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## HEGEL'S CRITICISM OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND ROMANTICISM: THE PROBLEM OF CONTENT IN RELIGION

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The long second part of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, the "Determinate Religion," constitutes his historical account of the religions of the world. The inordinate length of this section has caused many scholars to wonder why Hegel feels the need to give such a detailed analysis of the historical development of the different religions if his goal in the end is to make a case for the truth of Christianity. This has led to a degree of puzzlement about the "Determinate Religion" section. As a result, this section is not often treated in the secondary literature. Hegel developed his own approach to religion in large part in response to the views coming from the Enlightenment and Romanticism. He was highly critical of different aspects of these movements, which he saw as undermining the truth of religion. In the present article I wish to examine his critical intuitions vis-à-vis these views. My proposal is that by seeing Hegel's philosophy of religion as a response to the main trends of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, we can understand why he felt that he needed to spend so much time with the different world religions.

**Keywords:** G. W. F. Hegel – Enlightenment – Romanticism – Philosophy of religion – Christianity – World religions

Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* consists of three parts, "The Concept of Religion," the "Determinate Religion," and the "Revealed Religion." The second of these is by far the longest. It is here that Hegel goes through his historical account of the religions of the world. The inordinate length of this section has caused many scholars to wonder why Hegel feels the need to give such a detailed analysis of the historical development of the different religions if his goal in the end is to make a case for the truth of Christianity. This has led to a degree of puzzlement about the "Determinate Religion" section. As a result, this section is not often treated in the secondary literature.

Hegel developed his own approach to religion in large part in response to the views coming from the Enlightenment and Romanticism. He was highly critical of different aspects of these movements, which he saw as undermining the truth of religion. In the present article I wish to examine his critical intuitions vis-à-vis these views. The key will be to get straight about what he identifies as the principal errors of his day. In addition, we need to come to terms with his methodology for understanding the large cultural phenomenon known as religion. We wish to explore, among other things, how he proposes to make a defense of Christianity by means of his method. My proposal is that by seeing

Hegel's philosophy of religion as a response to the main trends of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, we can understand why he felt that he needed to spend so much time with the different world religions.

**1. The Conclusion of the Enlightenment: Ignorance of the Divine.** The followers of the Enlightenment aimed to eliminate superstition by examining religion with the faculty of critical reason. Knowledge was the result of an empirical investigation of the world, and it was impossible to demonstrate the existence of God in this way. The closest that one could come to this was the watchmaker argument, which seemed to give some empirical evidence that there was a creator of the universe, but nothing more could be said about this entity. The result was that it was generally accepted among scholars that while God existed, He could not be known, and all claims to do so were regarded as based on fallacious reasoning.

Hegel takes it to be a defining characteristic of his own day that there is great pride taken in the advances of the empirical sciences and the knowledge attained by them; here he is presumably thinking about things such as the invention of the microscope or the improvements of the telescope that opened up vast new spheres of human sense experience. Despite this richness of new empirical knowledge, it is equally a point of pride that it is claimed that nothing can be known about God. He formulates this somewhat paradoxically as follows: "The more the knowledge of finite things has increased – and the increase is so great that the extension of the sciences has become almost boundless, and all regions of knowledge are enlarged to an extent which makes a comprehensive view impossible – so much the more has the sphere of the knowledge of God become contracted. There was a time when all knowledge was knowledge of God. Our own time, on the contrary, has the distinction of knowing about all and everything about an infinite number of subjects but nothing at all of God."<sup>1</sup>

He takes this result to be an unhappy conjunction of certain philosophical theories, which lead to skepticism about God, and the view of empiricism, for which only evidence based on experience counts as demonstration. Hegel believes that it became a mark of the fashionable skeptical disposition during the Enlightenment to hold the view that nothing could be known about the divine. This showed that one was savvy to the critical spirit of the age. He explains, "It no longer gives our age a concern that it knows nothing of God; on the contrary, it is regarded as a mark of the highest intelligence to hold that such knowledge is not even possible."<sup>2</sup> The advocates of the Enlightenment thus look down on religious believers with condescension, regarding them as naïve, backward and superstitious.

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<sup>1</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 1, pp. 35-36; *Jub.*, vol. 15, pp. 52-53. (*Phil. of Religion* = *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vols. 1-3, trans. by E.B. Speirs and J. Burdon Sanderson, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; New York: The Humanities Press 1962, 1968, 1972. *Jub.* = *Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe*, vols. 1-20, ed. by Hermann Glockner, Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag 1928-41.)

