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# Hegel, Providence, and the Philosophy of History

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## HEGEL, PROVIDENCE, AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

Karl Löwith, in his *Meaning in History*<sup>1</sup> argues that the Christian idea of Divine Providence gradually gave way, around the time of the Enlightenment in France and elsewhere, to the secularized notion that there is a kind of inevitable progress in history towards what is better and better. Included among the »secularizers« are Voltaire, Condorcet, Turgot, Hegel and other philosophers. Löwith casts their accomplishments in a negative light. What is this belief in endless progress but an unauthentic transference of the Christian belief in the coming of God's Kingdom to the purely secular sphere? Those intellectuals who found it difficult to believe in a final spiritual kingdom have, in Löwith's estimation, settled upon the new worldly belief that humanity is progressing in every way - scientifically, technologically, culturally, even morally.

Immanuel Kant did not share Löwith's misgivings. Living in the midst of the changes which Löwith castigates, Kant was much more sanguine about the value of the Enlightenment concept of progress. In his *Philosophy of History*, he presents progress as a viable rational counterpart of the religious idea of Divine Providence, and as concerned specifically with the inevitable evolution of the nations of the world towards peace:

»Here [...] is a proposition valid for the most rigorous theory, in spite of all skeptics, and not just a well-meaning and practically commendable proposition: The human race has always been in progress toward the better and will continue to be so henceforth. To him who does not consider what happens in just some one nation but also has regard to the whole scope of all the peoples on earth who will gradually come to participate in progress, this reveals the prospect of an immeasurable time [...] The hope for [the human race's] progress is to be expected only on the condition of a wisdom from above (which bears the name of Providence if it is invisible to us); but for that which can be expected and exacted from *men* in this area toward the advancement of this aim, we can anticipate only a negative wisdom, namely, that they will see themselves compelled to render [war] firstly by degrees more humane and then rarer, and finally to renounce offensive war altogether, in order to enter upon a constitution which [...] can persistently progress toward the better.«<sup>2</sup>

Löwith, in sharp contrast, finds such conceptual conjunction of »Progress« (even construed as »negative wisdom«) with »Providence« regrettable - a watering-down of the religious experience of transcendence inculcated by Christianity, a dismaying orientation of human life to purely secular aspirations and expectations - over-optimistic expectations doomed to generate disappointment when they inevitably fall short of fulfillment.

During the last century, the idea of constant progress has often been coupled with evolution, even though Darwin's theory of »natural selection« eschews any teleological interpretations, including expectations of progress. Nevertheless, some proponents of social evolution, branching off sharply from Darwin, have explicitly extrapolated the idea of the upward biological progress in the tree of evolution into overarching concepts of social and/or moral progress. A recent example is the French Jesuit paleontologist and philosopher, Teilhard de Chardin, who observes:

»We are sometimes inclined to think that the same things are monotonously repeated over and over again in the history of creation. That is because the season is too long by comparison with the brevity of our individual lives, and the transformation too vast and too inward by comparison with our superficial and restricted outlook, for us to see the progress of what is tirelessly taking place in and through all matter and all spirit.«<sup>3</sup>

A similar theory of ethical/spiritual evolution is propounded by M. Scott Peck in his best-selling book, *The Road Less Travelled*:

»The notion that the plane of mankind's spiritual development is in a process of ascension may hardly seem realistic to a generation disillusioned with the dream of progress. Everywhere is war, corruption and pollution. How could one reasonably suggest that the human race is spiritually progressing? Yet that is exactly what I suggest. Our very sense of disillusionment arises from the fact that we expect more of ourselves than our forebears did of themselves. Human behavior that we find repugnant and outrageous today was accepted as a matter of course yesteryear.«<sup>4</sup>

Hegel, if he were living today, would probably agree with such progressive views - to Löwith's dismay. But Hegel's reasoning would be based on different premises than Teilhard's or Peck's; and Hegel would also proffer a different interpretation of the final goal towards which human progress is moving. Hegel would also characterize Löwith's »secularization hypothesis« as an unsubtle oversimplification of his approach, and resolutely deny that he had any intention to do away with Christian transcendence. To understand why this is so, we have first to consider Hegel's rather unique general optimism about the interrelationship of Christianity and modern philosophy, and more specifically the power of philosophical conceptualization to bring out the true meaning of Christian dogmas.

