Towards the end of his Frankfurt period, Hegel therefore no longer considered intuition and feeling as specific forms for the divine all-unity. They also do not visualize the consummation *of* unity *as* unity. Thus, these forms come into a structural parallel to the thought-reflection form and participate in its problem of presenting unity in forms of difference, although intuition and feeling were supposed to undermine precisely the reflection principle of distinction in the pre- or post-reflexive immediacy of their happening-actuality. In the so-called *System Fragment of 1800*[5] (cf. Hegel 1989l, pp. 339–48), Hegel explicitly connects feeling with reflection, while intuition recedes. "Divine feeling, the infinite felt by the finite, is only completed by the fact that reflection is added" (Hegel 1989l, p. 345). But the "dwell[ing]" above the feeling reflection is only a "recognition of the same [sc. the feeling] as a subjective" (ibid.). Thus, for reflection, the opposition of the subjectivity of feeling against the objectivity of its infinite, divine content reappears. Consequently, Hegel now assigns to reflection the task of paving the way to the infinite. This is made possible by an infinite "all of life" that also encompasses the finite (Hegel 1989l, p. 343). For its path to the infinite, however, reflection now has, on the one hand, to "show finitude" in all that is "finite" in a kind of negative dialectic (Hegel 1989l, p. 345). Alongside this figure, which contains the nucleus of Hegel's subsequent methodology of immanent critique, there is, on the other hand, a positing of the infinite through the reflective procedure of opposition. However, the infinite posited in this sense—and be it also thematic in a Spinozist sense as nature or God—has "for reflection" only one character: namely, "that it is a being apart from reflection" (Hegel 1989l, p. 344). It is *for reflection-beyond* reflection. Hegel has not yet gained the insight of speculation, leading into the connection of both figures of reflection in a logic of the self-referentiality of reflection. Therefore, this divine-absolute remains intangible for his mental reflection. Only religion could 'lift' it out of the mortal and transient in some

'elevation' of man to the infinite and call it God. Since reflection knows life only as iterating progress of "connection of connection and non-connection" (Hegel 1989l, p. 343), religion must be lifted above reflection and philosophy must consequently cease with religion. In view of the already seen aporetics of feeling and intuition as forms of religion, and in view of their opposition to all reflection, this religion together with its God, of course, loses itself in abstraction. Reflection, however, does not fare any better in its antinomy: it exhausts itself in infinite but empty iteration, and nevertheless remains finite in its opposition.

In his system sketch, Hegel does not succeed in thinking together the supporting basic concept of life with its differentiation to nature and individuation through reflection. And as little as he can connect the concept of life with the mental operation of reflection, little is he able to bring the opposite forms of reflection, i.e., differentiation and difference of differentiation as self-application, into a transparent connection. He succeeds in this only with the elaboration of the speculative form of thought, which is introduced into a new system sketch. For both, however, the mental preconditions are ready.

3. Self-Construction of the Absolute by Systematic-Speculative Reason and Religious Faith

Already in 1801, immediately after his transition to Jena and in a renewed discourse with Schelling, Hegel confronts the unacknowledged aporetics of his earlier theories of religion by criticizing the culture of reflection of the "Western North[s]" (Hegel 1968a, p. 14)[6] with the help of a speculative concept of the absolute. The *Differenzschrift*, in which Hegel appears, as it were, as a partisan of Schelling in the literary public sphere, understands religion as an element of the "view of the self-forming, or objectively finding Absolute" (Hegel 1968a, p. 75). This formula describes the conclusion of a sketch of a new system[7] through the figures of art and speculation, whereby religion is subordinated to art. Whereas in art and religion the unconscious predominates, it is in speculation that intuition of the absolute appears more in the form of the activity of consciousness. However, the difference of art and religion on the one hand and of speculation on the other hand consumes itself, insofar as in both also their respective opposite is set. Therefore, both "art and speculation... are in their essence the service of God; both (are) a living intuition of absolute life, and thus a unity with it" (Hegel 1968a, p. 76). In this substance-metaphysical formula at the end of the system sketch, religion takes a double position: while at one time it stands metaphorically as aesthetic-speculative 'worship' for the whole of the intuition of the absolute that is identical with the absolute itself, at another time religion in a narrower sense is only a moment assigned to art.[8]

The precondition of such a systematic conclusion is the overcoming of the point of view of reflection in philosophical-speculative reason. It allows Hegel "to construct the absolute in consciousness" (Hegel 1968a, p. 9). Already from this it is evident that the concept of the absolute, which is in the inheritance of the former concept of life, does not mean something detached. It is not about a supramundane-otherworldly God. Rather, the Spinozistic character of the former 'life' remains. Already for this reason the construction of the absolute in consciousness cannot be a simple act of production of consciousness, on which the absolute would remain dependent as a law. Its construction in consciousness is therefore likewise presented by Hegel as a "self-construction of the absolute" (Hegel 1968a, p. 92), in which consciousness is, as it were, co-constructed *eodem actu.* This occurs, however, in a way that is grounded in the self-activity of consciousness as cognition and action. Hegel unmistakably ironizes the contrary assumption, according to which the absolute presents itself to consciousness in such a way that it "gives itself entirely to the passivity of thought, which need only open its mouth" (Hegel 1968a, p. 85f). This absolute would have to prepare itself, as it were, independently of consciousness "already for itself to a true and known" (Hegel 1968b, p. 107)—a nonsensical thought for a consciousness- and subjectivity-theoretical thinking. Thus, the activity of the consciousness of reason is not merely a passive organ of the absolute, but in its execution, it produces the absolute as—by virtue of its self-construction—precisely a non-produced thing. In this 'as' negative-

dialectical consciousness and speculative self-construction of the absolute coincide: both are related to each other and fundamentally form an interrelation.[9] The self-construction of the absolute mediated by reason and consciousness can be traced, on the one hand, through the inner structure of consciousness; on the other hand, it corresponds with the systemic form increasingly determining Hegel's thought, which encompasses consciousness in relation to its possible objects. How both the structure of consciousness and its possible object relations relate to the construction of the absolute finally becomes the topic of the system's conclusion.

In view of the consciousness-performativity, the most important innovation of the *Differenzschrift* is that the moment of difference in the reflective activity is becoming linked with the moment of consciousness referring back to itself, so that in such self-reference it comes to a difference against the reflection-difference. This backward-referential self-application of the moment of reflection-difference is the elementary structure of self-referential negation, or in other words: the negation of negation as an operative basic figure. In the view of the absolute, this negation-dialectical structure shows itself insofar as reason "produces" the absolute by "liberating consciousness from its limitations" (Hegel 1968a, p. 15). It recognizes itself in its contents, and it grasps that this connection is not arbitrary, but constitutes reality. The absolute also stands for this. Reason, through its self-referential negation in the self-knowledge of the limitations of consciousness, which also includes the difference of form and content, precisely through its instrument, reflection, "becomes capable of grasping the absolute" (Hegel 1968a, p. 16), insofar as reflection "makes itself its object" (Hegel 1968a, p. 18), abolishes itself in its difference to the absolute through its own principle of negation, and thus becomes reason itself. Simply put: it must "give itself the law of self-destruction" (op. cit.)—thus negating that which is separated by itself, that is, annulling it by a kind of separation of the separating. Thereby, the reflection of the understanding becomes reason, and reason becomes speculation by grasping the inner, logical concurrence of the two completions of negation. By "daring" the "finitudes of consciousness" by their inner negation to it, reason becomes the speculation united with the absolute. The overcoming of the finitudes of consciousness is precisely that construction of the absolute in consciousness, and reason, holding both sides of this process together, "rises to speculation, and in the groundlessness of limitations... has grasped its own grounding in itself" (Hegel 1968a, p. 9). It is precisely this insight into this groundlessness that is the self-grounding of the absolute grasped in speculative reason.

However, it is not yet the foundation of the system in a self-supporting whole. For it has indeed been shown how the reflection or difference of consciousness can be annulled by self-application; and it has been shown that this is an in itself founding, *cum grano salis*: autonomous process, which, for that very reason, agrees with the absolute, in itself founding. But consciousness and its reflection appear, as it were, as something given to the absolute—divisiveness, according to Hegel, must already be there for the need for philosophy to arise at all—and the absolute shows itself in the law of reason of 'self-destruction' through reflection only as a force of negation vis-à-vis consciousness-reflection, which for its part negates unity with the absolute. According to Hegel, this force is only "the force of the negative absolute" (Hegel 1968a, p. 16). Without reflection difference, without the finiteness of consciousness, the absolute would be only an empty self-completion.

Hegel fends off this problem of abstraction in the absolute by placing intuition at the side of reflection and connecting both in the form of a transcendental knowledge. However, intuition as the "positive side of knowledge" (Hegel 1968a, p. 30) is not an empirical one; through its connection with reflection, it acquires the ability to "synthesize opposites" (Hegel 1968a, p. 30). Thus, transcendental knowledge deals not only with concept, consciousness, and intelligence as elements of the ideal world, but also with being, unconsciousness, and nature as elements of the real world. It is thus concerned with the content side of knowledge, for which Hegel takes up the Schellingian motif that consciousness reconstructs itself through the real. Thus, transcendental knowledge becomes the "objective totality" and the sphere of necessity (Hegel 1968a, p. 31), which is

supposed to correspond to the sphere of freedom and the subjective. Thus, the system's thought is in focus. It stands for the fact that the absolute "sets itself in appearance" and consequently does not "annihilate" it, but "construct[s] it into identity" (Hegel 1968a, p. 36). In the background of this motif is the thought of Schelling, to which Hegel is completely committed in *Differenzschrift*. He defends it against philosophizing according to the principles of the early Fichte. The latter only arrives at a subjective subject-object, so the artificial language borrowed from Schelling for Fichte's consistent departure from the ego, which seeks to catch up with its setting through the natural and social world itself, which is co-established and geneticized by it. Schelling, on the other hand, according to Hegel, proposes both an objective and subjective subject-object. The reciprocal polarity of nature and morality, of theoretical and practical philosophy, manifests a twofold original identity of the absolute and reconstructs its ultimate indifference. The details of this intricate conception must be left to themselves here. But from Hegel's account, a not unimportant shift in emphasis from Schelling becomes apparent: namely, a primacy of the subjective side in polarity; it provides for constructive tensions in the system. It is true that the absolute as a "point of indifference encloses both in itself", gives birth to both and at the same time "itself out of both" (Hegel 1968a, p. 77). But the claimed equal originality of identity and difference is relativized by the fact that "philosophy" leaves its right to the "separation" by setting its equal absolute with the "identity"—with which both stand at the same time in relation to philosophical thinking (Hegel 1968a, p. 79). Corresponding to this is that the "absolute itself" is, according to the famous program formula, "the identity of identity and non-identity"; "opposition and oneness are at the same time in it" (op. cit.). However, this identity or its 'is' are borrowed from philosophy. The absolute remains related to the logicality of its consciousness.

The tensions in the system are also evident in its conclusion. Hegel explicates over many stages how the objective and the subjective subject-object inversely correspond and mutually unlock each other. Transcendental and natural philosophy are supposed to hold each other in reciprocal balance as totals. But the abolition of their difference into the indifference of the absolute takes place by reflecting on their character of knowledge and science. This "view," however, is "only negative," and it does not come to the "absolute point of indifference" in which both forms are "annihilated by the fact that, united, they both exist" (Hegel 1968b, p. 93). The "original identity", on the other hand, must "unite both in the view of the absolute becoming itself objective in completed totality, in the view of the eternal incarnation of God, the witnessing of the Word from the beginning" (Hegel 1968b, p. 94). For this view, Hegel recurs to the central Christian theological motif of the incarnation of God. However, it is, strictly speaking, not a direct self-view of the absolute. It takes place for the resolution of the system—in a certain demarcation from Schelling—rather through the polarity of art and speculation as the last, dialectical complexity encompassing and reducing forms of consciousness and knowledge. For their polarity is to represent the conclusion of the system.

As already indicated, the third limb of Hegel's later system's conclusion figures religion, with its inner faith contents, as assigned to art as a dependent moment—as much as the religious motif of God's incarnation guides the system-concluding view of the absolute. The downgrading of religion to a dependent moment of art has—beyond the Schellingian influence—a systematic reason. For Hegel has come to the insight that the primary subjective form of religion, faith, is an ambivalent and fractured form of consciousness. In this, the problem of reflection is ultimately not overcome, but perpetuated unrecognized. Therefore, in the system sketch of the *Differenzschrift*, religion enters into the cultic figure of a "Gottesdienst[es]" (worship) that is performed philosophically, as it were, namely through art and speculation (Hegel 1968a, p. 94). This can be described almost mystically as "living intuition of absolute life, and thus oneness with it" (op. cit.). The philosophical cultus inherits and surpasses, as it were, that of religion and its faith.

In this philosophical cultus, speculation ultimately prevails, despite the fundamentally emphasized polarity of it and art. In this asymmetry, the peculiarity of the subjective

human consciousness in the context of the system conclusion is subcutaneously brought to bear. In its fine structure, art stands for the side of the unconscious and of being in this view of the absolute; speculation, on the other hand, stands for consciousness and becoming. The outstanding unity of both, however, is asymmetrically accomplished only on the part of speculation, in that the latter [knows] how to take for itself the "preponderance which consciousness has in it" (op. cit.). This, however, is done most indirectly, namely, by positing becoming and being, freedom and nature "as the original absolute being," more precisely: presupposing it—a being that "can only become insofar as it is" (op. cit.). But this original absolute being is no longer available to speculation itself. It recognizes itself as a side of the absolute, which as transcendental philosophy also deals with the knowledge of nature, but precisely not with nature as nature. And it has the absolute in that it knows about its inner "limit," recognizing its "incapacity" to "abolish itself through itself..." (Hegel 1968b, p. 95). In this knowledge of its limits is preserved, *cum grano salis*, a criticalist motif. Hegel reinforces this when he concludes by having the intellectual intuition (*intellektuelle Anschaung*) of the absolute occur in the duplicity of a subjective and an objective transcendental view, thus combining not only a rhetorical homage to Schelling, but now also to Fichte. Both intuitions are antinomical to each other and yet are set *eodem actu* in the absolute. This can only be done by speculative reason encompassing the reflection of reflection. Nevertheless, such reason itself remains antinomic. For it considers the unification of the members of the antinomy as truth and thus stands in contrast to simple reflection, which sees only contradiction in the antinomy. And yet, in this "truth" as "absolute[m] contradiction" only "both are set and both are annihilated," it is "neither both, and both at the same time" (Hegel 1968b, p. 96).

Thus, the conclusion of the system sketch proves that the system is just not concludable. Just when the absolute and consciousness are speculatively thought together, their difference shows. It can be thematized on the side of the absolute as well as on the side of consciousness. The latter is the case when consciousness explicates the absolute in the forms of the conditioned and in the knowledge of its limitations. For this, the absolute is the inner ground of possibility. By standing for the coherence of absolute and explication under the conditions of the conditioned in such activity of consciousness, the absolute itself comes into difference with respect to its self-identity.

Hegel's new conception of speculative knowledge enables him, in principle, to explicate the content of religion, which he had earlier named with the keyword 'unification', without exposing it to the aporias of the difference of reflection. But the speculative transformation is also accompanied by a critique of the form of religious consciousness as faith. As already indicated, according to Hegel's analysis in the *Differenzschrift,* faith is a "relation of limitedness to the absolute" in which "only the opposition (*Entgegensetzung*) [is] in consciousness, whereas there is a complete lack of consciousness about identity" (Hegel 1968a, p. 21). Faith is a "relation of reflection to the absolute," which describes the divine only in the form of an object and sees in a speculative abolition of the opposition between it and the absolute only a "destruction of the divine" (op. cit.). Nevertheless, faith is not merely opposed to the absolute. As "immediate certainty," it is in fact also "identity itself" and therefore "reason" (op. cit.). The absolute certainty is nothing other than the absolute itself, accomplished at the place of human subjectivity. But it is this only, conscious and formless. Therefore, it is not able to recognize its character itself. What is recognized on its ground remains "accompanied by the consciousness of opposition"—and thus undermines certainty (op. cit.). Although faith claims to be certainty of God and thus undermines the difference of consciousness, this difference reappears the moment faith expresses God in the form of a representational object. If the consummation of certainty wants to form a knowledge of this consummation, the consequence is to transfer the religious consciousness of God into a speculative unity with the philosophically conceived absolute. This requires a momentary negation of the form of consciousness of faith. Through it, the self-referentiality of religious consciousness becomes comprehensible as it is founded in the absolute, which for its part is self-referential. Without that negation, consequently on the fixed state of

consciousness, the difference of the consummation of absolute certainty and the knowledge of the consummation of the absolute achieved by Hegel cannot be conveyed. This is the religion-theoretical consequence of the transfer of the reflection opposition into speculative reason. This is the nucleus for Hegel's later philosophy of religion's characteristic theorem of the so-called *Aufhebung der religiösen Vorstellung in den philosophischen Begriff*, that is, lifting of the religious concept into the philosophical concept.

The theological consequence of religion is accompanied by a theo-logical one. If the religious God-consciousness must be negated in the form of faith, so that the absolute can be adequately grasped, then also the God presented by this consciousness in the form of reflection is to be negated for the sake of the absolute. For the God of religious consciousness is not the absolute. From the reflection as form of the religious faith consciousness also the religiously in form of an object thematic God is concerned. Therefore, it is necessary to abolish the God imagined in representational objectivity into the speculatively conceived absolute. The conceptual pattern for this lies ready in the figure of the self-construction of the absolute in knowledge, which negates with the religious God-consciousness in the form of faith also the religiously objectified God. However, Hegel's speculative theory of the absolute does not content itself with this religion-critical result. Due to the fact that it can be described as 'religion' in the broader sense of the philosophical cultus of the incarnation of God itself, it is later able to give a philosophical existence to religion in a narrower sense as well. But for this, systematically, at least two consequences of Hegel's concept still have to be unfolded. One consists in the fact that via the antinomy in the system conclusion in the relation of intuition and reflection, of transcendental and natural philosophy, the always at least momentarily occurring asymmetry in the relation of consciousness and absolute is caught up in thought. Thus, in a certain inheritance of Kantian criticalism, the perspectivity of consciousness is marked in its peculiarity *sub specie of* the absolute: this is the absolute precisely for consciousness, its being-for-itself is not absorbed by the absolute—without prejudice to the figure of 'self-destruction' or negation. However, this requires—and this is the other consequence of Hegel's concept—that in the absolute itself difference becomes thematic. This is, in substance, already connected to the reflection of reflection—in which the figure of the negation of negation resides—as an element of the self-construction of the absolute. But difference also wants to be set at the place of the self-reference of the absolute. The difference in the absolute is accompanied by the fact that it is not exhausted in the mere being-for-itself. Rather, it is as itself also for others: namely for consciousness, for whose being-for-itself the absolute is also as other. Exactly this is the basic figure of the spirit: a being for oneself and for oneself that is at the same time being for others. It is not difficult to find motives reformulated in it, which were described before with love and life—but remained intellectually uncatchable.