<sup>2</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 1, p. 36; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 53.

But, for Hegel, the view of the Enlightenment is both confused and unchristian. He believes that Christianity commands one to know God, and on this point he takes his philosophy to be in complete harmony with Christian doctrine: “What is laid down by the Christian religion as the supreme, absolute commandment, ‘Ye shall know God,’ is regarded as a piece of folly.”<sup>3</sup> One reads further, the current view of our ignorance of God is “directly opposed to the lofty nature of the Christian religion, for according to this we ought to know God, His nature, and His essential being, and to esteem this knowledge as something which is the highest of all.”<sup>4</sup> In this context he also refers to Matthew 5:48 as evidence of his claim: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”<sup>5</sup> Just as God knows, so also should humans know.

Hegel’s central argument against the prevailing view is that a key feature of Christianity is the revelation: God revealed Himself to human beings. Given this, it is difficult to understand, Hegel believes, how one can claim that He cannot be known. God revealed Himself precisely in order to be known: “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.”<sup>6</sup>

In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* Hegel traces the different forms of revelation and hiddenness in the different world religions, and the fact that God reveals himself in Christ is perhaps the single most important point that makes Christianity what it is. God does not wish to remain hidden or unknown.<sup>7</sup> The revelation is ample demonstration that God can in fact be known. Thus to say that we nonetheless can know nothing about

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<sup>3</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 1, p. 36; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 1, p. 37; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 54. He also takes up this issue in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, where he argues, “...I have implicitly touched upon a prominent question of the day; namely, that the possibility of knowing God: or rather – since public opinion has ceased to allow it to be a matter of *question* – the *doctrine* that it is impossible to know God. In direct contravention of what is commanded in Holy Scripture as the highest duty – that we should not merely love, but *know* God – the prevalent dogma involves the denial of what is there said; namely, that it is the Spirit that leads into truth, knows all things, penetrates even into the deep things of the Godhead.” Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 14; *Jub.*, vol. 11, pp. 40-41. (*Phil. of Hist* = *The Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree, New York: Willey Book Co. 1944.)

<sup>5</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 1, p. 36; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 15; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> See Hegel, *LPR*, vol. 3, p. 246; *VPR*, Part 3, p. 175: “Philosophy knows God essentially as concrete, as the spiritual, realized universality that is not jealous but communicates itself. Even light communicates itself. Whoever says that God cannot be cognized is saying that God is jealous, and is not making a serious effort to achieve cognition when he speaks of God.” (*LPR* = *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vols. 1-3, ed. by Peter C. Hodgson, trans. by Robert F. Brown, P.C. Hodgson and J.M. Stewart with the assistance of H.S. Harris, Berkeley et al.: University of California Press 1984-87. *VPR* = *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, Parts 1-3, ed. by Walter Jaeschke, Hamburg: Felix Meiner 1983-85, 1993-95.)

him is absurd, when in fact we know rather a lot about the revelation of Christ in his life and teachings.

But the problem is much broader than just one concerning the existence and nature of God; indeed, due to the criticisms of the Enlightenment Hegel believes that in the Protestant thinking of his day all of the traditional doctrines and dogmas of Christianity had been watered down, thinned out and for all intents and purposes abandoned. The critical eye of the Enlightenment thinkers has made belief in individual dogmas implausible. Again by requiring demonstration by means of empirical evidence alone, these thinkers reduced the doctrines of religion to absurdity. Hegel believes that the theologians themselves are in large part responsible for this. Under the captivating spell of modern science, they have in the course of time implicitly relinquished one doctrine after another, capitulating to the criticisms of the sciences: "There are very few dogmas of the earlier system of Church confessions left which have any longer the importance formerly attributed to them, and in their place no other dogmas have been set up. It is easy to convince oneself, by considering what is the real value now attached to ecclesial dogmas, that into the religious world generally there has entered a widespread, almost universal indifference towards what in earlier times were held to be essential doctrines of faith."<sup>8</sup> He goes on to mention a number of examples of doctrines which have fallen into discredit: the Trinity, the resurrection of the body, the divinity of Christ, eternal salvation, etc.