»The authority of the canonical faith of the church has been in part degraded, in part removed. The »symbolum« or »regula fidei« itself is no longer regarded as something totally binding but instead as something that has to be interpreted and explained from the Bible. But the interpretation depends on the spirit that explains. The absolute footing is just the concept.<sup>5</sup> To the contrary, by means of exegesis such basic doctrines of Christianity have been partly set aside and partly explained in quite lukewarm fashion. Dogmas such as those of the Trinity and the miracles have been put in the shadows by theology itself. Their justification and true affirmation can occur only by means of the cognizing spirit, and for this reason much more of dogmatics has been preserved in philosophy than in dogmatics or in theology itself as such.«<sup>6</sup>

Hegel is here echoing Anselm's *credo ut intelligam* faith as the foundation for speculative philosophizing. The highest speculative truths are contained implicitly in Christian dogmas such as the Trinity; and philosophy, or »Absolute Knowledge«, as Hegel observes in his 1807 *Phenomenology*,<sup>7</sup> begins with the imaginative, figurative truths of religion as an indispensable content which are imperfect only insofar as they still need to be elaborated into suitable rational/conceptual formulations. A major part of Hegel's system of philosophy is concerned precisely with such speculative elaboration of religious ideas. Thus Hegel describes his *Phenomenology of Spirit* as the »Golgotha of Absolute Spirit«,<sup>8</sup> his *Logic* as conceptualization of the »life of God before the creation of the world«,<sup>9</sup> and the political sections of his *Philosophy of Right* as »the march of God through the world.«<sup>10</sup> Thus also Hegel's *Philosophy of History* is a rational/conceptual elaboration of the Christian concept of Divine Providence. Hegel states this in the initial sections of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, where he begins with a criticism of theologians. He cites the scriptural injunction that we should »know, love and serve God«, and then goes on to observe that

»In recent times Philosophy has been obliged to defend the domain of religion against the attacks of several theological systems. In the Christian religion God has revealed Himself - that is, he has given us to understand what He is; so that He is no longer a concealed or secret existence. And this possibility of knowing Him, thus afforded us, renders such knowledge a duty. God wishes no narrow-hearted souls or empty heads for his children; but those whose spirit is of itself indeed, poor, but rich in the knowledge of Him; and who regard this knowledge of God as the only valuable possession. That development of the thinking spirit, which has resulted from the revelation of the Divine Being as its original basis, must ultimately advance to the *intellectual* comprehension of what was presented in the first instance, to *feeling* and *imagination*.«<sup>11</sup>

Hegel then proceeds to apply this general optimism about the powers of human knowledge to the Christian doctrine of Divine Providence:

»The time must eventually come for understanding that rich product of active Reason, which the History of the World offers to us. It was for awhile the fashion to profess admiration for the wisdom of God, as displayed in animals, plants, and isolated occurrences. But, if it be allowed that Providence manifests itself in such objects and forms of existence, why not also in Universal History? [...] Our mode of treating the subject is [...] a Theodicaea - a justification of the ways of God - which Leibniz attempted metaphysically, in his method, i.e. in indefinite abstract categories - so that the ill that is found in the World may be comprehended, and the thinking Spirit reconciled with the fact of the existence of evil. Indeed, nowhere is such a harmonizing view more pressingly demanded than in Universal History [...]«<sup>12</sup>

Hegel thus considers it the function of a philosopher such as himself in Western Christian civilization to *demonstrate* the rationality of history - a rationality that is merely implicitly assumed by the theologians. And Hegel explicitly differentiates his approach from a natural-history approach. Unlike Marx, Huxley, Nietzsche, Spengler and Spencer, who in very diverse ways tried to extrapolate the theory of organic evolutionary progress into the social and cultural realms, Hegel, who explicitly rejects the possibility of physical evolution,<sup>13</sup> concerns himself with the specifically spiritual evolution of mankind. His philosophy of history, looking for the »Rose in the Cross« of history's past, for the essential rationality of historical reality, hypothesizes an ongoing evolution spearheaded in the development of the Concept of the State. The upward thrust of spiritual evolution, according to Hegel's theory, has to do with the gradual but inevitable emergence of human freedom in the modern state. He explains this in the Introduction to his *Philosophy of History*:

»The Orientals have not attained the knowledge that Spirit - Man *as such* - is free; and because they do not know this, they are not free. They only know that *one is free*. [...] That *one* is therefore only a Despot; not a *free man*. The consciousness of Freedom first arose among the Greeks, and therefore they were free; but they, and the Romans likewise, knew only that *some* are free - not man as such. Even Plato and Aristotle did not know this. The Greeks, therefore, had slaves [...] The German nations, under the influence of Christianity, were the first to attain the consciousness, that man, as man, is free; that it is the *freedom* of Spirit which constitutes its essence. [...] The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom; a progress whose development according to the necessity of its nature, is our business to investigate.«<sup>14</sup>