However, in the *Differenzschrift*, Hegel does not—yet—have a conceptual form that allows to explicate the absolute as spirit. Therefore, in the following years in Jena, Hegel experimented with various systematic figures that attempted to conceptually explicate the exposition of the absolute as spirit in the *Differenzschrift.* In the system drafts that emerge in rapid succession but remain unpublished, the architecture of the system is concerned with the question of its conclusion. In this question, the antinomics of the system concept from the *Differenzschrift* is further negotiated. In addition, material from natural and social philosophy is incorporated to an increasingly greater and more complex degree. The fact that Hegel's first major publication is not one of the announced system concepts, however, but the *Phenomenology of Spirit* from 1807[10], may have to do not least with the theme of the certain special position of consciousness and its perspective, which was also already discussed in the *Differenzschrift*. The tension between phenomenology and system that is connected with this can be seen in Hegel's entire path of thought.

4. Incarnation of God versus Reflection Philosophy of Subjectivity—And Hegel's Early Controversy with Schleiermacher

In the following years of Hegel's development, the topic of religion recedes further. Epistemological and natural-theoretical as well as moral and social-philosophical topics are in the foreground. Even before that, religion was only one topic among others, especially from the environment of state and law. Religion, however, remains an object of Hegel's thought, and there are also neitherholt systematic shifts. Hegel did not give prominent attention to the topic of religion again until 1821, at the zenith of his effectiveness in Berlin. Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of religion, which he delivered in Berlin in 1821, 1824, 1827, and 1831 in four different forms, were supposed to be his answer to the understanding of religion as a 'feeling of par excellence dependence on God' of his theological colleague Schleiermacher, which the latter had systematically explicated in his *Glaubenslehre (Doctrine of Faith)*—this is the misleading programmatic formula of Schleiermacher's theological *opus magnum,* published for the first time in 1821/22 (cf. Schleiermacher 1984a; 2nd edition, Schleiermacher 2003).[11] It is misleading because Schleiermacher was also concerned with freedom. The dispute between Kant's heirs, rich in polemics and deliberate misinterpretations, was about dependence versus freedom as the substantive center of the religious, and feeling versus imagination as its mental form (Cf. Dierken 2023). The dispute from the Berlin years had a longer prehistory, which—after Hegel's distancing from his own efforts on feeling and intuition as subjective forms of religion—began in Hegel's Jena years. In *Glauben und Wissen (Faith and Knowledge)* from the *Kritisches Journal der Philosophie* (Critical Journal of Philosophy) of 1802, Hegel included a brief discussion of Schleiermacher's speeches *On Religion* in the section devoted to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, though without explicitly naming the author (cf. Hegel 1968d, pp. 313–414).[12] Schleiermacher, he argues, potentiated Jacobi's principle of a subjectivity that, while alive and infinite in itself, remains in the mode of yearning in relation to an overarching infinite. Thus, the characteristic of recent Protestantism of seeking "reconciliation in this world" (Hegel 1968d, p. 391) is taken to extremes: The divine-infinite is made present by the subjectivity of single individuals, which actually remains in the finite. Thus, the divine-infinite itself becomes a beyond of this world, although it is already claimed in this. Whereas Jacobi's conception of the divine-infinite as an unattainable, other-worldly, and divine Other is a misnomer, Schleiermacher has "torn down the partition between the subject or cognition and the absolute unattainable object" (op. cit.). His beyond is at the same time at his side, his 'universe' does not stand opposite subjective consciousness in its various processes, but rather becomes manifest in these itself. This distinguishes Schleiermacher from Jacobi, who, against Spinozistic consequences, only offers an intuitionistically packaged difference principle of 'faith' in a beyond. In contrast, Schleiermacher knows a "subject-objectivity of the intuition of the universe" (op. cit.). Thus, Hegel basically confirms the speculative character of Schleiermacher's thought—measured against Hegel's own categorical criteria. Schelling's artistic formula of 'subject-objectivity' refers to an absolute that is capable of difference, but at the same time is superior to it, and the intuition related to the universe has a trait of intellectual potentiation—be it in the sense of the intellectual intuition inspired by Kant and Fichte, the execution of which transcends all discursive differences, or in the sense of Spinoza's 'third kind of cognition', which as intellectual love of God completely aligns itself with the inner, as it were, divine principles of the natural world order and completes itself in its immanent morality.

As much as Hegel recognizes the fundamentally speculative character of Schleiermacher's concept, he also sees this as being again undermined in favor of remaining in the this-worldly-finite. While Schleiermacher's alleged "subject-objectivity of intuition" is fundamentally speculative, intuition, however, "remains a special and subjective thing" (Hegel 1968d, p. 391). Schleiermacher ties it back to a rather arbitrary multiplicity of individual religious acts. Their spectrum is characterized by the endpoints of an 'inspiring' religious virtuosity and an arbitrary "atomistic" of responses (Hegel 1968d, pp. 390–2). According to Hegel, by transferring the speculative of his thought into sociological and psychological

figures, Schleiermacher comes up with an inconclusive abundance of asymmetrical—and consequently contingent—constellations that resemble the "figures of a sea of sand exposed to the play of the winds" (op. cit.). The virtuosos accentuated their idiosyncratic particularity by presenting the intuition of the universe in arbitrary-special refractions, and the 'congregations' of the recipients of their effusions each formed their own 'little congregations' in highly fluid formations. Their changing constellations do not reveal a universal shape, but only an infinite series of modifications and remodeling without a general principle. For Hegel, this is the sociological counterpart of religion to the conceptual fact that the intuition of the universe is "made subjective again" (Hegel 1989i, p. 393). For Hegel, Schleiermacher represents a subjectivistically overstretched variant of the reflective-philosophical relation to the absolute, which is characterized by explicating the structure of a final, admittedly always already claimed synthesis, which is named under the title of the absolute, not as such in its consummation and consequently out of it, but only in particular, finite and subjectively broken shadings. In contrast to religiously unbiased faith, which surrenders itself completely to the absolute while losing its reflexive knowledge mystically, as it were, faith tainted by reflection philosophy is precisely a form of consciousness that knows the relationship to the absolute only in the form of difference and forgets the identity claimed for itself—a motif known since Hegel's critique of the form of faith from the *Differenzschrift.* Thus, Schleiermacher remains with a mere "seeking of longing" (op. cit.). The fact that Hegel's critique of Schleiermacher concentrates on the form of intuition, which ostensibly remains in isolation, and ignores the form of feeling, which in Schleiermacher is complementary and preflexively undercuts all differences, reveals how much Hegel's discussion of Schleiermacher is also a self-commentary on his own earlier efforts in the philosophy of religion under the sign of the figures of intuition and feeling.

In his critique of Schleiermacher, Hegel hints at the contours of an alternative he favors. It is a matter of making religious individuality nameable "under the body of an objective representation of great figures" and of transferring its lyrical expression into rememberable "general speech" (Hegel 1968d, p. 392). It is a matter of 'Gestalt' (form) and 'work' and not only of fluid aesthetic-religious consummations. Hegel can even speak of the "objectivity" of a general church linked to the morality of the state (op. cit).[13] Although such turns of phrase also involve a transformation from the objectivism of the old dogmatics, it remains striking that Hegel moves the performance structure (*Vollzugsstrukturen)* of subjective consciousness out of focus. They can be thematized precisely as a moment of the content side of religion, which in an undogmatic sense has as its content the incarnation of God. In the Fichte part of *Glauben und Wissen,* Hegel indicates the outlines of an economic-trinitarian understanding of Christianity as a contrast to and surpassing of the reflective philosophy of subjectivity. According to this, religion contains for finite nature a real redemption, "whose original possibility, the subjective in the original image of God,—its objective, however, the reality in his eternal incarnation,—the identity of that possibility and that reality, however, is resolved by the spirit as the oneness of the subjective with the incarnated God" (Hegel 1968d, p. 407). According to this, the Christian religion itself contains the structure of the spirit, which brings the subjectivity of religious consciousness into unity with the God who became man. This unity, however, is not a difference-free immediacy. Rather, it is about a being-in-the-other of God and man, and *vice versa,* insofar as both have taken up the difference of otherness into their being-in-themselves or being-for-themselves.

With this figure, a symmetry of God and man, of the absolute and his knowledge is basically indicated. It was already conceptually exposed in the philosophical cultus of the system sketch of the *Differenzschrift.* It remains open, even with this symmetry achieved via the content side of religion, how to deal with the perspectival difference of consciousness and content that re-emerges with its articulation, which already showed up in the tensions in the system sketch of the *Differenzschrift.* These tensions determined Hegel's further path of thought in Jena. In addition to the critical writings devoted to the problems of reflection, Hegel devoted himself in Jena above all to the further development

of the system form—and at the same time worked out the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which pursues precisely the constellations of consciousness. We shall examine this next.

5. Tensions in the System and the Absolute as Spirit

In the years after 1801, Hegel worked continuously on the reconstruction of his system conception, in which religion was also assigned its place. The reconstructions virtually amounted to a new conception. However, during this time they did not reach any result that would have been worthy of publication in Hegel's eyes. Instead, a series of critical writings were published in which Hegel applied the methodological arsenal of the negative dialectic of reflection to a wide variety of systematic positions with increasing virtuosity. It is about an immanent critique of the limitation and conditionality of the respective authoritative point of view. The implicit prerequisite is the "idea of philosophy", which allows Hegel to expose with the insight into the conditioned at the same time the subterranean relation to the absolute (cf. Hegel 1968c, pp. 115–94). However, Hegel did not succeed in explicating the absolute in the system form at that time. As is known, the first form of the system appeared only in the Heidelberg period in 1817. The *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in the Compendium*, i.e., the form of the mature system, which in turn was changed in its later editions (cf. Hegel 1989f, 1992), however, did not follow up on the great work at the end of the Jena period: the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, published as the first part of the *System of Science*.[14] This system remained a fragment; further parts did not appear. And the later published system explicitly places the set of topics called 'Phenomenology' only in its third part, the "Philosophy of Spirit". In 1807, on the other hand, the *Phenomenology* was intended to provide an introductory lead-in of consciousness to the speculative system standpoint, not the system in its system form—although the *Phenomenology* of 1807 presents much of the material of systematic natural, social, and spiritual philosophy. The specific method of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, on the other hand, consists over long stretches in the immanent critique of consciousness in relation to its objects. In this it claims at the same time to present the absolute in its appearance—at least 'in itself' or 'for us', the philosophically initiated readers.

With this systematic constellation of critique and construction, of consciousness and absolute, differences to the system requirements of the *Differenzschrift* of 1801 are connected. A further difference is added: the concept of the absolute is no longer described as identity, which admittedly corresponds with non-identity, nor in a reductive approach as indifference, which productively sets two subject-objects out of itself through primal division. Schellingian and, to a certain extent, Hölderlinian inspirations step back, and a pneumatological motif pushes forward in contrast. The absolute is explicitly understood as 'spirit' in *Phenomenology* (Hegel 1980, p. 28). Its being-for-itself consists in being for the spirit, thus being present in the other of itself and thus being mentally consummated through this other as self-knowledge in otherness. This mental consummation is, according to the constitution of consciousness, not without objective representation. Therefore, the absolute appears in the dialectic of consciousness and its objects. The theoretical or natural-philosophical figures contained in it are lifted into practical or social-philosophical constellations and are surpassed by them. Morality becomes the primary element of the spirit, and the subjectivity of consciousness, in its asymmetrical relation to its objects, is transferred into intersubjectivity—which basically tends to symmetrical relations without prejudice to an abundance of permanent newly breaking asymmetries, depending on the degree and form of the naturalness entering into moral relations. Historical power and domination structures, the relations of the sexes and generations, the production and exchange of things, political orders of different interests, for example, can be mentioned here.

Hegel sought to develop for his own systematic conception in the Jena period the preconditions of this new distinction of spirit as a unity of the infinite and the finite, of the absolute and consciousness in manifold alternating relations of selfhood and otherness. The systematic concepts were drafted in the context of his Jena teaching activities and have remained fragments. The early fragments on a *System of Speculative Philosophy,* written

around 1802/03, contain primarily the philosophy of nature and culminate in remarks on the spirit as the summit and turning point of nature (cf. Hegel 1986). The manuscript *Logik, Metaphysik, Naturphilosophie* of 1804 begins, like the mature system of the *Encyclopedia*, with a logic in which the categorial structures of knowledge are presented as such, at least in a rudimentary way (cf. Hegel 1982). The metaphysics that follows includes cognition, objectivity—which, according to Kant's ideas, includes the soul, the world, and the supreme being—and, under the title of subjectivity, basic elements of the philosophy of the ego, consciousness, and spirit. Spinoza's concept of the absolute, standing in self-referential self-preservation, Leibniz's *Monadology*, and the latest subject-theoretical drafts are processed by Hegel in partly enigmatic formulas. The structure of spirit based on the reflection of reflection becomes increasingly recognizable. However, even in the chapter on the absolute spirit, the absolute is not, as in the *Phenomenology* of 1807, the spirit. Conversely, in 1804, "the spirit... is still the absolute" (cf. op. cit., 188). According to the logic of the speculative proposition, in this formulation the predicative absolute determines the spirit, but not, as later, the spirit the absolute. And the spirit is also not an absolute for itself; it does not recognize itself as absolute spirit. This may well be the reason that the 1804 manuscript follows the philosophy of absolute spirit with the philosophy of nature and ends the system with it. In contrast, the manuscripts on the *Philosophy of Nature and Philosophy of mind* of 1805/06 contain the philosophy of nature and the philosophy of spirit (cf. Hegel 1987). The latter includes, as the concept of spirit, the structure of subjectivity as intelligence and will; as real spirit, the social and legal relations of recognition, contract, crime, and law come up; and under 'constitution', basic elements of an estates theory of the state are explicated, followed by the components of the later conclusion of the system in absolute spirit: art, religion, and science. In this final part of the 'Constitution', the spirit brings forth a "world which has the form of itself" (Hegel 1987, p. 253). This is the basic structure of the subsequent absolute spirit, which here was still located in the objective one. The world brought forth by the spirit in spirit-form is also apostrophized as "intuition of itself as itself" (op. cit., 235). Here, Hegel transforms the intellectual intuition of the systematic conclusion of the *Differenzschrift* of 1801. Although intuition in a narrower sense then belongs to art, in 1805/06 the structure of the self-perception of spirit in its absolute form is decisive for all three elements, i.e., also for religion as the incarnation of God into spirit that is remembered and universalized in the conception and finally for science, which here, however, does not include the speculative philosophy of the concept, but world history. This marks a difference from the concept of absolute spirit of the *Phenomenology* that emerged contemporaneously, which articulates the "self-consciousness of spirit" in the forms of religion, art subsumed to religion, and absolute knowledge (cf. Hegel 1980, p. 495). A difference also appears between the draft of 1805/06 and the later system. It corresponds to the earlier Jena draft in the sequence of the forms of the absolute spirit, but separates them from the objective spirit.

The conceptual differences also point to a systematic problem of the later Hegel: namely, the emptiness of content of the system-concluding pure philosophical philosophy, which in fact comprises only a methodological recapitulation of the contents previously explicated in consciousness—or spirit—philosophical dialectics (cf. Hegel 1992, p. 393f). In this, philosophy does follow the principle of reflexive self-penetration of the relationality of all relations determined by differences and opposites. But the price to be paid for this is that in the highest and last explicative form of spirit the difference of otherness fades away. For although the spirit is always supposed to be for the spirit, thus gaining its selfhood in otherness and *vice versa*, paradoxically, in the last form, which corresponds perfectly to the spirit, that difference tends to fall away, on which the difference of the other hangs.

If one wants to draw the systematic consequences from the work-genetic problems and combine this with a proposal for the appropriation of Hegel's thought, there is much to be said for explicating the system as phenomenology—and the spirit in the dialectical relations of consciousness, morality as well as the inner reflexivity of their cultural symbolization, including religion. The absolute spirit becomes thematic in its appearance in the guises

of subjectivity, sociality, and symbolic representation. But such a reverse-speculative phenomenology cannot become a self-supporting whole already in view of its starting point; it needs reformulating, catching up in the system. It only has to be open, in its central transitions as well as in its conclusion. The tensions, which are also found in the system of the mature Hegel, allow such an appropriation aiming at opening. For the systematic foundation of such an appropriation lies in the "highest definition" of the absolute from the system's philosophy of mind: "The absolute is the spirit" (cf. Hegel 1992, p. 29). This might contain a veritable offer to religion in the beginning age of its critique.

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Notes

1 On Hegel's early years, see Vieweg (2019, p. 56ff), Jaeschke (2010, pp. 3–19) on the phases of Hegel's life focused on here (with further lit.). This volume also describes the backgrounds and contexts of Hegel's writings considered below (each with further lit.); the relevant sections are easy to identify.

2 Recent research has shown that the texts of the early Hegel, first published in 1907 by Hermann Nohl under the title 'Theologische Jugendschriften', are in a different chronological order; also, the impression that Hegel was primarily occupied with theological questions is already inaccurate in view of the weight of political studies. Factually, this corresponds to the fact that Hegel discussed the topic of religion early on also from the perspective of its social formations. Cf. Schüler (1963); Jamme and Schneider (1990); Jaeschke (2020).

3 Cf. further Lange (1993); Dierken (2015).

4 The heading on these text volumes, written between 1798 and 1800, is secondary; the arrangement series also goes back to the editors and has recently been changed. This applies especially to the presentation of the Jewish and Christian religions.

5 The description of these texts as system fragments is secondary. See also Zhang (1991).—The so-called *oldest system program of German idealism from* 1796/97 shows a clearly different character than Hegel's contemporaneous texts by Hegel and is presumably a joint work together with Schelling and Hölderlin.

6 With the so-called *Differenzschrift*, Hegel made his public debut in the philosophical El Dorado of Jena, to which he was able to move in 1801 due to an inheritance: Hegel (1968a) ught as reflective philosophy, Hegel may also have meant his own earlier efforts. This becomes virtually a topos for Hegel.—Cf. on Differenzschrift also Jaeschke and Arndt (2012).

7 On the importance of systems thinking in Hegel and its various developments, see Dierken (2018).

8 The importance assigned to art by the *Differenzschrift in* the conclusion of the system is probably due to Hegel's adoption of Schelling's concept. During the following time in Jena, Hegel then developed the sequence of art, religion, and philosophy that was decisive for his later conclusion of the system. Religion, however, retains a dual position until the conclusion of the mature system: in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in the Grundrisse* (1830), on the one hand, the whole sphere of the 'absolute spirit' is called religion "in general," although, on the other hand, religion forms only its middle member (Hegel 1992, pp. 366, 372ff).

9 If it still forms a form of knowledge around itself, Hegel will later explicate this in the logicality of the concept of spirit.

10 This great work of Hegel's is available in numerous editions: The critical edition is Hegel (1980).

11 § 9.2 (cf. the context §§ 8–10); more differentiated in thought, changing God as the object of the feeling of dependence to an expression of his 'Woher', in the 2nd ed. (cf. Schleiermacher 2003) § 4.4 (cf. the context §§ 3–6).