Clear testimony to the fact that the traditional dogmas no longer carry any force of conviction is that fact that they are, according to Hegel, consigned to being a subject of purely historical study.<sup>9</sup> In Protestant seminaries and faculties of theology students dutifully learn about the Church Councils and study the arguments that took place at them. But in this way the dogmas that are discussed are attributed to other people who lived in the past. They are thus not a part of the living religious belief of the moment. The issues are generally regarded as not being of any relevance in the present. If this is what theology is about, then it is only concerned with the finite, that is, details of historical knowledge, and not with the infinite, that is, God. Although the theologians can make a show of great erudition in their detailed knowledge of the Church Councils, they know

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<sup>8</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 1, p. 38; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 55. See also *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 1, p. 39; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 56: "...the weighty doctrines of the Trinity, of the resurrection of the body, as also the miracles in the Old and New Testaments, are neglected as matters of indifference, and have lost their importance. The divinity of Christ, dogma, what is particular to the Christian religion is set aside, or else reduced to something of merely general nature." See also *Phil. of Mind*, § 445, Addition; *Jub.*, vol. 10, p. 312: "For although even those theologians who declare God to be unknowable go to a great deal of trouble exegetical, critical, and historical about him and in this way expand theology into a complex detailed science, yet in their hands the science gets no further than a knowledge of externals, for they throw out the substantial content of their subject matter as indigestible by their weak minds and accordingly renounce all claim to a *cognition* of God, since, as we have said, a knowledge of externals does not suffice for cognition, which requires a grasp of the substantial, specific nature of the subject matter." (*Phil. of Mind* = *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*, trans. by William Wallace and A.V. Miller, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1971.)

<sup>9</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 1, pp. 40-42; *Jub.*, vol. 15, pp. 57-59.

nothing of God. In this sense Hegel sees theology in his own day as having betrayed its very office.

The result of the criticism of the advocates of the Enlightenment is a reduction of the content of religion. Nothing determinate can be known about God or the key dogmas. Hegel explicitly compares the Enlightenment with what he regards as genuine philosophy on this point concerning the correct conception of religion: "The...opposition is between philosophy and the Enlightenment. Philosophy is opposed to the attitude of indifference toward the content; it is opposed to mere opinion, to the despair involved in its renunciation of the truth, and to the view that it does not matter what content is intended. The goal of philosophy is the cognition of the truth – the cognition of God because he is the absolute truth...The Enlightenment – that vanity of understanding – is the most vehement opponent of philosophy. It takes it very ill when philosophy demonstrates the rational content in the Christian religion, when it shows that the witness of the Spirit, the truth in the most all-embracing sense of the term is deposited in religion."<sup>10</sup> While the Enlightenment empties religion of its content, philosophy tries to understand it by grasping the rational element in this content.

Controversially, Hegel claims that the function that philosophy can serve is to save religion from the neglect by the theologians. It can restore knowledge of God and the traditional dogmas and thereby put religion back onto a firm footing: "it is philosophy which is the liberation of the spirit from that shameful degradation, and which has once more brought religion out of the stage of intense suffering which it had to experience when occupying the standpoint referred to."<sup>11</sup> Philosophy must come to the rescue of religion to defend it from its ostensible defenders, the theologians: "the fact is that in recent times philosophy has been obliged to defend the domain of religion against the attacks of several theological systems."<sup>12</sup> This is a highly provocative claim that surely irritated many theologians. But, indeed,<sup>13</sup> Hegel makes it an overt point on his agenda to restore the lost doctrines for theology.

## **2. The Conclusion of Romanticism: The Split between Thinking and Feeling.**

Since, according to the advocates of the Enlightenment, God could not be demonstrated by empirical evidence and scientific reasoning, this led thinkers of the Romantic movement to the conclusion that everything having to do with the divine and religion belonged to the realm of subjectivity, inwardness and feeling. Nothing outwardly could be demonstrated in the objective sphere, and so, it was thought, the realm of religion must belong to the inward, subjective sphere. This leads to the view, still quite widespread today, that it is impossible to discuss religion or to argue for or against the existence of God since these are inward matters of the heart that cannot be demonstrated objectively or discursively.

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<sup>10</sup> Hegel, *LPR*, vol. 3, pp. 246f.; *VPR*, Part 3, p. 175.

<sup>11</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 1, p. 37; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 15; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 1, p. 32; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 49: "Indeed, the re-establishment of the doctrines of the Church, which have been reduced to a minimum by the understanding, is...the work of philosophy."

Therefore, there opened up a radical split between thinking and feeling. The realm of science and discursive rationality was that of thought, which was concerned with objective things, whereas the realm of religion was that of feeling or inward subjectivity. Hegel regards this as another disastrous feature of contemporary thinking.