»The German nations, under the influence of Christianity« [...] Christianity? The harbinger of freedom? Hegel is of course at the antipode to Nietzsche's interpretation of Christianity as a »slave mentality.« Christianity in Hegel's interpretation, far from inducing a slave mentality, is the fundamental source for the emergence in historical consciousness of the concept of freedom. How does Hegel come to this conclusion? The »middle term« for this connection of Christianity with freedom is the unique emphasis in Christianity on *subjectivity*. The Christian idea of God as Absolute Being/Object, says Hegel, is expressly geared, in contrast to other religions, to accommodate the *subjective* element.<sup>15</sup> The Christian God is an absolute unique, free, personal, subject. Thus the notion of »liberty«, in our modern sense of the word, did not even exist before Christianity came into the world.<sup>16</sup> Although the practice of slavery did not cease immediately in Christianity,<sup>17</sup> the idea that all human beings were equally free has been present in the world since the beginning of the Christian era.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to note, however, that the ascendancy of the world towards a greater extensivity of freedom did not imply, in Hegel's mind, a trend towards *democracy*. Hegel castigated democracy for offering only an incomplete and unsatisfactory »compromise« approach to the political affirmation of individual subjectivities. Democracies, Hegel observes, tend to construe universal subjective participation in politics in a quantitative rather than a qualitative fashion. Thus they oversimplify the complex task of assuring participation on all levels of society into the easier-to-attain ideal of »one man, one vote.«<sup>19</sup> Hegel's own ideal, to which democracy is only an approximation, is »absolute freedom«,<sup>20</sup> a paradoxical concept of freedom which Hegel borrows in part from Fichte. In a state of absolute freedom, individuals are not just free, but *determine* themselves to be free; that is, they build up constitutional incentives and safeguards so iron-tight that they almost, in Rousseau's words, *force* themselves to be free.

The political state which would achieve such a paradoxical goal would be one which managed, according to the exigencies of the dialectical/speculative Concept, to unite nature and natural determinations with spirit and free choices. Hegel's candidate for such an ideal polity was, as is well-known, a constitutional monarchy somewhat like an idealized, reconstituted Prussian state, in which the royal line of succession would supply a stable »natural« foundation for the activities of spirit to be carried out by the legislative and executive branches of government, while the various classes of society and civil »corporations« (labor unions, professional organizations, etc.) would supply a constant and dependable »natural« resource for governmental representation in the Estates.

Well, as is well-known, Hegel compared philosophy to the Owl of Minerva, which only came out at the end of day, looking back at the past, and having no privileged knowledge of the future. Hegel officially abjured prophecy, although he occasionally made some »off the record« guesses about what the future would hold - for example, his suggestion in the *Philosophy of History* that America would be the »land of the future«. But what if Hegel could be present now at the end of the twentieth century, and still have the benefit of the retrospective view which he thought to be so necessary to philosophy? Would he still adhere to his theory about the spiritual evolution towards freedom in history? How would he react to the almost universal demise of monarchies, even constitutional monarchies? In the wake of fascism and communism and the multiple genocides witnessed by our generation, would he be able to salvage his theory about the progression of freedom?

Hegel was not adverse to revising his theories, when this was needed. For example, in the earlier and later versions of his *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, he revised his analyses of the syllogism in the *Logic*, and his categorization of the stages of religion in the *Philosophy of Absolute Spirit*. It is not inconceivable that, as Klaus Hartmann suggests,<sup>21</sup> he would rethink and revise the interconnection of his theory of historical progress with constitutional monarchy. The Hegelian free state could be salvaged, as long as union of nature and Spirit, essential to the idea of Absolute Freedom, could be maintained. The principal *realphilosophische* question Hegel would need to ask is, are the natural divisions of society and the diverse gifts and callings of human subjectivity adequately represented at the level of the higher echelons of government? It is not inconceivable that he would find the contemporary Bundesrepublik Deutschland and other European social democracies to be exemplars spearheading the historical progression of the concept of freedom.

But in the interests of the spiritual progress of mankind, would Hegel, even with the benefit of 20th century hindsight, ever be able to raise his sights beyond the parameters of the nation state? Probably not. His trenchant nationalistic critique of the proposal for a League of Nations in Kant's treatise on *Perpetual Peace*<sup>22</sup> indicates quite clearly that Hegel, unlike Kant, did not conceive of any final development of Absolute Freedom in the international sphere. No doubt Hegel's vision would grow dim when confronted with such challenges. But we should not fault Hegel, since we ourselves have similar difficulty in overcoming nationalistic blinders to grapple with the immense complexity of moving beyond ethnic and racial and religious provincialism to incorporate freedom in the international sphere.

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#### NOTES

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- 3 Pierre TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, *The Divine Milieu*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960, p. 133.

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- 11 G.W.F. HEGEL, *The Philosophy of History*, Sibree trans. New York: Dover, 1956, p. 15.
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- 14 G.W.F. HEGEL, *The Philosophy of History*, Sibree trans. (New York: Dover, 1956, pp. 18-19.
- 15 G.W.F. HEGEL, [*Minor*] *Logic*, § 194.
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- 17 G.W.F. HEGEL, *The Philosophy of History*, Sibree trans. New York: Dover, 1956, p. 18.
- 18 G.W.F. HEGEL, [*Minor*] *Logic*, § 163, Zusatz.
- 19 G.W.F. HEGEL, *Philosophy of Right*, *Werke*, VII, §§ 49, 200, 273.
- 20 *Ibid.*, §§ 21 ff.
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- 22 See the *Philosophy of Right*, *Werke*, Vol. 7, § 333.