12 The passage on Schleiermacher's *speeches* is found 391–393.

13 In this motif Hegel's early interest in a connection between religion and moral social forms lives on.

14 On the relationship between phenomenology and system, see also Jaeschke and Arndt (2012).

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God, Religion and History: The Significance of Schelling's Philosophy of Religion for Determining the Concept of Religion

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Abstract: This article discusses Schelling's contribution to the definition of the concept of religion in post-Kantian philosophy. In three lines of argument, it is shown that Schelling's late lectures on the philosophy of mythology and revelation place religion in a history of development in which religion is successively understood as religion. Schelling assumes that religion is independent of reason and is based on a real relationship with God that is connected to the nature of man. This makes the philosophy of religion an independent academic discipline. Schelling links the historical development of religion and the history of God in his concept of monotheism. This is the content of Schelling's formula that God is the Lord of being.

Keywords: Schelling; philosophy of religion; concept of religion; German Idealism

1. Introduction

Schelling's late philosophy of religion, which he developed in his Munich and Berlin lectures from 1827 onwards, is one of the most important and influential concepts of so-called German Idealism. Like Hegel's, his reflections on religion did not initially take effect through publications but through his lectures in Munich and Berlin. It was only after the death of his father that Karl Friedrich August Schelling published his lectures on the philosophy of mythology and revelation from 1856 to 1858 in the *Sämmtliche Werke*, which he edited, making them known to a wider audience.[1] Schelling's late philosophy of religion presupposes both his own early philosophy and the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant. The philosophy of religion only emerged as an independent academic discipline in the 1790s as a result of Kant's critique of traditional metaphysics and its final idea, the concept of God (cf. Jaeschke 1986, pp. 9–133; Wagner 1986; Feiereis 1965). The philosophy of religion is not a mere continuation of *theologia naturalis*. With the concept of religious consciousness (*religiösen Bewusstsein*), the philosophy of religion has its own topic and no longer asks, as *theologia naturalis* did, about the being and nature of God. As is well known, Kant's critique of knowledge excluded the latter from the realm of possible objects of knowledge. The point of reference for the philosophical discussion of religion became human consciousness, which functioned as the general foundation of culture. In contrast to the Enlightenment, this created a uniform basis for determining what religion was. As the various philosophies of religion that were developed in post-Kantian philosophy show (cf. Pfleiderer and Matern 2021; Jaeschke 2012, pp. 7–92), religion is now understood as a component of consciousness. It thus belongs to the human condition, even if its classification in the structure of consciousness can be undertaken differently. This framework, created by the Kantian critique of knowledge, lays the foundations for the modern concept of religion, which was further developed in the 19th century on the basis of consciousness theory. One of the possible further definitions of religion in the new field of reference established by Kant is Schelling's late philosophy of religion. But what is the contribution of Schelling's later philosophy of religion to the modern definition of religion?

According to Schelling's thesis, which is the subject of the following considerations, religion is a historical phenomenon. It is subject to a history of development, in the course of which it is first grasped. In contrast to Kant, but also to Friedrich Schleiermacher, Schelling integrates religion into a history in which it successively comes to itself. This idea of a history of self-consciousness, which the young Schelling formulated programmatically around 1800 (Schelling 1976–2020, I/9,1, p. 24f.), is taken further in his late lectures on the philosophy of mythology and revelation. The model for Schelling's historical view of religion is—as in his early work—Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's work *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, published in 1780 in the context of the so-called Fragment Controversy (Lessing 1981, pp. 81–103). In contrast to Lessing, however, Schelling transfers the developmental model of religion from morality to the self-relationship of consciousness. For Schelling's late thesis, however, religion is not only embedded in a history; it is independent of reason and *Wissenschaft* (science). Only if religion has such a principle could the philosophy of religion be an autonomous *Wissenschaft* in its own right. If reason were merely to find itself in religion, a philosophy of religion would also only be a duplicate of general philosophy. The two aspects mentioned above—the historical integration of religion and its independence from reason—are combined by the late Schelling in his concept of God, which he defines as monotheism.[2] God is the All-One (*All-Eine*). But monotheism is not a truth of reason. It is a dogma because it is linked to the history of religion independent of reason.

This is the subject of the following reflections on Schelling's late contribution to the definition of the concept of religion. It begins with the definition of religion in the lectures on the philosophy of mythology and revelation. The second section outlines the concept of monotheism, which Schelling developed in his late work. The concluding third section focuses on Schelling's understanding of monotheism as a dogma. Only with monotheism as a dogma are the systematic foundations of the concept of religion laid out.

2. The Principle of Religion in Schelling's Late Work

Significant for Schelling's late philosophy of religion is the assertion that religion is not a component of reason. "In order to assert itself as a special science apart from general science and independent of it, the philosophy of religion would have to know how to assert a *special, peculiar principle of religion* that is independent of philosophy and therefore also of reason." (Schelling 1996a, p. 189)[3] Only if religion had a principle that was independent of both reason and philosophy would philosophy of religion be a special *Wissenschaft* that would differ from a general *Wissenschaft* of reason, such as philosophy is. With this claim, Schelling refers critically to the religious philosophical debates of his time. Since the philosophies of religion that emerged following Kant's critique of knowledge understood religion as a component of reason, i.e., they understood religion as a religion of reason, such a philosophy of religion, he argued, was neither an independent science nor capable of grasping historical religions. Schelling put forward this thesis above all in his historical-critical introductory lectures on the philosophy of mythology, which he held repeatedly both in Munich and in Berlin and whose beginnings date back to his time in Erlangen (cf. Schelling 1821; cf. Danz 2021, pp. 241–48). Why, in Schelling's eyes, does the previous philosophy of religion fall short, and what does he himself understand by this term? To begin formulating a response to these questions, we shall return to Kant.

On the one hand, Kant critically destroyed the foundations of the traditional *theologia naturalis* in his theoretical philosophy, thereby dissolving the possibility of a religion that is a component of reason.[4] However, Kant obscured his critical insight that religion and its object, God, should be excluded from reason by reintroducing religion into practical philosophy. "If one examines the content more closely, one finds even in Kant's critique, but under the cover of moral philosophy, the remnants of the old natural theology, a part of the metaphysics abolished by Kant, which was introduced and blackened through the Kantian back door" (Schelling 1996a, p. 199). Kant's own philosophy of religion, according to the critique, was not sufficiently critical of knowledge. Precisely because he introduced

the idea of God as a component of the realization of the moral law in his foundation of religion within the horizon of the realization of pure practical reason by human beings, he established the idea of God as the basis of morality (cf. Kühnlein 2023). In this way, albeit with regard to the realization of moral reason by humans, religion becomes an element of reason. However, this means nothing other than that the normative core of religion is (practical) reason. Religion, then, only exists where human beings have subordinated their individual determinations of will to the general moral law.

Such a concept of religion, as elaborated by Kant on the basis of his critique of knowledge in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, not only renews the enlightened idea of a natural religion or religion of reason, but above all postulates the human universality of religion. The normative basis of religion is practical reason, which is invariably the same in all people. The images with which the religion of reason articulates itself in history are variable and subject to historical change. But the images of historical religions, and thus religions themselves, are merely an expression of the general and invariant religion of reason on which they are based. For the philosophy of religion, this constellation gives rise to the task of distinguishing between the historical forms in which religion appears in history and its substance. However, if the core of religion is identical in all historical religions, namely the moral determination of the will of practical reason, then religion itself is non-historical.

Kant's construction of a rational religion abolishes the historicity of religions by distinguishing between an unchangeable rational substance and a changeable form of religion. According to Schelling, this dilemma also characterizes the continuations of Kant's philosophy of religion where they no longer connect religion with practical reason, but—like Hegel—speculatively with the self-relation of consciousness. Here too, because the essence of religion is understood as a component of reason, a distinction is made between form and substance.[5] The actual religion, its essence, consists in a logical event that excludes all history from the concept of religion. But religion is a phenomenon of history. Not only is it subject to change, it is also independent of reason. Consequently, it would be too short-sighted to distinguish between the historical forms of religions, their changeable images and symbols and an invariant core of reason. The latter is a postulate of reason that owes itself to history and, as a result, leads to a rationalization of religion. In order to understand religion philosophically, the construct of a religion of reason is not sufficient.[6]

In contrast to the enlightened conceptions of a rational religion and their continuations in Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy, Schelling claims that religion is not a component of reason. The latter is "not a peculiar source of religious knowledge" (Schelling 1856–1861, XIII, p. 190).[7] Rather, religion has its own principle, which is independent of reason and philosophy. This in turn presupposes "not merely an ideal, but a *real* relationship of the human being to God" (SW XIII, p. 191). Consequently, the principle of religion that is independent of reason does not consist in a faculty of consciousness (*Bewusstseinsvermögen*) but in the essence of a human being. This essence, which Schelling understands as consciousness, is a real relationship with God. Consciousness and God are thus linked in a self-relationship, so that every act of consciousness is already based on the relationship to God. In this sense, consciousness is "the real subject of the Godhead" (Schelling 1996a, p. 191).

What does this mean for Schelling's understanding of religion? It is a real relationship with God that is based on the nature of human beings. Religion refers to the real God. Therefore, it has a substance that is distinct from philosophy. Since religion, which is independent of reason, is the subject of the philosophy of religion, it constitutes itself as an independent *Wissenschaft*. Schelling intertwines the concept of God and consciousness in one process so that the development of the concept of God is at the same time the constitution of consciousness. Schelling brings together the two aspects just mentioned in his concept of monotheism, to which we must now turn.

3. The Concept of Monotheism in Schelling's Late Work

For Schelling, God is not an idea of reason. This corresponds to the fact that there can be no religion of reason. Religious knowledge is not already inherent in reason. Rather, it is based on a separate principle of religion that is independent of reason. Schelling develops this structure in his late works in Munich and Berlin with monotheism.[8] Monotheism is not a concept of reason either. As Schelling formulates it, it is a world-historical concept that only entered history with Christianity. Monotheism is linked to the history of religion. It does not owe its existence to reason or scientific reflection. What does Schelling understand by monotheism? He distinguishes between monotheism as a concept and as a dogma. In the following, we will examine what Schelling understands by monotheism as a concept, while in the concluding third section, we will discuss monotheism as a dogma, which is the focus of his reflections.

Monotheism as a concept implies that God is the All-One. The "only *God*", according to Schelling in his lecture *Monotheism*, could "only be called the one who, according to his concept, is the All-One, who is not unique in the negative, exclusive sense" (SW XII, p. 61). Monotheism is a doctrine of uniqueness (*Alleinheitslehre*). This distinguishes it both from a merely theistic concept of God, according to which God is a being or a substance, and from pantheism, which understands the world as the determination of God's being, i.e., expands the theistic substance to allness (*Allheit*). According to Schelling, God is neither a being nor a substance. God is the Lord of Being.

Schelling's construction of the concept of monotheism is based on the concept of God. God, according to his concept, is existence itself (*Seiende selbst*), the universal being (cf. SW XII, p. 25). Being and concept coincide in the concept of God. This concept is not about a real, actual being but about the concept of God, i.e., about what must be thought if God is to be thought. The fact that God is the existent itself or the absolute is a prerequisite without which God could not be God, but not yet the reality of God. Existence itself is, therefore, neither God nor the content of monotheism, but a "pre-concept of God" (ibid.). It contains the concept of what will be. Schelling structures the concept of God by distinguishing between three potencies of being itself [9]: that which will be, the "general subject to being" (SW XII, p. 34), is the being-can-be (*Sein-Könnende*), the purely existing (*rein Seiende*) and the being-should-be (*Sein-Sollende*).[10] It is important to see that Schelling distinguishes between the three potencies and God or the Godhead. The latter is not itself representable. God can only be represented indirectly, namely in and through the triadic potencies structure. In the background of this construction of the concept of God is the distinction between essence and form in the philosophy of identity.[11] Both are equally original and distinct. This means that the absolute identity only comes to reality and revelation in the form. Likewise, the three potencies represent God, who is distinct from them as their unity. They, the three potencies, are the "matter of the Godhead, but not the Godhead itself" (SW XII, p. 25).

Schelling's construction of the concept of God based on the concept of being itself aims at an absolute self-relation, a self-contained totality (cf. SW XII, p. 60). This self-relation is built up through the explication of the triadic potencies structure. Three times it posits being itself as the subject of being or as "general potentia existendi" (SW XII, p. 35), as that which will be. This cannot be posited directly, but only medially, i.e., by the fact that what can be is held, as it were, in its ability to be by the purely existent. However, the first and second potencies are only differentiated and related to each other in the third potency. This is not a synthesis. Rather, the third potency relates being-can-be and purely existing to each other by distinguishing the two. Only with the third potency is the derivation of the structure of the concept of God achieved, since with it the being itself is set as being-can-be as such, which is free from its being.[12]

The inner connection of the three potencies unfolds the being itself as a subject of being or as a general potentia existendi on the one hand as a self-contained self-relation and on the other hand as a self-referential relation of representation. In the three potencies, the Godhead appears as its unity. But the Godhead itself is independent of and distinct from its form (cf. SW XII, p. 59f.). The three potencies are the matter or the being of God,

but not God itself. They are the forms of God's being in which God appears and, in this medial sense, God itself.

The systematic foundations of the concept of monotheism have thus been outlined to such an extent that its content can now be examined. First of all, God is the All-One (cf. SW XII, p. 60). God is the universal being in the three forms of its being, but God's divinity is distinct from its three forms or shapes of being. Godself is neither a being nor a substance. For the concept of monotheism, this then means that God is more than one: God in the three forms of its being in their indissoluble connection, in which God is represented. Consequently, the content of monotheism cannot consist in the abstract and tautological statement that God is unique. Rather, God is several forms; only according to God's divinity is God unique. Monotheism therefore does not exclude a majority in God. Thirdly, Schelling's concept of monotheism is medially constructed. The unity of God is not a substantial unity. It is supra-substantial (*übersubstantiell*). But what does that mean? The three potencies, the matter of God, are substantial. But they do not establish the "uniqueness of God *as such*" (SW XII, p. 29). Godself, or the Godhead, is distinct from the three potencies in which God alone is revealed. The Godhead, as this thought must be understood, is itself a medium. As mentioned, it only comes to reality in forms. Schelling's monotheistic concept of God is based on a medial model of unity, according to which the unity of God cannot be represented directly. God, who is independent of the forms of its being, appears in them as their indissoluble unity.

Schelling's concept of monotheism as a self-referential all-unity has thus been developed. The concept of monotheism contains a triadically structured self-relation (cf. SW XII, p. 61). Thus, God is free from being and free to being, i.e., independent of the world. Since God is at the same time the universal being, God's relation to the world is a component of this self-relation. The fact that there is something apart from God, that God enters into a relation that God constitutes Godself, depends exclusively on God's will, since God is an absolute self-relation. Monotheism therefore means that God is not only independent of being, but also free to accept being or not. God is the Lord of being. With the concept of monotheism reconstructed so far, however, the construction of Schelling's concept of God is not yet complete. It merely names the foundations of the concept of God and, as will be shown, of the concept of religion. Monotheism is not only a concept but above all a dogma. Schelling's construction of the concept of God is aimed at the latter. Finally, we must now look at what characterizes monotheism as a dogma and how it differs from monotheism as a concept.

4. Monotheism as Dogma

Monotheism as a concept implies, as explained, that God is the All-One. The subject of the considerations is the concept and not, as Schelling repeatedly emphasizes, the reality of God. This only becomes the subject of the derivation of the concept of God with monotheism as a dogma. Unlike the concept of God, which is always a philosophical construction, monotheism as a dogma is bound to the history of religion and is independent of the philosophy that is supposed to understand it. In the following, we will first examine the transition from monotheism as a concept to monotheism as a dogma and then the interlocking of monotheism and religious history. Only against the background of this successive and staged development of the concept of God can the question be answered as to what Schelling understands by monotheism and to what extent this is the basis of his concept of religion, which is independent of reason.

Schelling uses the concept of monotheism to describe the unity of the three potencies as a representation of God, who appears in the three potencies as the forms of God's being. God appears in these forms and is not differentiated from them at the previous stage of the development of the concept of God. The transition from monotheism as a concept to monotheism as a dogma is about separating God from the forms of God's being, i.e., showing how God, as the unity of the forms in which God presents Godself, is independent and free in relation to them.[13] In the structure of Schelling's late system, as he conceived it in

Munich, this transition has the function of leading from negative to positive philosophy.[14] What does this transition consist of, through which God is separated from the three forms of being? It consists of the fact that God places the forms of God's own being, i.e., the three potencies, in tension. In their unity, the three potencies represent a self-contained self-relation that is detached from all external relations. Consequently, the construction of an external relation can only take place in such a way that this self-contained self-relation is broken up by placing the three potencies that structure it in tension. Since this is a self-relation, this tension cannot be caused by external factors, but only by the absolute self-relation of God to Godself, or more precisely, by a non-derivable act of God. God sets the first potency, the being-can-be, in which God is the ground of the Godhead, into being, so that the other two potencies are also set out of their position and potentialized. Through this act, which puts the unity of the three potencies in tension, God separates Godself from the forms of God's own being. These forms step out of their divinity and become cosmogonic and theogonic powers.[15] Since the three potencies form a context structured in itself, their tension initiates a process in which the first potency, which has been raised into being, is brought back into its potency by the second potency, which is thereby potentialized.

With the abolition of the unity of the three forms of God by Godself, which Schelling interprets as *universio*, a process is set in motion through which God's external relations first arise. In God, the potencies are "the One turned out or turned back (whose inner is outer, whose outer is inner)", so that the "*universe*" is nothing other "than the One turned back, as it were" (SW XII, p. 90). Only through this tension is monotheism as dogma possible since it can only be an assertion if there is a majority of forms. This is only possible through creation. At this stage in the development of the concept of God, monotheism as dogma thus contains the creation of the world as a natural process brought about by a non-derivable act of God (cf. SW XII, p. 118). In this graduated process of nature, the first potency raised into being is successively overcome back into its potency and ground by the second potency. This is the case in the emergence of consciousness, with which the process of nature comes to a conclusion. The consciousness of the human being is therefore the first potency brought back to itself as something that can be. As the first potency becomes the reason (*Grund*), the unity of the potencies as revelation and representation of God is restored. This means nothing other than that human beings, as the result of the process of creation, represent the realization of monotheism.[16]

Schelling links the process of creation with the development of the concept of God. In the emergence of human consciousness, God realizes Godself as the All-One. Since human consciousness is the first potency that has come to itself, consciousness is the subject of God; it is the representation and image of God. For monotheism, this means that it contains an identity of God and consciousness, which is the basis of the concept of religion. The essence of human beings is based ab ovo, i.e., before all action and thought, on God. Religion denotes a real relationship between human beings and God. Its content is monotheism, the self-relation of consciousness as a representation or medium of the All-One, who appears in consciousness in the unity of forms, but at the same time remains distinct from these forms.