As a dialectical thinker, Hegel strongly opposes the radical division between thought and feeling. His initial intuition is the idealist claim that thinking is at the heart of the different human spheres of activity. The arts, the sciences, legal systems and governments are all the products of the collective human mind or “spirit.” They develop in different contexts in different places through the centuries. In the course of this development, they take on different characteristics and shapes. Religion constitutes an aspect of human culture as well. Like the other spheres of spirit, it too develops in the different peoples and places through time. Like the other spheres of spirit, it can also be made the object of study and knowledge. Human beings are characterized by “spirit,” and every sphere of their lives is permeated by it: “it is through thought, concrete thought, or, to put it more definitely, it is by reason of his being spirit, that man is man; and from man as spirit proceed all the many developments of the sciences and arts, the interests of political life, and all those conditions which have reference to man’s freedom and will.”<sup>14</sup>

Hegel is quick to reject the view that religion is concerned with some unique or special faculty, for example, feeling or immediate knowing, whereas philosophy is concerned with thought. In the *Encyclopedia*, he refers to “the prejudice of our day and age, which separates feeling and thinking from each other in such a way that they are supposedly opposed to each other, and are even so hostile that feeling – religious feeling in particular – is contaminated, perverted, or even totally destroyed by thinking, and that religion and religiosity essentially do not have their root and their place in thinking.”<sup>15</sup> According to the Romantic account, it is human feeling which is regarded as the most important element of the individual. Hegel attempts to refute this view of the split between faith and reason as follows: “Making a separation of this kind means forgetting that only man is capable of religion, and that the lower animals have no religion, any more than right and morality belong to them....Religion, right, and ethical life belong to man alone, and that only because he is a thinking essence. For that reason *thinking* in its broad sense has not been inactive in these spheres, even at the level of feeling and belief or of representation; the activity and productions of thinking are *present* in them and are *included* in them.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 1, pp. 1f.; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> Hegel, *EL*, § 2; *Jub.*, vol. 8, p. 42. (*EL* = *The Encyclopaedia Logic. Part One of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. by T.F. Gerats, W.A. Suchting, H.S. Harris, Indianapolis: Hackett 1991.)

<sup>16</sup> Hegel, *EL*, § 2; *Jub.*, vol. 8, pp. 42f. For Hegel’s critical discussion of the split between faith and knowledge, see also his “*Aphorismen über Nichtwissen und absolutes Wissen im Verhältnisse zur christlichen Glaubenserkenntnis. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnisse der Philosophie unserer Zeit.* Von Carl Friederich G....I – Berlin, bei E. Franklin. 1829,” *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik*, 1829, nos. 99-102, pp. 789-816; nos. 105-106, pp. 833-835; see pp. 813f. Reprinted in *Vermischte Schriften*, vols. 1-2, ed. by Friedrich Förster and Ludwig Boumann, vols. 16-17 (1834-35) in *Hegel’s Werke*, vol. 17, pp. 111-148, see pp. 141f. (In English as “Review of K.F. Göschel’s *Aphorisms*,” trans. by Clark Butler in *MW*, pp. 401-429, see pp. 423ff.; *Jub.*, vol. 20, pp. 276-313, see pp. 306f.) (*Hegel’s Werke* = *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich*

Religion belongs uniquely to human beings, and from this it follows that it must imply the cognitive faculty unique to human beings: thought. One recalls Hegel's famous criticism of Schleiermacher for making feeling the organ of religious faith. This is also relevant for Hegel's criticism of Jacobi's view of a precognitive immediate knowing that is different from our usual ways of knowing.

Hegel further argues that the misunderstanding arises from the fact that when people hear the claim that religion, right and ethics are essentially concerned with thought, they mistakenly take it to mean that conscious reflection is always at work in these different spheres. Instead, Hegel's thesis is that a necessary *logos* or reason is always present and developing in these different contexts, regardless of how reflective particular individuals may or may not be. The rich content of religion is contained in the spirit of a people. Here Hegel is paradoxically in agreement with the Romantics who were interested in reviving a national German spirit by studying German folk songs, folk tales and fairy tales, which they regarded as reflecting the common cultural heritage of the German people. But at the same time he is vehemently opposed to their reduction of all religious content to the realm of subjectivity.