Monotheism describes the essence of human beings as the realization of God in consciousness. But this consciousness is not a real, conscious consciousness. It can only be such through a spontaneous actus. But through this actus, consciousness raises the first potency, which has been brought back into its potency, into being again, and thereby puts the unity of the potencies into tension once more. This actus of consciousness is incapable of being. Through it, however, consciousness steps out of its unity and falls prey to a process to which it is at the mercy of and over which it has no power. This second *universio* marks the transition to the history of religion. It is the process in which the "monotheism that has, as it were, grown into the *essence* of humans becomes a freely recognized monotheism" (SW XII, p. 126). Unlike the process of creation, the history of religion is realized on the level of consciousness as a repetition of the process of nature. In it, the first potency rises into being through a free act of human beings, which is overcome back into its potency by

the second. Consciousness, which is set out of itself, namely its unity with the All-One, is subject to the potencies set in tension within it, to which it relates.

It is only at this stage of development that monotheism contains the history of religion and acquires its actual meaning (cf. SW XII, p. 95). For with the renewed emergence of the potencies from their unity, a majority of theogonic powers is established in consciousness, which is the precondition for monotheism as dogma. What does this mean for Schelling's understanding of monotheism? The history of religion is the process of the restoration of consciousness and thus of monotheism. Consciousness becomes human by becoming God-setting (*Gott setzend*) (cf. SW XII, p. 123). The stages of the process of the history of religion are mythology, revelation and philosophical religion. Mythology is a natural process of the restoration of consciousness, in which the second potency returns the first potency, which has been elevated into being, to its potency. Mythology is a natural process, since the theogonic potencies constituting consciousness appear in it as gods. In the mysteries, the mythological process becomes reflexive (cf. Wirtz 2022, pp. 211–79; Gabriel 2006, pp. 442–64). In them, consciousness grasps itself in its unity and thus the gods as manifestations of the one God. The mysteries anticipate monotheism and point to a future religion. Revelation refers to mythology. Unlike the natural religion of mythology, it is supernatural. In revelation, the second potency negates the independence it has acquired through the mythological process in a free act. Through this act, the second potency restores the unity of the potencies and in this way realizes monotheism in history. However, monotheism is only conceptualized at a further stage in the development of religious history, namely philosophical religion. This belongs to the history of religion and is therefore not itself philosophy (cf. Buchheim 2015, pp. 425–45). It does not abolish historical religions, like the religion of reason of the Enlightenment. Rather, it is incumbent on philosophical religion to understand the two religions that precede it, whose succession it owes itself to. This means that philosophical religion is the reflective transparency of consciousness in its religious-historical integration, which presents itself in the monotheistic God to whom it refers. However, according to Schelling, this philosophical religion does not yet exist. It is the goal of the development of the history of religion.

For Schelling, monotheism contains the historical transparency and comprehension of consciousness in its unity and wholeness. Connected in monotheism are the process of the history of religion, i.e., the history of the restoration of consciousness, and the history of God, the theogonic process, which is realized in the history of consciousness. Both dimensions are connected by Schelling in such a way that in the restoration of consciousness God is realized as the All-One. Monotheism arises in the overcoming of the blind being of the first potency by the second. As a result, consciousness becomes the medium of God. Consciousness grasps itself as a representation and image of the forms of God in its unity of past, present and future, in that being is set as past. For Schelling, this is a divine act, the breakthrough of the spirit through the natural process, which becomes historical reality with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. This means, however, that monotheism is linked to the revelation of God. The history of religion is the history of God. In this history, God comes to reality in the three forms of God's being, whereby the unity of God that appears in the restored consciousness is not a necessary but a factual one. For this reason, monotheism is an assertion or, as Schelling puts it, a dogma. Since the unity of the three forms of God itself cannot be represented, since it only comes to reality in the unity of the three potencies in consciousness, monotheism is a judgment "cum emphasi". "A is subject to B, i.e., it is not itself and by its nature B (in this case the sentence would be an empty tautology), but: A is that which cannot be B either" (SW XII, p. 53). This also makes it clear why the idea of the triune God, which entered history with Christianity (cf. Krüger 2008), is concrete monotheism (cf. SW XII, pp. 75–79). This content of monotheism is independent of reason and philosophy since it owes itself to the history of religion.

Monotheism, as the considerations presented can be summarized, is the content of the concept of religion. God and religion are independent of reason and bound to history, so the historical development of religion represents the realization of monotheism in history.

This is Schelling's contribution to the definition of the concept of religion in the horizon of post-Kantian philosophy. Religion is a phenomenon that develops in history. It is not based on timeless reason, as in rationalism and supranaturalism. For this reason, the form and content of religious ideas cannot be distinguished. Schelling's discovery of the history of religion was the starting point for further debate on the concept of religion: the historical theologies of Ferdinand Christian Baur and David Friedrich Strauß in the 19th century and Paul Tillich and others (cf. Zachhuber 2013, pp. 21–130; Kaplan 2006) in the 20th century.

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Notes

1 Prior to this, Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus published a transcript of Schelling's first Berlin lecture on the philosophy of revelation in 1843.

2 Although monotheism is one of the key concepts of Schelling's late work, surprisingly little research has dealt with this concept. (Cf. Holz 1970, pp. 260–76; Ullmann 1985, pp. 381–88; Hutter 1996, pp. 343–48; Franz 2006, pp. 200–16; Krüger 2008, pp. 191–200; Wirtz 2022, pp. 115–33).

3 Cf. SW XI, 244; (Schelling 1996b, pp. 99–105).

4 (Cf. Schelling 1996a, p. 200): "The true result of Kant's critique is therefore actually this: there is no religion of reason".

5 (Cf. Schelling 1996a, p. 202): "The trick is the old one known through Kant, Kant wanted the facts that had become unpalatable to reason to be transformed into moral facts; here they are to be transformed into speculative ones". (Cf. Danz 2018, pp. 118–24).

6 Cf. also the criticism of the young (Schleiermacher 1999, p. 164f.) of the Enlightenment construct of a natural religion.

7 Cf. already AA I/4, p. 249 and AA I/18, p. 181.

8 It further develops considerations from his philosophy of identity, in which monotheism already functions as a key concept. Cf. AA I/14, pp. 321–25. The development of Schelling's monotheism in the history of his works must be disregarded in the following. (Cf. C. Danz 2021, pp. 231–52). In the following, I will limit myself to the presentation of *Monotheism* in the *Sämmliche Werke*.

9 Cf. SW XII, pp. 34–61. In the literature on Schelling's monotheism, the constitutive function of the doctrine of potencies for the concept of monotheism is generally ignored. (Cf. only Franz 2006, pp. 200–16; Hutter 1996, pp. 343–48). The consequence of this is that Schelling's medial construction of monotheism does not come into view.

10 With the three potencies that unfold being itself, Schelling takes up the doctrine of potencies in the philosophy of identity (Cf. Danz 2022, pp. 179–205). On Schelling's theory of potencies, see also (Gerlach 2023; Beach 1994; Buchheim 1992, pp. 116–29; Hogrebe 1989, pp. 79–93).

11 Cf. AA I/10, p. 121f.: "§. 15. *The absolute identity is only under the form of the proposition A = A*, or this form is directly posited by its being. [. . .] Thus, immediately with the being of absolute identity, that form is also posited, and there is no transition here, no before and after, but absolute simultaneity of the being and the form itself".

12 Cf. SW XII, p. 56: "The concept is: the subject *posited* or *existing* as such".

13 Cf. SW XII, p. 80: "So far we have only the *concept* of monotheism. God, if he is real, *can* only be the All-One [. . .]. But now the question is about the real being. The specific question is: *How* can God exist in the way that has now been determined in advance? By this being is understood a real being, a being connected with actus".

14 This function of the monotheism lecture in the Munich lectures changes in Schelling's Berlin period with the introduction of negative philosophy alongside positive philosophy. The latter, which now follows on from the *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology* and precedes the lecture on *Monotheism*, is now responsible for thematizing this transition (Cf. Danz 2022, pp. 179–205).

15 Cf. SW XII, p. 90f. 100: "As this Only one, in his Uniqueness, he [sc. God] appears when the potencies are set in tension. For the potencies are = him and yet not himself. If he therefore sets them in tension so that they no longer = him, he now appears as himself and, having as it were expelled the matter of his being from himself, stands there in his absolute nakedness, where the essence = (instead of) being = him".

[16] Cf. SW XII, p. 120: "The human consciousness is rather originally grown together with God, as it were—(for it is itself only the product of the monotheism *expressed* in Creation, the realized All-Unity)—the consciousness has God *in* itself, not as an object *before* it".

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Article

Ferdinand Christian Baur on Religion: A Historicist Approach in an Idealist Context

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Abstract: In this article, I consider F.C. Baur's conception of religion. This has rarely been done because Baur is generally regarded as a historical theologian rather than a theorist of religion. Yet I argue that, if we observe Baur's own historical work, we discover there a remarkably original conceptual work on the notion of religion. For Baur, I argue, religion was a key concept, in that it aided him in his attempt to bring together theological, historical, and philosophical work. Yet the concept of religion had to be of a particular kind in order to suit his agenda. Therefore, the identification of Baur's concept of religion will also help ascertain the coherence of his intellectual activity. In the article, I focus on two of Baur's works, his first monograph, *Symbolik und Mythologie (1824/5)* and his magisterial *Die christliche Gnosis (1835)*. I show that fundamental ideas across these two books should be seen as Baur's own (rather than merely borrowed from Schleiermacher and Hegel), and that there is more continuity between them than readers have often found. In a final section, I discuss briefly an essay Baur devoted to the *Begriff der Religionsphilosophie (1837)*.

Keywords: F.C. Baur; mythology; Gnosis; religion; philosophy of religion; idealism; Schleiermacher; Hegel

1. Introduction

Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) is arguably the most important German theologian between F. D. E. Schleiermacher and Albrecht Ritschl. In his influential *History of Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, Karl Barth called him 'the greatest theologian since Schleiermacher' (Barth 2001). Baur's main period of activity falls between 1825 and 1855. Over the course of those thirty years, he published a stream of highly original and pathbreaking works, mostly books and lengthy journal articles, which revolutionised biblical studies, the history of dogma, and church history.[1] Characteristic of his work was his insistence that theology had to be based on a strictly historical foundation. At the same time, he firmly believed that historical work would not be satisfactory unless it included thoroughgoing philosophical reflection. 'Without philosophy, history remains to me forever deaf and dumb', he famously wrote in the preface to his first, major monographic publication (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, p. xi).

This insistence that theological, historical, and philosophical work could never be separated, at least not when the object of study was Christianity, is at the root of Baur's significance as a theologian. All major nineteenth-century theologians defined their work in broader disciplinary terms than is customary (and indeed possible) in the twenty-first century. Scholars celebrated as systematicians, such as Schleiermacher, would still also lecture and publish on historical and exegetical subjects (For this, see now Zachhuber (2023), esp. 122–24). Those who are known today mostly as historical or biblical scholars, for example Schleiermacher's sometime Berlin colleague W.M.L. de Wette, would often also write on philosophical or systematic theological topics (On W.M.L. de Wette, see Howard (2006), esp. chap. 1–4). Yet few made the unicity of these discourses the centre of their activity as much as Baur did. Indeed, few could rival his mastery of a huge range of sources

while making a serious claim to synthesise them into a single philosophical and theological vision.

At the same time, Baur's versatility has also contributed to a series of attacks and criticisms of his work which started during his lifetime and has never since abated. This criticism, admittedly, was frequently motivated above anything else by his opponents' dislike of his scholarly conclusions, especially his interpretation of key New Testament texts and tenets which vitiated the orthodox instincts of many of his colleagues and readers.[2] Where those critics were not content simply to dismiss Baur's work due to its departure from traditional assumptions about Christian origins and Christian history, they would resort to the claim that Baur only arrived at those results because he systematically applied the ideas and principles of German idealism to his historical sources.[3]

The notion that Baur was merely a Hegelian theologian subsequently passed into theological historiography and became a commonplace even among those who were not necessarily hostile to his work.[4] It is for this reason, mainly, that, in Peter C. Hodgson's words, Baur remains 'in the Anglophone world [. . .] the most neglected and least appreciated of the major German theologians of the nineteenth century.'[5] It is, therefore, crucially important to move away from this blanket assessment of his thought in order to regain a sense of his significance as a theologian and scholar of religion.

Studying his concept of religion may be a particularly suitable angle from which to accomplish this necessary reframing of his thought. Not much has been written on Baur's understanding of religion.[6] For this, there is a simple reason: only rarely in his voluminous works does Baur directly venture into debates about the definition of religion, let alone offer a fuller treatment of this concept. If someone were to conclude that Baur, whatever his scholarly merits, was not a theorist of religion, this would prima facie be a plausible claim to make. In this paper, I shall, however, argue for a rather different interpretation of the material. I will suggest that for Baur's unique concern to bring together theology, philosophy, and history, the concept of religion is key. This is because 'religion' to him is a category spanning all three disciplines.

According to Baur, religion is an intellectual attempt to overcome (or 'reconcile') the duality of nature and spirit (or mind: German *Geist*) which human beings experience as fundamental in their lives. This can be done in three principal ways: by privileging nature (*Geist* is merely a variety or a manifestation of matter); by privileging spirit (humans' true home is distinct from their embodied state); or by understanding the two as truly one (*Geist* can exist in nature and transform it). These attempts, Baur believed, play out in history and can only be understood in that context. As historical phenomena, however, religions nevertheless need philosophical interpretation. This historical–philosophical approach to religion will, according to Baur, ultimately reveal the unique significance of Christianity and thus provide theology with a firm apologetic basis for its more specific truth claims.

This hypothesis will now have to be tested against Baur's own works. In what follows, my account will be centred around two key publications. I will begin by examining Baur's first full monograph, and his only major treatment of the history of religions more broadly, entitled *Symbolik und Mythologie* (*Symbolism and Mythology*, 1824/25). While Baur himself credits Schleiermacher as a major influence on his understanding of religion in this book, I shall argue that Baur's conception is in fact more original than he (and most of his subsequent readers) acknowledge. From there, I will, in a second step, consider *Die christliche Gnosis* (*Christian Gnosis*, 1835), one of Baur's most important works and his authoritative treatment of what he calls the Christian philosophy of religion (Baur 1835). In this book, it is Hegel's influence that is most apparent, but I shall once again suggest that Baur's ideas about religion ought to be considered on their own terms rather than as derivative of the thought of his older contemporaries. In a final section, I will briefly discuss a journal article, *Über den Begriff der Religionsphilosophie* (*On the Concept of Philosophy of Religion*), in which Baur responded to a critical reviewer of *Christliche Gnosis* with an attempt to clarify his own understanding of philosophy of religion and its relationship with theology (Baur 1837).

Ultimately, I shall attempt to show that the concept of religion was of pivotal importance for the entirety of Baur's thought. A full analysis of his concept of religion is, therefore, also a contribution to the continuing effort to show the coherence and the inner unity of his huge and diverse literary corpus.[7]

2. Baur's *Symbolik und Mythologie*

Baur's first monograph, published in two volumes in 1824/25 under the title *Symbolik und Mythologie oder die Naturreligion des Altertums* (*Symbolism and Mythology or Nature Religion of Antiquity*) is in some ways an outlier among his major publications. While he ultimately cannot hide his underlying theological concerns, the work is first and foremost a contribution to the history of religions and, in particular, the history of 'early' religions which were read by Europeans at the time via their mythologies.[8] At the time of writing the work, Baur was professor at the Protestant Seminary of Blaubeuren, a boarding school for future theologians, and his task was mainly the teaching of the classics (Lincicum and Zachhuber 2022, pp. 2–3). *Symbolik und Mythologie* clearly grew out of this occupation. This may be the reason why, after his appointment to a chair in theology at Tübingen University in 1826, he never again took up the subject matter which stood at the centre of this early work.

Throughout the monograph, Baur pursues three main, interlocking arguments. First, he analyses the mythical texts extant from classical civilization in order to demonstrate their internal, historical relationship. Second, he interprets mythology in this reconstructed form as the characteristic form in which humanity at an early stage of its development had expressed its deepest philosophical and religious insights. Third, he inscribes this early, mythological world view into a historical succession of religious ideas which ultimately leads to Christianity as its fulfilment.

It is in and through the second and third of these concerns that Baur's understanding of religion comes to the fore with particular clarity. In his preface, Baur explains his fundamental intuition as follows. History in its entirety, he argues is 'a revelation of the Godhead', and for this reason, world history must in one sense be the history of a consciousness.[9] This consciousness, however, cannot be that of an individual—although we need to understand it through this analogy—but is ultimately the 'collective consciousness of humanity, whose living unity is the image and the mirror of the divine spirit itself' (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, p. vi).

By taking this approach, Baur claims, we at the same time address the problem of the unity of history in general. As the unity of the individual can only be conceptualised based on that individual's mind (*Geist*), so the unity of the world's history, too, with reference to its 'living original source from which it has sprung', in other words, from the point of view of the deity (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, p. vi). It is for this reason that no other study reveals the truth and unity of history as much as the study of religion:

> And where should such an attempt, if it is ever to be made, bear more fruit than in the place where the spiritual life in its most immediate and greatest expression (*Äußerungen*) presents itself of its own accord: in the history of religious faith? (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, p. vi).

For this reason, Baur continues, he 'sought to understand the mythology of the nations of antiquity as a world-historical phenomenon belonging to the domain of religion and religious history, one which can only be grasped as a unity' (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, p. vi). In other words, the study of mythology to him really is the study of religion, and his ambition in approaching this subject is nothing less than the proof that only religion, reconstructed through mythology, can make us perceive history in its unity and thus its divine origin.

In studying mythology, Baur believes, he grasps religion in its most primitive stage, as nature religion (*Naturreligion*). The identification of mythology and nature religion is expressed in the book's title, thus indicating its significance for Baur's project. This does not mean, however, that his study restricts itself to a consideration of the earliest historical phase

of religion. Rather, he argues, we can only understand mythology from its 'opposition' to Christianity (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, p. vi). Implicit, then, in any investigation of mythology (as nature religion) is always already the recognition of its relative position towards Christianity as the ultimate goal towards which the history of religion tends. We could not understand mythology as nature religion without an awareness of its place in a history which, ultimately, finds its fulfilment in Christianity:

> Just as Christianity, precisely because it is not a human system but divine revelation, can only truly be appreciated from the highest standpoint of world history, so it seemed that it was only possible to know mythology, or nature religion, in its inner essence by placing it in an appropriate relation to Christianity (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, pp. vi–vii).

At this point of his exposition, Baur includes an explicit acknowledgement of the debt he owes to Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*:

> The more determinedly its brilliant and sharp-witted author presents the specific character of Christianity in this work, the greater are the gains for the reconstruction [*Construction*] of any other form of religion, particularly for the one most immediately opposed to Christianity. But [Schleiermacher's] reconstruction [*Construction*] of the Christian faith itself was, of course, only made possible by considering Christianity from the perspective of the philosophy of religion (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, p. vii).

Baur's understanding of religion in his first work has now become fully apparent. Religion is a form of consciousness or *Geist*, both in the individual person and in the world at large. It guarantees their unity, but this unity does not come at the expense of individual parts. Rather, it is a *historical* unity and thus its development or movement through specific modifications is the one and only way it exists as a whole, as well. Religion therefore must be studied historically, but this does not mean that it is to be dissolved into its constituent parts without considering their coherence. 'Without the idea of religion,' he writes, 'the essence of individual forms of religion cannot be understood' (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, pp. x–xi). The whole comes before its parts both epistemically and ontologically.

Moreover, this 'essence' is not an abstract concept, but it is fully revealed in its perfect form, Christianity. For this reason, Baur's study of mythology is not far removed (from his own perspective) from Schleiermacher's presentation of the Christian faith in the *Glaubenslehre*. Schleiermacher, according to Baur, presents the 'specific character of Christianity' 'from the perspective of the philosophy of religion', and for that reason his work also contributes to the *Construction* of any other form of religion.

In Baur's own presentation, then, his theory of religion at this point is practically identical with the one he had found in Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*. Yet even the most Schleiermacherian interpretation of Baur's early position would have to qualify this assessment.

To begin with, it is unclear that Baur ever embraced Schleiermacher's concept of the 'feeling of absolute dependence' as the basis of religion.[10] For Baur, the fundamental problem religion addresses is less that of our activity and passivity in relation to the world, but rather that of the world's unity and diversity and thus the duality of mind and nature.[11] While both theorists speak of 'self-consciousness' in connection with their theories of religion, the use of the same term masks rather different underlying conceptions.

A second observation is that Baur reverses the thrust, so to speak, of Schleiermacher's theory. While Schleiermacher saw history as the horizon from which to understand the evolution of religion, what interested him primarily was the concept of religion as God-consciousness and its perfect realisation in Christianity (Schleiermacher 2003, pp. 60–80 (§§7–9)). For Baur, by contrast, the study of history was an end in itself. His aspiration was to write a history of religion, and the value of Schleiermacher's theory, therefore, depended for him on its usefulness for this purpose.

Finally, while Baur ultimately shared Schleiermacher's concern with the understanding of Christianity as religion (even where his overt purpose was the exploration of 'nature religion'), in this, too, his emphasis was more strongly on the historical side than was the case for Schleiermacher. For all his emphasis on unity and the 'idea of religion', Baur was, and remained, a historical scholar whose primary work consisted in the critical interpretation of sources. While he adopts the principle that through *Wissenschaft* the 'spiritual life of the nations' must be 'recognised as one great whole' and accepts that this only becomes possible by a philosophical approach to history (Baur 1824–1825, vol. 1, p. xi), such a perception, to him, had to be the result of historical scholarship and could always be critiqued in light of the critical results of such scholarly work.

In sum, *Symbolik und Mythologie* offers an approach to religion through the study of mythology. Baur understands mythology as representative of nature religion, the most primitive stage of religion. In stark opposition to nature religion stands Christianity as the religion of *Geist*, but this opposition is nevertheless integrated into a historical development which necessarily proceeds from the lowest to the highest and can be perceived as one only from this angle. This approach suits Baur for whom historical, philosophical, and theological interests can never be fully separated.

3. Religion in Baur's *Christliche Gnosis*

Baur's *Mythology* was not, as far as one can see, a successful book. Friedrich Creuzer, on whose *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen* Baur had evidently modelled his own contribution, was dismissive about it, and it is unclear that the work left any traces in the extensive contemporaneous debates about mythology and the origins of religion.[12] While Baur continued his research into the broader history of religions, he never again attempted anything as ambitious as he did in his first published book. That said, his underlying concern with religion in its philosophical and historical dimensions remained at the core of his work for at least the next fifteen years. It now became foundational for Baur's extensive writing on the history of Christian doctrine.

The key source for identifying Baur's abiding interest in religion is his remarkable monograph *Die christliche Gnosis* (*Christian Gnosis*, 1835).[13] As in the case of his work on mythology, it is the subtitle that gives away Baur's peculiar approach to his subject matter by informing readers that Baur's presentation of Gnosis was, at the same time, that of 'the Christian philosophy of religion'. However intuitively implausible this identification of Gnosis with the particularly Christian form of the philosophy of religion may seem to be, the title accurately describes Baur's approach in this monograph.

In the book, Baur sets himself three principal goals.[14] First, he conducts an historical investigation of late ancient Gnosticism. Second, he seeks to argue that Gnosis, rightly understood, is 'the Christian philosophy of religion'. His third interest follows from the second. Insofar as Gnosis in Baur's specific interpretation is apparently not limited to its late ancient guise, its history extends beyond the early centuries of the Christian era. Baur therefore, devotes a considerable part of his monograph to the subsequent history of the Christian philosophy of religion. This part culminates in a lengthy section on three of Baur's contemporaries, F. W. J. Schelling, F. D. E. Schleiermacher, and G. W. F. Hegel.

Baur's versatility is evident from the different approaches and registers he employs in pursuit of this complex agenda. Where his aim is the reconstruction of ancient Gnosticism, we mostly encounter Baur, the scholar of historical Christianity, who engages both the historical sources available to him at the time and the more recent literature by scholars such as Jacques Matter (1791–1864) and August Neander (1789–1850) (Matter 1828; Neander 1818). In his pursuit of the other two aspects of his work, however, Baur's interest in the theory of religion comes to the fore.

The key question for readers then and now, surely, is why he thinks that Gnosis should be understood as the specifically Christian form of the philosophy of religion. Early on in his book, Baur states his case as follows:

> Among all the peculiarities which present themselves to us in Gnosis, possibly none stands out more clearly, and there is none other that so obviously and to such a profound degree penetrates to its essence, than the relationship it has with religion. Religion is the proper object Gnosis deals with; but not, in the first instance, religion as an abstract idea, but rather religion in the concrete shapes and positive forms in which it historically (*historisch*) objectivized itself at the time when Christianity came into existence (Baur 1835, p. 18).

Baur here does not yet explain what basis in the sources his interpretation has, but his statement is pivotal, nonetheless. What it shows is that Baur continues to think of religion as primarily a historical reality. The Gnostics are philosophers of religion not by virtue of having a formula or definition of religion but by conceptualising religion *within history*. At first sight, this could be read as a delimitation of the specifically Gnostic approach to religion. In this reading, Gnostics were a subset of philosophers of religion insofar as their interest was directed more at the historical manifestations of religion rather than its abstract definition. Yet it is unlikely that this is what Baur has in mind. After all, his argument is that Gnosis is 'the' Christian philosophy of religion. It therefore stands to reason that this peculiarity of the Gnostic approach to religion is, in Baur's view, normative for the approach Christian thinkers ought to take. If so, it indicates that Baur, on this point at least, did not change his standpoint from the one we encountered in *Symbolik und Mythologie*. Philosophy of religion deals with the concrete manifestations of religion and for this reason has to be historical in its approach.

How then is Gnosis the Christian philosophy of religion? To Baur, Gnostics are Christian philosophers and, as such, convinced of the superiority of their own faith. In order to establish this truth, however, they accept that argument is needed, and such argument must ultimately rest on comparison. A comparative treatment of religions, however, cannot be accomplished without a concept of religion. The introduction of the concept of religion is thus from the outset motivated by an apologetic agenda. For this reason, Baur thinks, Gnosis is misunderstood if reconstructed purely as a philosophy:

> Whenever the essence of Gnosis is located in philosophical or theological speculation—as is often the case—this determination needs to be corrected in the following point: the speculative [idea] must not be considered the object of Gnosis in and of itself, [that is,] in the manner in which philosophy is engaged with it; rather, it may only be considered the object [of Gnostic thought] in so far as it is given in the content of the positive religions to which Gnosis relates itself (Baur 1835, p. 19).

The Gnostics are thus engaged with 'concrete' religions in two ways: on the one hand, they deal with religions as historically realised; on the other hand, their concern for the concept of religion can never be detached from the 'content of the positive religions', that is, from specific doctrines with which believers of these religions identify.

This qualification does not mean, however, that Baur has second thoughts about the philosophical character of Gnosis. Quite the contrary:

> Gnosis is only history of religion insofar as it is, at the same time, philosophy of religion, and the characteristic way in which these two elements and tendencies—the historical and the philosophical—have mutually penetrated each other and bound themselves into a whole, also provides us with the proper concept of its essence (Baur 1835, p. 21).

It is evident that Baur ascribes to the Gnostics precisely the approach to religion which he himself believes ought to be accepted by the modern scholar and which he previously applied to the 'nature religion' of antiquity. In the specific way in which he describes the outworking of this principle, however, we can begin to observe subtle changes from his earlier understanding of the matter. He explains the 'Gnostic' understanding of religion as follows:

> The idea of religion coincides for Gnosis with this [idea's] essential and necessary content, which is the idea of the Godhead. For Gnosis, therefore, the history of religion is not merely the history of divine revelations, but these revelations are simultaneously the process of development in which the eternal essence of the Godhead itself goes forth from itself, manifests itself in a finite world and splits itself from itself in order to return into an eternal union with itself through this manifestation and this self-bifurcation (*Selbstentzweiung*) (Baur 1835, p. 22).

Baur had previously argued that the historical and the philosophical approaches to religion among the Gnostics 'mutually penetrated each other and bound themselves into a whole' (Baur 1835, p. 21). Here, he describes the details of how this mutual penetration is to be understood. The history of religions is not merely a succession of religious ideas or divine revelations, but it is ultimately the history of the divine in its finite manifestations and its eventual return to itself.

One may find in the rejected alternative the position Baur had originally adopted from Schelling and Schleiermacher. He now advances a further argument, according to which the divine *Geist* is itself historical and only reveals itself through a history that is as much divine history as it is the history of the world. This dual perspective is possible because the history of *Geist* consists in its development from pure simplicity via its self-divestment to its final reconciliation with itself.

It is clear that Baur is here drawing on Hegel's philosophy of religion.[15] Hegel's lectures were only published posthumously in 1832, and there is no indication that Baur was familiar with the ideas influentially developed in this text before that date (Hegel 1832). *Christliche Gnosis*, published three years later, is Baur's first major work in which the influence of Hegel's thinking is brought to bear on his key interests of religion, history, and philosophy. True to form, Baur acknowledges this fact in his preface to the work, albeit in an anonymised reference to the 'most recent philosophy of religion' (Baur 1835, p. viii). For this reason, it has been convenient for students of his oeuvre to consider *Christliche Gnosis* as the point of transition from an earlier period in which Baur was under Schleiermacher's influence to his more mature phase as a Hegelian theologian.[16]

This assessment, however, is problematic, certainly when it comes to Baur's conception of religion. As we have seen, in *Symbolik und Mythologie* Baur's understanding of religion was more independent from Schleiermacher than his own presentation suggested. What we find in *Christliche Gnosis* is that in important ways Baur's approach to the problem of religion has not radically changed compared to his earlier work, despite the fact that Hegel has now replaced Schleiermacher as the theorist whose work Baur cites as his primary inspiration.

I shall have to return to the question of how Baur's account of religion in *Christliche Gnosis* is related to Hegel's theory, but for now I would suggest that Baur's own statements of intellectual dependency have to be taken with a grain of salt. It was Baur's own research that primarily determined the broad outlines of his approach to theoretical and speculative issues, even if one should not doubt that he genuinely felt enriched and even intellectually oriented by the philosophical and theological writings of his older contemporaries.

As we have already seen, Baur's own intuition was twofold: first, religion had to be understood both historically and philosophically because religion as a phenomenon was not 'abstract' but existed only in concrete religions. Second, these concrete realisations could only be conceived as instantiations of religion in philosophical analysis, more specifically an analysis driven by a prior awareness of the concept (*Begriff*) of religion. This intuition becomes immediately intelligible once one takes into account Baur's own academic work as a historical theologian with philosophical aspirations. In other words, he developed a theory of religion that could make sense of the complexities of his own scholarship.

As for the concept or *Begriff* of religion, *Symbolik und Mythologie* used the dualism of mind or consciousness and nature without, however, explaining fully what this meant. Only Baur's claim that nature religion ultimately needed the contrast with Christianity to be properly understood indicated his idea that religions were classified based on the place

they give to this pair of opposites. Here, *Christliche Gnosis* provides further clarification of Baur's views.

According to Baur's analysis, the Gnostics themselves considered the 'religions' they acknowledged in a specific hierarchy: 'Christianity stands above Judaism, while Judaism is granted a certain superiority above paganism' (Baur 1835, p. 25). Paganism is considered the religion of nature, and thus forms the lowest rung of the evolution of religious history. Christianity, by contrast, is the highest religion, the religion of salvation, 'the religion of absolute truth and absolute knowledge' (Baur 1835, p. 25). Judaism hovers in between the two as it is associated with the sharp dualism of nature and *Geist* represented by the principle of creationism (Baur 1835, pp. 27–28).

What is the argument for Christianity's absoluteness? Given Baur's emphasis on the opposition of nature and spirit in the Gnostic approach to religion, it cannot surprise that Christianity has to prove its dignity as the highest and most accomplished religion by bringing these two together. In this way, it can be the religion of redemption or reconciliation, the religion in which spirit is incarnate in nature. Christology is thus the key to the absoluteness of Christianity, and the touchstone for every Christian philosophy of religion must be its ability to explain how this reconciliation came to pass in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (See Zachhuber 2013b, pp. 35–36).

The ancient Gnostics, however, failed badly in this task. As is well known, their Christology was docetic (Baur 1835, pp. 260–65). Their Christ does not 'really' become human. In Baur's analysis this means that Christ ultimately is a spirit figure who only *seemingly* entered a human body. As a result, spirit and nature are not truly reconciled in Gnosticism. Gnostic Christianity remains dualistic; its philosophy cannot conceptualise the unity of spirit and nature which is the truth of religion. Ancient Gnosticism thus, according to Baur, correctly identified the task of the Christian philosophy of religion, but it was unsuccessful in carrying out this task.

This, however, may not have been such a bad thing, as it explains why there is not only a history of religion which, in a sense, comes to its fulfilment in Christianity (Baur has nothing to say about Islam), but also a *history* of the Christian philosophy of religion. Throughout the centuries, Christian thinkers again and again seek to resolve the same difficulty. Baur spends a considerable part of *Christliche Gnosis* charting the subsequent history of Christian philosophers, but his analysis inevitably arrives again and again at the conclusion that their attempts at showing the unity of nature and spirit in the Incarnate remain ultimately unsuccessful. This is even true for the most recent attempts by Schelling, Schleiermacher, and Hegel with which the book ends (Discussion in Zachhuber 2013b, pp. 38–47).

That said, Baur is here clear that Hegel's version is the most accomplished to date. Schleiermacher is reconstructed as the theorist of subjective religion who cannot explain how the stages of intra-mental conceptualisation are related to the external history of religion. Hegel's theory of absolute *Geist*, by contrast, offers the means for overcoming the duality of subject and object.[17]

Despite the place of honour Baur grants to Hegel's philosophy of religion in his own account of *Christliche Gnosis*, it is far from clear that in his theory of religion he follows in Hegel's wake. For Hegel, religion was one stage in the history of the absolute spirit characterised by knowledge of *Geist* in the form of representation (*Vorstellung*).[18] For Hegel's own understanding of the evolution of religion (as well as its eventual transformation into philosophy) the tension between the true content of religious knowledge and its ultimately insufficient pictorial form is crucial. While this is too brief and superficial a sketch of Hegel's concept of religion, it should suffice to show that it is rather different from the understanding of religion underlying Baur's argument in *Christliche Gnosis*.

This result merely confirms the earlier impression that Baur's regular claims to follow in his views on religion the theories of one of his famous, older contemporaries, have to be taken with a degree of scepticism. Baur was, in fact, more original than he gave himself credit for. While his views on religion evolved and changed, and while he is no doubt

right to acknowledge that the publication of works such as the *Christian Faith* and, later, Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* impressed and stimulated his own ideas, there are assumptions underlying Baur's work on religion that he retained with remarkable persistence for a considerable part of his intellectual career. These principles should be considered as Baur's own, original concept of religion.

4. Baur on the 'Concept of the Philosophy of Religion'

In the final part of this essay, I will consider a piece of writing by Baur that has hardly found any attention among Baur scholars or, indeed, among those studying religious thought under the influence of German idealism. It is a fifty-page-long article with the title *Über den Begriff der Religionsphilosophie* which Baur wrote in 1837 (Baur 1837). The essay responds to some early reviews of *Christliche Gnosis* and is thus directly connected with Baur's major publication on the philosophy of religion. It is remarkable that Baur published the article in the *Zeitschrift für speculative Theologie*, an influential organ of the Hegelian School edited by Bruno Bauer. It is Baur's only publication in this journal and perhaps an indication that, at this point, he hoped to be more recognised among the members of the school.

The chief criticism to which Baur responds in his article is this. If defining philosophy of religion involves the assessment of all the crucial truth claims of religion; if, in particular, key doctrines such as the Christological dogma are included under the purview of the philosophy of religion, what room is left for theology? As one of Baur's reviewers, Friedrich Rudolf Hasse, put it:

> There must also be an immanent knowledge of Christianity, i.e., one which knows Christianity from the perspective of the inmost point of its own interior, without having mediated itself through reflection on other forms (*Gestalten*) of religion. Now, this is precisely what is understood as theology in a higher sense of the word (Quoted in Baur 1837, p. 370).

Baur, characteristically, rejects this view:

> Immanent knowledge of Christianity in this sense, I believe, must be denied. If Christianity is to be known from the perspective of the inmost point of its own interior, it can only be known as the absolute religion; however, Christianity will not be known as the absolute religion based on itself [alone], but only based on the idea of religion (Baur 1837, p. 371).

There is, in other words, no space for a fideist withdrawal from the world of critique and speculation. Christians have no right to think of their own faith as unique *without* the intellectual effort of showing this from a comparative perspective. This perspective, however, has to be philosophical. Nevertheless, Baur accepts that the precise definition and delimitation of philosophy of religion is something in need of further elaboration. He therefore offers a threefold division of possible interpretations:

In the first, he writes, philosophy of religion signifies

> [. . .] all that was otherwise counted as part of so-called natural religion, or natural theology: the development of the concept of religion and of those doctrines that were commonly differentiated from the positive content of Christianity as knowable by reason, such as doctrines about God, freedom, and immortality (Baur 1837, p. 368).

He associates this approach to philosophy of religion with Christian Wolff, whose *Theologia naturalia* rested on the assumption that it was 'possible to draw a determinate dividing line between the natural and the supernatural, between the rational and the supra-rational.' (Baur 1837, p. 368). The reader of Baur's earlier work here recognises the 'abstract' concept of religion from which Baur always sought to distance himself.[19]

His main objection to this approach here, however, is not that this is an abstract understanding of the discipline, but that it presupposes a hermetic distinction between

the ideas of natural theology and the principles of revealed religion. Wolff's approach therefore became untenable where the division between reason and revelation was no longer considered as categorical. The consequences for the philosophy of religion were far-reaching:

> There then seems to be no reason why the concept of the philosophy of religion should not also include whatever must by reason be recognized as belonging to the essential content of revealed religion. Consequently, the history of the philosophy of religion would also have to extend itself to include the whole series of efforts by which reason or philosophy from the earliest times on sought to arrive at a clear articulation of the teachings of the Christian faith (Baur 1837, pp. 368–69).