**3. The Problem of Content.** The negative result to which the Romantic emphasis on feeling leads is the elimination of any concrete content in faith. This is something that Romanticism has in common with the Enlightenment. For the advocates of the Enlightenment it was the inability of religion to defend itself in terms of science that led to the elimination of its key doctrines and ended in a position of skepticism or agnosticism. For Romanticism, the focus on feeling and the individual eliminated the objective content of religion and transferred everything to the sphere of personal feeling, inwardness and subjectivity. Since feeling can be related to any kind of content, there is nothing specifically to attach it to the faith of the Christian religion. In the foreword to the third edition of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* in 1830 Hegel argues that when one makes feeling the criterion, the relation of faith becomes a purely formal one. He explains, people with this mistaken conception "busy themselves at great length with a mass of indifferent external matters of the faith; but then in contrast they stand by the name of the Lord Christ in a completely barren fashion as far as the basic import and intellectual content of the faith itself is concerned; and they deliberately and scornfully disdain the elaboration of doctrine that is the foundation of the faith of the Christian church. For the spiritual, fully thoughtful, and scientific expansion [of the doctrine] would upset, and even forbid or wipe out, the self-conceit of their boasting which relies on the spiritless and fruitless assurance...that they are in possession of Christianity, and have it exclusively for their own."<sup>17</sup> It is clear that if religion is to make any sense it must contain a concrete content

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*Hegel's Werke. Vollständige Ausgabe*, vols. 1-18, ed. by Ludwig Boumann, Friedrich Förster, Eduard Gans, Karl Hegel, Leopold von Henning, Heinrich Gustav Hotho, Philipp Marheineke, Karl Ludwig Michelet, Karl Rosenkranz, Johannes Schulze. Berlin: Verlag von Duncker und Humblot 1832-45. *MW* = *Miscellaneous Writings of G.W.F. Hegel*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2002.)

<sup>17</sup> Hegel, *EL*, p. 20; *Jub.*, vol. 8, p. 27.



that is accessible to everyone. It cannot be the private, exclusive domain of specific individuals to the exclusion of others. Hegel describes this mistaken view as “the subjectivity of knowledge” which “entrenches itself as in an inaccessible place.”<sup>18</sup>

Hegel is interested in making a case not just for religion in general but for Christianity in particular. For Christianity to be a specific religion, he reasons, it must have a determinate content. This content is determined by its conception of God and its dogmas, which are objectively accessible. If it lacks this content, then an ostensible belief in Christianity could in effect be a belief in anything at all. Hegel explains this while criticizing what he takes to be a mistaken “philosophizing” view of his own age that he associates with Jacobi and some of the German Romantics: “The Christian faith implies an authority that belongs to the church, while, on the contrary, the faith of this philosophizing standpoint is just the authority of one’s own subjective revelation. Moreover, the Christian faith is an objective content that is inwardly rich, a system of doctrine and cognition; whereas the content of this [philosophical] faith is inwardly so indeterminate that it may perhaps admit that content too – but equally it may embrace within it the belief that the Dalai-Lama, the bull, the ape, etc., is God, or it may, for its own part, restrict itself to God in general, to the ‘highest essence.’”<sup>19</sup>

With these examples it is clear that content is not an indifferent part of a religion. The content is precisely what defines the individual religions and separates and distinguishes them from one another. Simply by saying that one believes is not enough to determine one’s confession. But this content is precisely the proof that belief is a matter of knowledge. One must *know* the content of one’s belief in order to distinguish it from other beliefs.

The lack of content leads to another problem. If God cannot be known and there is no concrete content given from the outside, then it is only natural that this will get filled up from the inside, namely, by some subjective notion that is idiosyncratic to the individual. Hegel explains, “While the divine being is thus placed beyond our knowledge, and outside the limit of all human things, we have the convenient license of wandering as far as we list, in the direction of our fancies. We are freed from the obligation to refer our knowledge to the divine and true. On the other hand, the vanity and egotism which characterize it, find, in this false position, ample justification; and the pious modesty which puts far from it the knowledge of God, can well estimate how much furtherance thereby accrues to its own wayward and vain strivings.”<sup>20</sup> With no concrete content to determine or restrain action, the door is open for religious fanaticism to believe the most far-fetched things and even to carry out extreme acts in the name of religion.<sup>21</sup>

Hegel is critical of this view since, he believes, it leads to a form of relativism. There

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<sup>18</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 3, p. 174; *Jub.*, vol. 16, p. 379.

<sup>19</sup> Hegel, *EL*, § 63; *Jub.*, vol. 8, p. 168.