This, it would seem, is precisely what Baur himself proposed in *Christliche Gnosis* and elsewhere: an understanding of philosophy of religion that would include doctrines such as Christology within its purview. Here, however, Baur chooses a more cautious approach. He argues that it would be 'an inappropriate, overly vague determination of the concept' to understand it in such a broad sense that it includes 'by far the largest part of the so-called History of Dogma' (Baur 1837, p. 369). Instead, he proposes the following division:

> [T]here [is] every good reason to delimit the domain of philosophy of religion more narrowly, and accordingly assign to Christian philosophy of religion only the Christian religion as its object, just as Christian theology in the strict sense can only have Christian dogma for its object (Baur 1837, p. 369).

As soon as we use the term 'Christian religion', Baur maintains, we adopt the comparative perspective and are, consequently, in the domain of the philosophy of religion. This philosophy, then, has the task of determining the essence of Christianity insofar as it is religion:

> What else then is the Christian philosophy of religion in its most proximate and most immediate concept than the reflection on the relationship between Christianity and the two religions preceding it, paganism and Judaism, as well as the determination of this relationship on the basis of the concept of religion, which is individualized in the positive, historically given religions, and which, in them, divides itself into the moments that were contained within the concept in themselves, in order thereby to realize itself? (Baur 1837, p. 370).

With this statement, it seems, Baur has restated his understanding of the Christian philosophy of religion as he developed it in *Christliche Gnosis* on the basis of his own earlier work in *Symbolik und Mythologie*. And yet, there is a difference which Baur, however, seems unwilling to acknowledge. His insistence that religion can only be studied in and through 'positive' historical religions would seem to imply that the content of these religions, their specific ideas, mythologies and, where applicable, theologies, are the object of their comparative historical–philosophical investigation. In fact, he expressed himself to this effect in *Christliche Gnosis*, where he observed that the Gnostic philosophy of religion was always conducted based on the 'content of the positive religions' (Baur 1835, p. 19).

Here, however, he seeks to draw a dividing line between the philosophical approach aimed at the concept of religion as historically manifest in a particular religion on the one hand, and dogmatics (including the history of dogma) on the other. How is this distinction established? How is it justified? The truth is that Baur's arguments are hardly more than pragmatic. He concedes that 'the particular history of Christian dogma also has a very close relationship indeed with the philosophy of religion', but asks the following:

> How much would the history of the latter have to lose sight of its actual task if it were to follow in their entire progression all theological disputes and negotiations which might offer something of significance to it? (Baur 1837, p. 372).

In the end, Baur's essay, which is his only explicit treatment of the 'concept' of the philosophy of religion does not offer much that goes beyond his earlier, historical

monographs. In response to the critique that his understanding of the philosophy of religion would leave no room for theology, he merely concedes a division of labour for practical purposes without, however, addressing the substantive questions arising from his own, expansive concept of the philosophy of religion.

5. Conclusions

On one occasion, Baur made the concept of the philosophy of religion the main topic of a publication. It is telling that this text is among the less informative with regard to his understanding of religion and the philosophical approach to its study. Baur worked best when he addressed historical topics. It is his engagement with historical material, whether it is the pre-Christian mythology or ancient Gnosis, he finds himself stimulated to reflect on broader, methodological, and even speculative questions, as well. Baur's neglect as a theorist of religion is thus, in a sense, understandable. The genre in which today's scholars of religion expect such concepts to be developed, the thematic or systematic treatise, is hardly to be found among Baur's writings, and where it may exist, it can easily disappoint.

I have nevertheless argued in this essay that Baur has extremely interesting, albeit controversial, things to say about the study and the conceptualisation of religion. In order to discover his ideas and insights, it is, however, necessary to follow Baur into his own historical explorations. While investigating historical phenomena, he develops, along the way, so to speak, his most stimulating and most original reflections on the topic of religion. In fact, I have argued that the originality of his own reflections is often unduly downplayed by his habit of trumpeting his most recent philosophical or theological influence. His readers cannot be entirely blamed for drawing the conclusion that Baur's theoretical framework was borrowed—initially from Schleiermacher and later from Hegel—given that he himself seems keen to create this impression.

Closer scrutiny can, however, reveal that Baur's conception of religion in its outlines is both relatively stable and, arguably, the product of his own scholarly and intellectual intuitions more than has often been recognised. This is not to deny that Baur was genuine where he wrote of the impression Schleiermacher's or Hegel's publications had made on him. His mind was highly receptive, and he was eminently gifted in his appropriation of external stimuli to the furtherance of his own work.

Still, there is good reason to believe that the foundations of Baur's understanding of religion are his own. To him, it was clear that such study had to be conducted both historically and philosophically. The concept of religion gained its significance in this connection, or so I have argued, as embracing these dimensions. Baur felt that a truly historical study of Christianity had to embed it in the world of religions, but in order to do so, a concept was required that held this entire field together, rather than isolate Christianity from its religious environment.

This concept was 'religion', but Baur saw it not only as a useful cultural universal, but rather as a speculative term which, in philosophical interpretation, revealed the history of religions as eminently meaningful. In and through the study of this history, Baur believed, the world with its duality of nature and spirit (*Geist*) could become intelligible, as would humanity's place in it, and its ultimate source in God. In religion, human beings seek to reconcile nature and spirit. Religions therefore always tend towards the unity of those two principles, but their reconciliation was only fully accomplished in Christianity.

Christianity, for Baur, is absolute religion, but because of the unique position it holds in the world of religion, it can only be appropriately studied in a philosophical and historical key. For this reason, the Christian philosophy of religion emerges right at the historical origin of the religion, in ancient Gnosticism. No Christianity without philosophical reflection—Baur certainly believed that, even though he also recognised the ambivalence of this insight. Philosophical reflection of the Christian faith held the promise of its rational affirmation as absolutely true, but it could also go awry, as in fact it did in ancient Gnosticism as well as in other, later forms Baur studied. Nevertheless, there was no alternative to it.

It is this complex and inevitably problematical understanding of religion which Baur develops in the context of his historical work, but which also, arguably, forms the lynchpin of his historical studies.

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Notes

1 A full bibliography in Lincicum and Zachhuber (2022, pp. 214–20). The most important existing portrayal of Baur in English remains Hodgson (1966). The fullest account in German of Baur's life and works is Fraedrich (1909). Cf. also Scholder (1961); Geiger (1964); Harris (1975); Zachhuber (2013b); and the studies collected in Bauspieß et al. (2017).

2 These attacks intensified with the publication of Strauss (1835–1836). Baur, as Strauss' teacher, was dragged into the controversy and publicly attacked. See Lincicum and Zachhuber (2022), chap. 14.

3 See Baur's own eloquent complaint about this kind of criticism in Baur (1841–1843), 1:iv–xxiv. English translation in Lincicum and Zachhuber (2022), pp. 78–87.

4 See Hodgson (1966) pp. 2–4 for a summary of this view (which the author himself criticises).

5 Peter C. Hodgson, 'Translator's introduction', in Bauspieß et al. (2017), p. v.

6 But see now Murrmann-Kahl (2021). The whole work may be consulted for debates about the concept of religion among German theologians in the nineteenth century. For the earlier debate see Stroumsa (2010). The most extensive history of debates about religion remains Feil (1986–2007).

7 Murrmann-Kahl (2021, pp. 399–400) argues that Baur in his final decade adopted a fundamentally altered understanding of religion that was more influenced by Kant than by his earlier idealist conversation partners. This interesting claim will need further investigation, but is not examined in the present paper.

8 For the early nineteenth-century interest in and study of mythology, see Williamson (2004, chap. 1–4).

9 Baur (1824–1825) vol. 1, p. v. All English translations are taken from Lincicum and Zachhuber (2022) unless otherwise indicated. They can be easily identified there from the pagination of the original German. Cf. here also Schelling (1978), p. 211: history is the 'progressive, gradually self-disclosing revelation of the Absolute'.

10 For Schleiermacher's definition see Schleiermacher (2003, pp. 32–40 (§4)). Baur's presentation of the *Begriff* of religion in chapter two of *Symbolik und Mythologie* (104–8) takes up Schleiermacher's language from the *Glaubenslehre*. Thus, religion is defined 'in its most general meaning' as 'the consciousness or feeling of dependence on God' (104). Carl E. Hester has, however, observed that 'the first chapter of *Symbolik und Mythologie* was already complete before Baur had read Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre*': Baur (1993), p. 154.

11 It is arguable that Baur here draws on F.W.J. Schelling's philosophy of identity: Zachhuber (2013a).

12 Creuzer (1837). Creuzer inserted the following statement into the third edition of his work: 'Das gleichmäßig betitelte Werk von F. Chr. Baur erschien bald nach der zweiten Ausgabe des meinigen. Es würde mir wenig anstehen, die Lobsprüche zu wiederholen, die er ihm besonders in der Vorrede ertheilt, und ich muss selbst den ablehnen, dass es in 'ächtphilosophischem Geiste' geschrieben sey (Vorrede S. VIII), hingegen aber auch seine Ausstellungen auf sich beruhen lassen; wobei er mir aber auch verzeihen wird, wenn ich sein aus den Schriften von Karl Ritter und den meinigen über ein Schleiermachersches Fachwerk aufgebautes System zu künstlich finde.' Creuzer (1837), vol. 1, p. xv.

13 On this work, see O'Regan (2001); Simuț (2015); Drecoll (2017); and Peter Hodgson, 'Editor's Foreword' in Baur (2020).

14 On Baur's argument in *Die christliche Gnosis*, see Zachhuber (2013b), pp. 25–50.

15 On *Selbstentzweiung* in particular, see Inwood (1992, pp. 35–38).

16 On Hegel's influence on Baur, see Wendte (2017).

17 According to Baur, therefore, the Christian philosophy of religion has been 'perfected' or 'perfectly realised' in Hegel: Baur (1835), pp. 720–21. See Zachhuber (2013b), pp. 42–43.

18 On Hegel's philosophy of religion, see Hodgson (2007).

19 Note in particular Baur's comment in Baur (1835), p. 555, n. 5. 'There hardly is a greater antithesis to Gnosis than Wolff's natural philosophy. While it *wants* to be philosophy of religion also, its God is merely the abstract, rational concept of the *ens perfectissimum* . . .' (My own translation).

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Article

Faith, Knowledge, and the *Ausgang* of Classical German Philosophy: Jacobi, Hegel, Feuerbach

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Abstract: This article revisits Feuerbach's "break with speculation" in the early 1840s in light of issues raised by the original Pantheism Controversy, initiated in 1785 by the publication of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's *Letters on the Doctrine of Spinoza*. The article first describes the concerns underlying Jacobi's repudiation of Spinozism, and rationalism more generally, in favor of a personalistic theism that disclaims the possibility of philosophical knowledge of God. It goes on to reconstruct Hegel's alternative to Jacobi's famous *salto mortale* before considering how Feuerbach's critique of Hegel's philosophy of religion, as well as the personalism of the so-called Positive Philosophy (inspired by the late Schelling), was influenced by both Spinoza and Jacobi in ways that have not yet received sufficient attention.

Keywords: Pantheism Controversy; German Idealism; philosophy of religion; F.H. Jacobi; G.W.F. Hegel; Ludwig Feuerbach

1. Introduction

The publication of Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* in 1841, followed in 1843 by his *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, has sometimes been taken to mark the end or *Ausgang* of the period in the history of classical German philosophy that began with the appearance of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781.[1] This article revisits Feuerbach's "break with speculation" in light of issues raised by the critique of philosophical rationalism advanced by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, initially in his letters to Moses Mendelssohn *On the Doctrine of Spinoza*, first published in 1785. In doing so, it seeks to cast in a new light certain debates about religion that are closely associated with the decline of German Idealism during the middle of the nineteenth century.

Although no match for Kant in terms of the breadth of his philosophical vision or the thoroughness of its execution, probably no one other than Kant exercised a greater influence on the development of classical German philosophy than did Jacobi. This influence was not limited to the debates about the relationship between religious faith and scientific (i.e., *wissenschaftlich*) knowledge that are the focus of this article. It extended to fundamental issues of philosophical method reflected in the various attempts of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel to develop a "system of reason" capable of responding both to Jacobi's critique of Kant's transcendental idealism and to his insistence upon the fundamental irreconcilability of a thorough-going philosophical rationalism with a belief in human freedom (cf. Jaeschke and Arndt 2012, esp. pp. 23–37 and 131–61; Sandkaulen 2023).

Jacobi's philosophical influence on these and other thinkers occurred primarily through his instigation of, and/or participation in, three public controversies (*Streiten*), which many of the most eminent German thinkers of his age weighed in on. These controversies raised issues that continued to shape debates among various proponents of pantheism and personalism for several decades, both in Germany and in Great Britain (cf. Bengtsson 2006). They include (1) the original Pantheism Controversy inaugurated by the publication in 1785 of Jacobi's Spinoza Letters, (2) the Atheism Controversy that resulted in Fichte's dismissal

from his chair at Jena in 1799, and (3) the exchange between Jacobi and Schelling initiated by the former through the publication in 1811 of his essay, "On the Divine Things and their Revelation" (cf. Essen and Danz 2012; Timm 1974).

Jacobi's enduring influence on Hegel is reflected in the frequency with which explicit and implicit references to his ideas occur throughout Hegel's published works and lectures, including the 1802 essay on *Faith and Knowledge*, the *Science of Logic*, the various editions of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, the 1822 foreword to Hinrichs' *Religion in Its Inner Relation to Science*, as well as the lectures on the philosophy of religion. The synthesis of faith and knowledge proposed by Hegel in these works, which involves a novel reconceptualization of both reason and revelation (described below), was developed partly in response to Jacobi (and partly to a range of thinkers including the Berlin *Aufklärer*, Kant, Fichte, Schleiermacher, and such neo-Pietists as August Tholuck, among others).

A considerable part of the appeal of the Hegelian philosophy to many of those who embraced it in the 1820s and 1830s was the hope it seemed to offer for reconciling their commitment to the Christian faith with their commitment to the freedom of scientific inquiry. Nevertheless, what D. F. Strauss referred to as the "beautiful hope-filled days of peace for theology" that the Hegelian synthesis of faith and knowledge seemed at first to presage were short-lived (Strauss 1840, p. 1).[2] Debates about the compatibility of Hegel's philosophy with the doctrines of the state-sanctioned ecclesiastical bodies became increasingly heated toward the end of the 1830s. These debates, together with political developments related to them, led to the rapid fragmentation, and eventual dissolution, of the Hegelian school.

One of the most vocal participants in these debates was Feuerbach, who had attended Hegel's lectures in Berlin from 1824 to 1826 and defended the Hegelian cause skillfully in essays and reviews published in the 1830s before beginning to distance himself from that cause in print in 1839. The publication, in 1841, of Feuerbach's magnum opus, *The Essence of Christianity*, marks a further step in this direction, though it was not until 1843 that a decisive break was announced publicly with the appearance of Feuerbach's "Preliminary Theses for the Reformation of Philosophy", followed shortly thereafter by his *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*.[3] Although Jacobi's influence on Hegel is widely acknowledged, his influence on Feuerbach has, until recently, gone largely unnoticed.[4] Nevertheless, as Christine Weckwerth, one of the co-editors of the critical edition of Feuerbach's collected works, has suggested, "Feuerbach's polemic against monotheism can . . . be viewed as a late offshoot of the Spinoza Controversy, which thereby enters into the discussion of early Hegelianism and the nascent philosophy of the *Vormärz*" (Weckwerth 2004, p. 433).[5]

My aim here is to take up this suggestion by focusing on the use made by Feuerbach of ideas taken over from both Spinoza and Jacobi in conceptualizing the break with the speculative philosophical tradition of which he had himself been a vocal advocate during the 1830s. In the *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, Feuerbach claimed for his "new" sensualistic philosophy that it is the incarnational telos of the historical development of modern philosophy ("*das fleisch-und-blut-gewordene Resultat der bisherige Philosophie*"), a topic on which Feuerbach had lectured and published extensively during the 1830s. The more modest thesis I seek to defend here is that there is a meaningful sense in which Feuerbach's philosophy of the future—which he enigmatically concedes at one point is "no philosophy" at all ("*keine Philosophie ist*")—is a historical heir of Jacobi's "*Unphilosophie*". To that extent, what Engels referred to as the "*Ausgang*" of classical German philosophy seems to be more closely related to its *Eingang* that has generally been recognized.

In defending this thesis, I shall revisit Feuerbach's break with speculation in light of philosophical issues raised by the original *Pantheismusstreit*. The discussion proceeds in three parts. In the first part, I describe the concerns underlying Jacobi's repudiation of philosophical rationalism in favor of a personalistic theism that disclaims the possibility of philosophical knowledge (*Wissen*) of God. In the second part, I describe the reasons for Hegel's dissatisfaction with Jacobi's account of the relationship between faith and knowledge, as well as the strategy underlying his alternative proposal (cf. also Stewart

2018). In the third part, I attempt to show how Feuerbach's critique of the Hegelian claim for the identity of religious and philosophical truth, as well as his critique of the so-called "Positive Philosophy" inspired by the late Schelling, were influenced by both Jacobi and Spinoza in crucial ways that have yet to receive sufficient consideration.

I hope, in drawing attention to these influences, to contribute to a reassessment of Feuerbach's role in the history of German Idealism and its aftermath, which saw the emergence of several developments that can be said to have been influenced by Feuerbach, either directly or indirectly. These include the rise of scientific materialism and positivism, several distinct streams of socialist thought, drive psychology, and *Existenzphilosophie* with its characteristic concerns for facticity, temporality, corporeality, and finitude. It is presumably with developments like these in mind that Karl Löwith could write, with some plausibility, in 1964 that "Feuerbach's effort to make Hegel's philosophical theology tangible and finite simply became the standpoint of the age. Now—consciously or unconsciously—it belongs to all of us" (Löwith 1964, p. 82).

2. Jacobi

The history of the influence (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of Jacobi's Spinoza Letters is largely, though not entirely, a history of unintended consequences. According to the account of his fateful conversation with Lessing contained in them, Jacobi had come to Wolfenbüttel in 1780 with the intention of enlisting Lessing's support "against Spinoza". He was taken aback when, after reading Goethe's poem fragment, "Prometheus", Lessing, without knowing the identity of the author, expressed his approval of the standpoint expressed in it. In doing so, he declared his dissatisfaction with "the orthodox concepts of the Divinity", as well as his commitment to a view of God as *hen kai pan* or One and All (Jacobi 1994, p. 187).[6]

In 1789, Jacobi introduced his contemporaries to the heterodox ideas of Giordano Bruno by including in the first appendix to the second edition of the Spinoza Letters excerpts from Bruno's *De la causa, principio e uno* (1584), a work he claimed belongs, together with Spinoza's *Ethics*, to "the *Summa of the philosophy of the* Hen kai Pan" (emphasis in original). Though it was not his intention to do so, as di Giovanni has observed, he thereby contributed "one more source of inspiration for the tendency to divinize nature already at work in the incipient Romantic movement" (Jacobi 1994, p. 192). Jacobi could scarcely have imagined that, within a few years, Spinoza would be hailed by Novalis and Schleiermacher as a God-intoxicated sage; that the first articulation of the so-called identity philosophy would be presented in the form of a dialogue named by Schelling for Bruno; or that, three decades later, Ludwig Feuerbach, the brother of Jacobi's own *Patenkind*, would be proud to be have been dubbed "Bruno reincarnate" by one of his friends (cf. Gooch 2013a).

Far from being intended as an endorsement of Spinozism, Jacobi's Spinoza Letters are an expression of existential protest against what he considered to be the fatalistic implications of a consistent philosophical rationalism, of which he took Spinoza's philosophy to be an unsurpassed exemplar. That said, Jacobi's stance toward Spinoza is complex and ambivalent (cf. Sandkaulen 2023, pp. 15–27). "I love Spinoza", he remarks to Lessing at one point in the Letters, "because he, more than any other philosopher, has led me to the perfect conviction that certain things admit of no explication: one must not therefore keep one's eyes shut to them, but must take them as one finds them" (Jacobi 1994, p. 193).

It is fairly common knowledge that Jacobi proposed to extricate himself from the fatalistic implications Spinoza's philosophy through his famous *salto mortale* (in its literal sense, a type of acrobatic somersault). Statements like the following have often been interpreted as expressing a leap of religious faith that has given rise to charges of obscurantism and religious irrationalism: "The whole thing comes down to this: from fatalism I immediately conclude against fatalism and everything connected with it" (Jacobi 1994, p. 189). In fact, this remark merely encapsulates a sophisticated epistemological argument against the kind of systematic rationalism epitomized by Spinoza that is similar in some respects to the proof of an external world put forward in the twentieth century by G. E. Moore (cf. Moore 1939). Rather than being an expression of irrationalism, Jacobi's leap involves an appeal

to a kind of unmediated certainty that trumps the degree of certainty of any conclusion derived by means of an inference from antecedent premises (cf. Crowe 2009; Beiser 1987, pp. 44–126). Jacobi regards his leap as warranted by the consideration that "I have no concept more intimate than that of final cause; no conviction more vital than that *I do what I think*, and not, *that I should think what I do*" (Jacobi 1994, p. 193; emphasis in the original). Since no conclusion reached through demonstrative reasoning can produce a degree of certainty as great as that with which he holds this conviction, Jacobi contends that he is in his rights to reject any such conclusion out of hand.

When asked by Lessing to share what he took to be the "the spirit that inspired Spinoza himself", Jacobi replied: "It is certainly nothing other than the ancient *a nihilo nihil fit*" (Jacobi 1994, p. 187). The cornerstone of Spinoza's philosophy is his definition of substance as "that which is in itself and is conceived through itself" (de Spinoza 1992, p. 31), and which he demonstrates from this definition to be necessarily one and infinite. Operating with this conception, Jacobi explains, Spinoza "established that with each and every coming-to-be in the infinite . . . something is posited out of nothing" (Jacobi 1994, pp. 187–88). The evident impossibility of this led Spinoza to reject the monotheistic conception of God as the transient cause of nature in favor of a conception of Deus sive natura (i.e., God or Nature) as the "immanent infinite cause", which is "One and the same with all its consequences" (ibid., p. 188). Possessing "neither understanding nor will", this immanent cause acts without "intentions and final causes" (ibid.) while also being devoid of affect and therefore incapable of love. The ordinary belief that we are responsible for our actions Spinoza attributes to ignorance of the true causes of our desires and volitions (de Spinoza 1992, p. 57).

Jacobi's protest against the fatalistic implications of Spinoza's philosophy, which he regarded as irrefutable on its own terms, and his rejection of attempts like Herder's to produce a "refined" (*geläuterte*) version of Spinozism that might avoid these implications, are registered on behalf of what he refers to in his open letter to Fichte (1799) as "the highest in man" (Jacobi 1994, p. 499). Jacobi seems to associate the unique dignity of human beings with feelings of admiration, respect, and love. These are only properly directed toward persons in whose wills originate achievements that are deserving of the admiration we sometimes feel toward them. If there are no final causes, then, strictly speaking, no one is worthy of admiration, respect, or love since no one is the originator of their own thoughts and actions. Indeed, in that case, "the only function that the faculty of thought has in the whole of nature is that of passive observer; its proper business is to accompany the mechanism of efficient causes" (Jacobi 1994, p. 189). It is this conclusion that Jacobi seeks to repudiate by means of an appeal to the immediate certainty with which he is aware that he is the cause of his own actions, even though he acknowledges that he lacks the resources to demonstrate this claim and must, in affirming it, "assume a source of thought and action that remains entirely inexplicable to me" (Jacobi 1994, p. 193).

To appreciate Jacobi's position, it is important to recognize how the affirmation of human freedom, belief (*Glaube*) in the existence of a personal Creator, and denial of the possibility of rational cognition of God are logically interrelated in his way of thinking. Jacobi's admission that he lacks the resources for explaining either how free will is possible, or how it is possible for God to have created the universe from nothing, is due to his conviction that freedom is by its very nature inexplicable. This is the case insofar as any effort to explain how it is possible for a human volition to produce a human action, or a divine volition to produce a divine action, would subsume volition within the system of efficient causes. For Jacobi, whatever is scientifically explicable is by definition natural. "Everything that reason can produce through division, combination, judgment, inference, and reflection is simply a natural thing" (Jacobi 1994, p. 192).[7] That human beings exist physically as part of a deterministic system of natural causes, while simultaneously possessing the capacity for self-determination, Jacobi takes to be "an absolutely incomprehensible fact; a *miracle* and a *mystery* comparable to creation" (Jacobi 1994, p. 530).[8]

While Jacobi claims indubitability for his beliefs both that he is the cause of his own actions and that there exists a personal God who created the world ex nihilo—not to

mention his belief in the existence of an extra-mental reality that is revealed to him by the senses—the kind of certainty involved here is not the same kind of certainty produced by rational demonstration. In his open letter to Fichte, Jacobi remarks somewhat cryptically that he associates "the highest in man" with "consciousness of non-knowledge [*des Nichtwissens*]" and that he identifies the "location" (*Ort*) of this consciousness with "the location of *the true* that is inaccessible to *Wissenschaft*" (Jacobi 1994, p. 499). *Nichtwissen* or non-knowledge, in the specific sense in which Jacobi employs this term, is thus not synonymous with ignorance but refers instead to the faith (*Glaube*) or immediate cognition through which Jacobi contends that supernatural truths are apprehended by the human mind. Freedom and non-knowledge, understood in this way, are co-extensive (cf. Jacobi 1994, p. 532).

The truth to which *Nichtwissen* gives access is a revealed truth rather than a demonstrable one. It is not scripture, however, that is the primary vehicle of this revelation but rather the individual human personality and the moral goodness that it is uniquely capable of manifesting in the world. Insofar as every "purely ethical, truly virtuous, action . . . [is] a miracle with respect to nature", each such action "reveals *Him* who only can *do* miracles, the creator, the almighty Lord of nature, the ruler of the universe" (Jacobi 1994, p. 589).[9] It is on the basis of this understanding of the relation between freedom and non-knowledge that Jacobi identifies the "jewel" of the human race, not with a "science that does away with all miracles", but instead with "the faith in a Being who can only do miracles, and who also created man miraculously; the faith in God, freedom, virtue, and immortality" (Jacobi 1994, p. 561).

3. Hegel

Hegel agrees with Jacobi that the method of rational demonstration employed by the reflective understanding is not suitable for obtaining philosophical knowledge of God or the Absolute. However, he does not share Jacobi's assumption that the kind of cognition of finite objects involved in "secular" science is the only type of cognition there is.[10] Against Jacobi (and others who discount the possibility of God's being rationally comprehensible by human beings due to their epistemic limitations), Hegel insists that the God of Christianity is not one who "enviously" hides himself from His creation, but rather one whose very nature it is to reveal himself to the community of finite or subjective spirits fashioned in His image (to employ the language of religious representation). The content of the Christian revelation thus demands to be comprehended conceptually. This, however, is not a task for which the reflective understanding (*Verstand*) that we employ in the cognition of finite objects is suited. Only speculative reason (*Vernunft*) as conceived by Hegel in his *Science of Logic* is capable of comprehending discursively the determinations of the absolute Idea.

An important impetus for the new logical method that Hegel sought to develop in his own *Science of Logic* was Kant's discussion of the antinomies of reason in the First Critique. Hegel credited Kant with having shown dialectic to be "a necessary function of reason" and having "vindicated . . . the objectivity of the illusion and the necessity of the contradiction which belongs to the nature of thought determinations" (Hegel 1969, p. 56). Thus, the arrival of the time—at the end of the *Aufklärung*—when it had finally become possible for philosophy "to deal with religion more impartially, on the one hand, and more fruitfully and auspiciously on the other", was signaled for him by the appearance of a new approach to logic first made possible by this Kantian breakthrough.

In his lectures on the philosophy of religion, Hegel seeks to develop speculatively the concept of religion and thereby to show that this concept reaches its complete development in Christianity, which deserves for this reason to be called the "*vollendete*" or consummate religion. In doing so, he makes the following methodological remark: "There can be but one method in all science, in all knowledge. Method is just the self-explicating concept—nothing else—and the concept is one only" (Hegel 1988, p. 100).[11] This goes to show that Hegel conceives of logic as the science of that Concept from which the form of all individual concepts, including the concept of religion, is derived (Hegel 1969, p. 30). Each of these

is "a moment of the form as totality of that same Concept which is the foundation of the specific concepts" (Hegel 1969, p. 39). The Concept with which Hegel's Logic is concerned is the exclusive product and object of thinking and is nothing other than "the logos, the reason of that which is, the truth of what we call things" (Hegel 1969).

In his 1822 foreword to Hinrichs' *Religion in Its Inner Relation to Science*, which Westphal calls "the most lucid and succinct statement of Hegel's mature position on the question of faith and reason", Hegel affirms the rightful claims of both (Hegel 2002, p. 332). In doing so, he argues that any satisfactory reconciliation between the two must be one that avoids the Scylla of depriving faith of its substantial content (so that "only the empty husk of subjective conviction remains"), as well as the Charybdis of depriving reason of its theoretical ambition to discover the truth (Hegel 2002). What seems to count for Hegel as "the highest in man" is not, as for Jacobi, faith in a personal creator whose nature defies conceptual comprehension; it is rather the thinking activity in which the reality of spirit consists. The aim of this activity is the comprehension of the content of the concrete Concept in the fullness of its internal determinations. Christian faith, in what Hegel considers to be its true sense, encompasses both the subjective element of unshakable conviction *and* the objective element of creedal content. Religion, on this view, "has its seat and soil in the activity of thinking", so that, even when "the truth of religion is . . . directly sensed [by means of] the heart and feeling", these remain "the heart and feeing of a thinking human being" (Hegel 1988, p. 399). That is, even where the doctrinal contents of the faith have not yet been rationally comprehended, genuine faith involves the possibility of their becoming so—a possibility for which Jacobi's account of faith as non-knowing does not allow.

In Hegel's view, spirit is free to the extent that it has come to be for itself. To that extent, spirit transcends nature while at the same time presupposing it. What needs here to be emphasized is that the freedom in which spirit is at home with itself, and in which it essentially consists, is one that is achieved only gradually through its own labors. These include the history of the religious representations that it has produced as it has struggled toward self-consciousness. This freedom is not accomplished in a single leap, much less one that it is in the power of any individual to make. It is achieved instead in the course of centuries through a collective agency (exercised by an "I that is We") in which the individual thinking subject participates, but only to the extent that he or she succeeds in transcending the contingency of his or her own subjective preferences and opinions.

Whereas Hegel disagrees with Jacobi in maintaining that God can be an object of rational cognition, his disagreement with Spinoza is expressed in his claim that "the standpoint of the Concept" is a higher standpoint than that of Essence, containing and preserving the truth of the latter while at the same time superseding it, as well as in his identification of the logical doctrine of Essence (*Wesen*) with necessity, and the doctrine of the Concept (*Begriff*) with freedom and self-consciousness. In the *Encyclopedia* Logic, Hegel affirms that "the various stages of the logical Idea can be considered as a series of definitions of the Absolute" (Hegel 1991, p. 237 [§160 Z]). In the first part of the Logic, on the doctrine of Being (*Sein*), which Hegel refers to as "the Concept only *in-itself*", the Absolute is defined as Being (Hegel 1991, p. 135 [§84] and p. 137 [§86 Z]). In the second part, on the doctrine of Essence, which is equated at one point with "the Concept as *posited* Concept" (Hegel 1991, p. 175 [§112]), the Absolute is defined not as a highest essence that is "'given' while outside and beside him there are also other essences", but rather as the *infinite* essence within which all finite essences and their internal conceptual relations are contained (Hegel 1991, p. 177 [§112 Z]). The "objective logic", which encompasses the doctrines of Being and of Essence taken together, is said by Hegel to take the place of the former metaphysics.

In the transition from the "objective" to the "subjective" logic (or doctrine of the Concept) in the *Science of Logic*, Hegel acknowledges that Spinoza's idea of substance is "a *necessary standpoint* assumed by the absolute" but claims that it is not yet "*the highest standpoint*" (Hegel 1969, p. 580; emphasis in the original). In a related remark that seems to be directed against Jacobi's *salto mortale* as a response to Spinoza, he writes: "The genuine

refutation must penetrate the opponent's stronghold and meet him on his own ground; no advantage is gained by attacking him somewhere else and defeating him where he is not" (Hegel 1969, p. 581). That is, a genuine refutation of Spinoza must show how the standpoint of Essence, through its own internal contradictions, itself gives rise to the higher standpoint of the Concept. It is precisely in its failure to raise itself to the standpoint of the Concept that Spinoza's philosophy is said to have fallen "short of the true concept of God which forms the content of the Christian religious consciousness" (Hegel 1991, p. 226 [§ 151 Z]). It is to their failure to appreciate the difference between these two standpoints that Hegel attributes the misguided charge of pantheism leveled against his position by critics such as the Pietist theologian, Tholuck.

To conceive of God according to the standpoint of the Concept is, on this account, to do something that Spinoza could not bring himself to do, namely, to posit finitude within God himself, only "not as something insurmountable, absolute, independent, but above all as [a] process of distinguishing that[,] . . . because it is a transitory moment and because finitude is no truth, is also eternally self-sublating" (Hegel 1988, p. 406).[12] It is in the form of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation that this "positing" first occurs, and God is thereby first conceived as spirit. This involves the pre-existent divine Logos being "transplanted into the world of time, . . . putting himself in judgment and expiring in the pain of negativity", even while, "as infinite subjectivity, keep[ing] himself unchanged" (Hegel 1971, p. 300 [§ 569]). In the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, the absolute self-mediation of spirit is "set out as a cycle of concrete shapes in pictorial thought" (Hegel 1971, p. 301 [§ 571]). Nevertheless, the comprehension of the positive content of these revealed truths that is achieved by philosophical thinking does not rest on an appeal to the authority of the biblical texts or the facticity of events narrated in them. This is because philosophy is not meant, for Hegel, "to be a narration of happenings but a cognition of what is true in them, and further, on the basis of this cognition, to comprehend that which in the narrative appears as a mere happening" (Hegel 1969, p. 588). To grasp the truth of the Christian faith in this way is to comprehend it conceptually and thereby to recognize its inherent rationality.

The doctrines of the Christian religion as they are presented in the Bible and in the creeds and catechisms of the Church are "given in a positive fashion" (Hegel 1988, p. 399). The form in which they are initially affirmed is the form of immediate certainty. This affirmation involves an act of faith wherein the spirit of the believer testifies to the truth content of the Christian revelation. Faith and reason are reconciled, however, only insofar as the positive truths thus affirmed are recognized, through an act of philosophical comprehension, to be necessary and eternal truths of reason. On this view, reason and revelation are *not* two categorically distinct sources of knowledge. The truths of revelation are rational truths. They are recognized as such once the truth content contained in them is transformed speculatively into a form that is adequate to itself. The spirit that reveals itself in the form of positive revelation and the thinking spirit that appropriates the contents of revelation in the form of the Concept are one and the same spirit. It is only through this process of self-mediation, Hegel maintains, that "the concept on its own account liberates itself truly and thoroughly from the positive" (Hegel 1988, p. 402).

Hegel's alternative to Jacobi's *salto mortale* is thus to acknowledge the truth of Spinoza's position while seeking at the same time to demonstrate that Spinoza fails to achieve "the highest standpoint", which is the one set forth in Hegel's own doctrine of the Concept, and which, as noted previously, he identifies with "the content of the Christian religious consciousness". According to that doctrine:

> Freedom is the following aspect of the idea: the concept, conceptually at home with itself, is free. The idea alone is what is true, but equally so is freedom. The idea is what is true, and the true is absolute spirit. This is the true definition of spirit. (Hegel 1988, p. 412)

In responding thus to Spinoza, Hegel takes himself to have shown, contra Jacobi, that a deductive system of reason "*aus einem Stuck*" is after all compatible with belief in freedom.

Whether Jacobi would have been satisfied with the definition of freedom produced by Hegel in this passage is another matter.

4. Feuerbach

That Feuerbach is generally (and rightly) remembered as an atheist and a materialist has tended to obscure the fact that he began his philosophical career as an enthusiastic pantheist. In his first book, *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* (1830), Feuerbach used the resources of speculative logic he had acquired from Hegel to develop a conception of the Divinity as One and All along lines laid out by Spinoza, Bruno, and Jacob Boehme (cf. Gooch 2013a). In light of its previously noted role in Jacobi's Spinoza Letters, it is telling that Feuerbach chose as an epigram to this book verses from Goethe's poem fragment, "Prometheus", whereas after his "break with speculation" (in 1842), Feuerbach would assign to the "philosophy of the future" (in a passage difficult to render in English) the task of pulling philosophy down, "*aus der göttlichen, nichtsbedürfenden Gedankenseeligkeit in das menschliche Elend*", in this earlier work, he instead regarded the contemplation of infinite substance as the highest ethical act of which human beings are capable (Feuerbach 1970a, p. 264). He also clearly shared Hegel's estimation of the "vanity" of the culture of reflection, which had forgotten the oneness, universality and infinity of reason (the topic of Feuerbach's doctoral dissertation) as the principal obstacle preventing modern subjects from achieving this, their highest, good.[13]

In addition to the early Feuerbach's evident attraction to the monistic conception of Divinity affirmed by Lessing in the Spinoza Letters, further evidence of his engagement with Jacobi in the 1830s is found in a review of a work entitled *Jacobi and the Philosophy of His Age* by J. Kuhn that Feuerbach contributed to the *Berlin Annals* in 1834 (Feuerbach 1969b). While conceding to Jacobi that Descartes' adoption of the method of mathematical demonstration was not entirely salubrious in its consequences for the development of early modern philosophy, Feuerbach objects in this review to Jacobi's account of the role of demonstration in Cartesian rationalism, specifically with respect to Jacobi's designation of the knowledge of God resulting from such demonstration as "mediated". Cartesian knowledge of God, who is imperceivable by nature, is the result of an act of thinking (*Denken*), and thinking, as conceived here by Feuerbach, involves abstracting from what is given to the senses. To be sure, the demonstration that God's existence is part of God's essence consists of the sequential, and hence temporal, presentation of a series of reciprocally conditioned propositions. Nevertheless, Feuerbach contends, the cognition in which this demonstration culminates is itself the *thought of* the timeless and "immediate" identity of God's essence and existence.

Two of the essays and reviews that Feuerbach contributed in the 1830s, first to the *Berlin* and later to the *Halle Annals*, were directed against authors identified by him as representatives of the so-called "Positive Philosophy". These thinkers, who include Friedrich Julius Stahl and Jacob Sengler, followed the lead of the late Schelling in their efforts to establish the freedom and personality of God as their fundamental *Grundsatz* or principle. They did this in explicit opposition to Hegel's absolute Idea and alleged *Begriffspantheismus*, as well as to philosophical rationalism more generally, which they thought had reduced God to a mere concept and compromised his sovereignty by subjecting his nature to rational necessity.[14] Both Stahl and Sengler had attended lectures on the history of modern philosophy delivered by Schelling in Munich in the late 1820s. In these lectures, Schelling had argued that the knowledge acquired by "negative" philosophy through the dialectical unfolding of the Concept completes itself only when it finally succeeds in distinguishing "*that to which* it is substance or is subordinated [i.e., God] . . . from *itself*". This, he claimed, occurs first as the result of "a subjective act, roughly comparable to the act of worship", whereby the merely negative logical method employed by Hegel "destroys itself in faith [*Glaube*], but precisely thereby posits what is truly positive and divine" (von Schelling 1994, pp. 175–76).[15]

What Schelling refers to here as that which is "truly positive and divine" is what the Positive Philosophers themselves affirm, according to Feuerbach, as the "highest essential concept and principle of [their] theological speculation", namely, "God as a personal being or the absolute personality" (Feuerbach 1969c, p. 183). For Feuerbach, who at this stage still identifies science (*Wissenshaft*) with thinking (*Denken*) conceived in Hegelian terms, this involves a fundamental confusion. Precisely because the individual personality (what Feuerbach calls the personality "as *concretum*") cannot be subsumed under any concept (by virtue of its being "*das von mir Unabsonderliche an mir*") and is for this reason quite literally incomprehensible, it is not a suitable object of "speculation" (as a method of philosophical inquiry).

On this reading, in seeking to make the individual personality the foundational principle of philosophical science (and thereby to avoid an inevitable and discomfiting "either/or"), the Positive philosophers remain true neither to the Christian faith nor to philosophical science. Although Feuerbach considered Jacobi's philosophy to be "a self-annihilating philosophy" because it "[puts] imaginary thought [*die* Einbildung, *zu denken*] in place of real thought" (Feuerbach 1984, p. 122), this did not prevent him from acknowledging Jacobi as "a classical, because consistent, philosopher [who was] at one with himself" in a way he did not think true of either the late Schelling or his disciples. This is because Jacobi never lost sight of the fact that "the personality proves itself only in a way that is itself personal" (Feuerbach 1973, pp. 188–89). This allowed him to preserve a clear distinction between science and non-knowledge (*Nichtwissen*). Feuerbach considered the late Schelling and his followers to have annulled this distinction to their own discredit and due to their own lack of "character" (Feuerbach 1973, p. 183).

Between the publication of the Stahl review (in 1835) and the Sengler review (in 1838), Feuerbach published (in 1837) a lengthy work on Leibniz, the most important chapter of which contains a critique of Leibniz's *Theodicy* (Feuerbach 1984). In that work, Leibniz had sought to demonstrate the compatibility of faith and reason in response to arguments to the contrary put forward by Pierre Bayle. The central claim advanced by Feuerbach against Leibniz is that, in doing so (in his most popular work), Leibniz sought to reconcile two "standpoints" that are fundamentally at odds with one another. These Feuerbach calls, respectively, "the theological standpoint", which conceives of God as an intentional agent who stands in external relation to the world, and "the philosophical standpoint", which, by contrast, conceives of individual things as modes of the one, infinite substance. At one point, Feuerbach compares Leibniz's effort to reconcile these two standpoints to the futile attempt made by the astronomer Tycho Brahe to synthesize the Ptolemaic and Copernican models of planetary motion. The argument developed here against Leibniz is structurally similar both of Jacobi's previously mentioned rejection of efforts like Herder's to produce a *geläuterte* Spinozism, as well as the central charge that Feuerbach levels against the Positive Philosophers' allegedly misguided efforts to reconcile Jacobi's personalism with the aims of philosophical science.

Insufficient attention has been paid by historians of philosophy to the fact that the distinction drawn by Feuerbach in the Leibniz book between the philosophical and theological standpoints is modeled after the distinction drawn by Spinoza in his *Ethics* between images (or "*entia imaginationis*") and ideas (or "*entia rationis*").[16] This distinction underlies Spinoza's observation, in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politico*, that the biblical authors "imagined God as a ruler, legislator, king, merciful, just, etc., despite the fact that all the latter are merely attributes of human nature and far removed from the divine nature" (de Spinoza 2007, p. 63). That the same distinction underlies the central thesis of *The Essence of Christianity*, according to which the God of religion is an alienated projection of the human *Gattungswesen* or species-essence, is reflected in Feuerbach's comment that "it is not I, but religion itself, that repudiates and negates the God that is not human, but is an *ens rationis*" (Feuerbach 1973, p. 14). It is at the point that God is conceived as an ens rationis that he ceases to be a personality "*in concreto*" (and thereby also the proper addressee of prayer and object of

worship): "But precisely there, where the personality *in concreto* begins, philosophy is at its end" (Feuerbach 1969c, p. 182).

In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach uses the expression "God as God" to refer to the impersonal God who is the object of philosophical consciousness. This he distinguishes from the anthropomorphically conceived God of religious faith, who is the object of prayerful supplication, and of whom Christ is believed to be the perfect image. "The humanity of God is his personality", Feuerbach writes. "God is a personal being means: God is a human being" (Feuerbach 1973, p. 256). That Feuerbach's anthropotheism is formulated in direct response to the Positive Philosophers is a point that has too often been overlooked. So, too, has been his charge that, in thus elevating the finite human subject to the status of the Absolute (by conceiving of God as a kind of super-human individual), they had committed *both* a category mistake and an act of conceptual idolatry.

In the preface to the first edition of *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), Feuerbach says that this book contains the elements of his own "philosophy of positive religion or revelation" (Feuerbach 1973, p. 3). In the preface to the second edition (1843), he acknowledges that his aim in developing this philosophy of positive religion was to dismantle both the Hegelian claim for the identity of the content of religious and philosophical consciousness as well as the conception of divine personality advocated by representatives of the Positive Philosophy (Feuerbach 1973, pp. 10–11). He also remarks—after having invoked the names of Jacobi and Schleiermacher—that whoever is unfamiliar with the historical presuppositions and "stages of mediation" (*Vermittlungsstufen*) underlying his arguments lacks the requisite point of entry for making sense of them (Feuerbach 1973, p. 24).

In fact, a central component of Feuerbach's argumentative strategy in *The Essence of Christianity* involves his deployment against Hegel of resources derived from Jacobi and Schleiermacher, though not in ways in of which either would likely have approved. This is most evident in Feuerbach's emphasis on the dramaturgical nature of religion, and on the centrality of feeling and imagination, which had been relegated to the periphery by Hegel.[17] This is also evident, as shall be shown in more detail below, both in Feuerbach's appeal to the empirical facts of religious consciousness and in his insistence that these facts be allowed to speak for themselves rather than being subsumed them within a preconceived theoretical system. Unlike Jacobi and Schleiermacher, however, Feuerbach's "practical-therapeutic purpose" in seeking to explain how anthropomorphic conceptions of the divine arise in the human mind, and to identify the needs that they serve, as well as the processes that give rise to them, is thereby to limit their influence. This is because he had come, in the age of Metternich, to regard this influence as an obstacle to the intellectual coming of age—in Kantian terms, the "*Mündigkeit*"—of the human race and the German people in particular.

As noted previously, Jacobi's affirmation of the existence of a personal God is closely related to his affirmation of the freedom of the human will from natural necessity. Feuerbach agrees but regards this as a merely imaginary and compensatory freedom. Belief in the existence of a personal God, on the account developed by him in his later writings on religion, results from the painful constraints that nature imposes on the finite human subject, including, most fundamentally, the constraint of mortality and the powerful wishes and desires that these constraints arouse in us. Is it too much to suggest that the central place occupied by the concept of "the wish" in Feuerbach's last word on religion, i.e., in his *Theogony*, can itself be traced back to the influence of Jacobi? Consider that Jacobi once wrote, "It is impossible that everything be nature and that there be no freedom for it is impossible that what alone ennobles and elevates man (*truth, goodness, beauty*) be only delusion, deception, lie" (Jacobi 1994, pp. 531–32). What is worth noting is that the word "impossible" here presumably does not mean "logically contradictory" or "inconceivable" but something more like "existentially intolerable". This interpretation is consistent with Sandkaulen's characterization of the rationale underlying Jacobi's *salto mortale* when she writes: "Spinoza demands a revision of our belief in the freedom of our actions that is so radical, a revision to our conception of ourselves as agents and of the lifeworld we inhabit

that is so fundamental, that the prospect of actually putting his conception into practice proves to be entirely unbearable" (Sandkaulen 2023, p. 21).

In light of these considerations, I propose reading the following passage from the chapter in *The Essence of Christianity* on "The Mystery of the Christian Christ or of the Personal God" as Feuerbach's own commentary on the logic of Jacobi's *salto mortale*:

> Desire says: There must be a *personal* God, he can*not not* be. The satisfied heart [replies]: *He exists*. The *guarantee* of his existence lies for the heart in the *necessity* of his existence: the necessity of the satisfaction of the *violence* of the need. It knows no law outside of itself. (Feuerbach 1973, p. 258)

The necessity that motivates the *salto mortale*, on the interpretation proposed here, is not of a logical but rather of a strictly *psychological* nature. To say the same thing in Feuerbach's language, the need that this leap is intended to meet is not a *theoretical* need but a *practical* one. In his later writings, Feuerbach will tend increasingly to identify the need that gives rise to religion with the need to be free from the limitations by which the human drive-to-happiness (*Glückseligkeitstrieb*) is restricted. It is for empirical scientific research (now no longer identified with "speculation") and modern medicine to discover how the restrictions imposed on this drive by nature can be mitigated, if not removed entirely, and for political reform to ameliorate restrictions due instead to historical circumstances subject to modification by the will of a properly educated citizenry (cf. Gooch 2013b).

Feuerbach's primary reason for referring to "the essential standpoint of religion" as "the practical standpoint" is his conviction that the fundamental purpose of religion is not to discover the truth but to secure "the well-being, salvation and blessedness of human beings" (Feuerbach 1973, p. 316). Whereas Hegel thought that the fundamental aspiration of religious consciousness is to relate itself to "a substantial content that is independent and self-subsistent, a truth that is not a matter of opinion and intellectual conceit but which is *objective*" (Hegel 2002, p. 342), Feuerbach's position is that religion appeals instead to the emotions (*das Gemüt*), to the drive for happiness, and especially to the affects of fear and hope (Feuerbach 1973, p. 318). "It is not the absolute as such that is the object and content of religion, but the absolute only *as* it is an object of feeling and imagination—*that* absolute whose essential determination is constituted precisely by this 'as'" (Feuerbach 1969d, p. 220).

What makes the standpoint of religion "practical" in Feuerbach's estimation is that it is determined by subjective human needs. Prayer is the characteristic form of religious activity through which the religious person seeks to satisfy these needs. The religious representation of God as an omnipotent and merciful being who responds to prayer is, on this account, determined by the needs that the activity of prayer is intended to meet rather than by a theoretical motivation to discover an adequate idea of the Absolute. Whereas Hegel "finds the quintessence of religion only in the *compendium* of *dogmatics*", Feuerbach claims to have discovered it instead "already in the *sample act* of prayer" (Feuerbach 1970b, p. 231).

A text of Feuerbach's that is especially relevant for evaluating the "break with speculation" that he sought to make in the early 1840s is the preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*, published the same year (1843) as his *Principles for a Philosophy of the Future*. In this preface, Feuerbach repudiates "the absolute, the immaterial speculation that is satisfied with itself—the speculation that creates its own content (*Stoff*) from itself", emphasizing that he had sought instead to solve "the riddle of the Christian religion" through "an empirical or historical-philosophical analysis" (Feuerbach 1973, p. 14). In explicit contrast to the Hegelian ideal of presuppositionless science, and echoing Jacobi's critique of the rationalist paradigm of scientific demonstration, Feuerbach emphasizes that the claims advanced by him in this book are "only the conclusions, the inferences from premises that are not themselves thoughts, but rather objective, either living or historical, facts" (Feuerbach 1973). It is striking that, in explicit and direct connection with his repudiation of "speculation", Feuerbach should invoke Jacobi by directly quoting a famous passage from the Spinoza Letters. He does this when he emphasizes that, in contrast to

speculative philosophy, his theoretical aim had not been to invent (*erfinden*) but rather to discover (*entdecken*) the essence of Christianity and, in so doing, "to reveal existence" (*Dasein zu enthüllen*). This is precisely what Jacobi himself had identified in the Spinoza Letters as the principal task of scientific inquiry.

In Rawidowicz's monumental survey of Feuerbach's entire corpus, and of the relation of his ideas to those of various predecessors and contemporaries (originally published in 1931), he noted a more sympathetic tone in comments about Jacobi found in Feuerbach's later writings compared with the reserved tone of remarks made prior to his "break with speculation" (Rawidowicz [1931] 1964, p. 262). He attributed this more sympathetic tone to a number of points of agreement between Jacobi's position and the "philosophy of the future" that Feuerbach first sought to sketch out in 1843. These include a common appeal to immediate knowledge that is expressed both in Jacobi's doctrine of faith (*Glaube*) and in Feuerbach's defense of sense certainty against Hegel's famous critique of it in the *Phenomenology*; a common commitment to "realism" understood as the view that our perceptions involve a direct awareness of extra-mental material objects and are not mere representations of such objects; a corresponding rejection of the speculative claim for the identify of thought and being; and a common emphasis on the I–Thou relationship or the inter-subjective structure of human subjectivity (in contrast to the Cartesian cogito). In the foregoing, I have sought to explain why these points of agreement, far from being coincidental, are instead reflective of Feuerbach's longstanding constructive engagement with Jacobi, whose influence on nineteenth-century German philosophy extends further than has generally been recognized.

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Notes

1 They were so taken by Friedrich Engels in his book, *Ludwig Feuerbach und die Ausgang der klassichen deutschen Philosophie* (Engels 1886), to which the title of this article alludes (Engels (1886)).

2 This and all other translations from the German are by the author (T.G.) unless otherwise noted.

3 Further insight into Feuerbach's reasons for making such a break at this time are contained in a handwritten manuscript discovered in the Feuerbach *Nachlass* and published by Ascheri Carlo with extensive commentary in Ascheri (1969). Relevant factors include a change in the political climate reflected in the closure of the *Halle Annals* by the Prussian censor, as well as a police search of Feuerbach's personal residence in Bruckberg.

4 An important exception in this regard is Rawidowicz ([1931] 1964), a study that remains unsurpassed for its comprehensiveness and includes a chapter on Feuerbach's relation to Jacobi (pp. 258–65), to which further reference is made below.

5 The term "*Vormärz*" refers to the period in German and Austro-Hungarian history that preceded the failed revolution that broke out in March of 1848.

6 This and subsequent Jacobi quotations are from the 1785 edition of "Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza" unless otherwise indicated.

7 This passage is from the 1789 edition of the Spinoza Letters.

8 This passage, and those cited in the next paragraph, are from Supplement 2 to Jacobi's open letter to Fichte, first published in 1799.

9 This passage is from the preface to the 1815 edition of Jacobi's *David Hume and Faith*.

10 As Merold Westphal observes in his own foreword to the translation of Hegel's "Foreword to Hinrich's *Religion in Its Inner Relation to Science*" (Hegel 2002, p. 334), Hegel uses the term "secular" in this context as a synonym for the understanding (*Verstand*) in contrast to reason (*Vernunft*). The translation of Hegel's foreword found on pp. 337–53 of this volume is by A. V. Miller.

11 Hegel (1988) is an abridgment of a three-volume edition of Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of religion based on the critical edition of these lectures found in Hegel (Hegel 1983–1985).

12 Hegel attributes Spinoza's inability here to the grip on him of a certain "Oriental intuition" of the oneness of God due to his having been a Jew "by descent". What he finds missing from Spinoza's philosophy is "the Occidental principle of individuality" exemplified by Leibniz's theory of monads (Hegel 1991, p. 226 [§ 151 Z]).

[13] See, in this context, Hegel's claim in the introduction to his early essay on *Faith and Knowledge* that Kant, Jacobi, and Fichte, who are said here to share the same "fundamental principle [of] the absoluteness of finitude", had together "raised . . . the culture (*Kultur*) of reflection . . . to a system" (Hegel 1977, pp. 62 and 64).

[14] The first of these is Feuerbach's review of the first two volumes of Friedrich Julius Stahl's *Philosophy of Right from a Historical Perspective* (1830, 1833), published in the *Berlin Annals* in 1835 (Feuerbach 1969a), and the second is his review of Jacob Sengler's *The Essence and Significance of Speculative Philosophy and Theology in the Present Age* (1837), published in the *Halle Annals* in 1838 under the title, "Toward a Critique of the 'Positive Philosophy" (Feuerbach 1969c).

[15] Bowie translates "*Glaube*" here as "belief".

[16] Cf. the appendix to Part 1, Proposition 36, as well as Book 2, Propositions 40–49.

[17] At the outset of *The Essence of Religion* (1846), Feuerbach explicitly identifies the *Abhängigkeitsgefühl* or "feeling of dependence" as the "ground" of religion while also identifying nature as the original "object" of this feeling, and hence of religion (Feuerbach 1971, p. 4). In a reply to a reviewer entitled "Zur Beurteilung des Schrifts 'Das Wesen des Christentums'" (1842), he suggests that the difference between his own position and Hegel's is most clearly evident in their respective attitudes toward Schleiermacher before going on to remark that Hegel failed to penetrate "the essence of religion . . . because he as an abstract thinker was not able to penetrate the essence of feeling" (Feuerbach 1970b, p. 230). Jacobi's influence is less readily detectable but, I believe, no less important.

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