<sup>20</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 14; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 41.

<sup>21</sup> In the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel defines evil as the disregard for the objective and the universal and giving priority to the arbitrariness of one’s own particularity. See *PR*, § 139; *Jub.*, vol. 7, pp. 200-204. (*PR* = *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. by H.B. Nisbet, ed. by Allen Wood, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 1991.)

is no objective standard for truth or knowledge of the divine, according to this conception, since the locus of truth is found in the heart of each individual. Hegel explains, "For with the thought that all objective determinateness has converged in the inwardness of subjectivity, the conviction is bound up that God gives revelation in an immediate way to man; that religion consists just in this, that man has immediate knowledge of God."<sup>22</sup> Since this knowledge is immediate, it gives the individual a special and irreplaceable role.

According to Hegel, the consent of the individual and conscience is a key feature of the modern world. In ancient cultures the individual or subjectivity was not recognized as being valid with respect to questions of morals, laws, customs, etc. Instead, it was the established objective sphere of such things which ruled with an iron hand. If accepted custom or law dictated that one do something, for example, take up the profession of one's father or marry someone that one's family has selected, then one did it, and one's own personal wishes and desires played no role in the situation. The individual did not count for much. For Hegel, it is a great breakthrough in the development of spirit that in the modern world the validity of the individual has come to be recognized. Today we believe that the assent of the individual is necessary for belief, and it is wrong to compel or coerce someone to do something against his or her will or conscience. The individual is now thought to be able to evaluate a given law, custom or belief and grant his assent if it is rational. To this extent Hegel is in agreement with the fundamental intuition of Romanticism about the subject. However, assent is directed toward something with a concrete content. There is an objective content external to the individual that one must take a stand on. We give our assent when we realize that that content is rational and thus in accordance with our rational will. With education and proper upbringing, one naturally comes to see the truth and rationality of this objective sphere, and when one reaches the age of reflection and contemplates such things for oneself, then one gives one's assent to them and complies with them. In this sense the right of the individual is recognized. It is the second aspect that, according to Hegel, the Romantics have failed to understand since they have eliminated all objective content. Assent or conscience only makes sense when it is related to something concrete with a determinate content. But when assent itself becomes the key, independent of any content, a number of problems arise.

The conception of individuality and conscience that one finds in the Romantics falls victim to these. The Romantics do not recognize the preexisting objective sphere of customs and ethics; instead, they place the entire focus on the individual's will and free choice. But this is empty of content and leads to arbitrariness. Instead of taking its truth from the objective sphere outside itself, the individual props himself up as the standard for truth and objectivity. For Hegel, this is a perversion of the modern principle of subjective freedom.

**4. Hegel's Solution.** Hegel's account of the determinate religions has long puzzled scholars since it is not immediately clear why he believes that he needs to give a detailed analysis of the history of the world's religions, many of which are little known to most

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<sup>22</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 1, p. 42; *Jub.*, vol. 15, p. 59.

philosophers. The answer lies in the issue of content. Since Hegel insists that content is an essential part of religion for all the reasons just discussed, it is important for him to examine the specific content in the different world religions in order to demonstrate that there is a historical development taking place. Only when one can discern accurately the content of the different forms of religious belief is it possible to see how the human mind, reflected in them is slowly progressing towards human freedom.

Each of the world religions is unique and has its own special set of beliefs and practices, i.e., its content. Thus in his analyses Hegel attempts to characterize each of the religions in terms of some prominent, distinguishing feature unique to them. One can see Hegel's negative response to the lack of religious content in the views of the religious movements of his time as an important motivating factor for the development of the analysis of the determinate religions. This is Hegel's way of demonstrating beyond any doubt that all religions have a determinate content and that it is absolutely essential to understand this if one is to grasp the nature of religion generally or the truth of Christianity specifically.

With the philosophy of the Enlightenment it is claimed that we cannot know the truth or God. Thus faith is divorced from any form of knowledge. In Romanticism faith then became conceived as a form of immediate knowledge or feeling in contrast to scientific knowledge, which is deemed impotent.<sup>23</sup> For this reason Hegel frequently criticizes the then current situation of religion along the same lines as he criticizes what he regards as contemporary relativism and nihilism. The goal of Hegel's lectures is to correct these misunderstandings and restore the traditional doctrines of Christianity. He believes that the only way to do this is with a historical analysis of the religions of the world.

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<sup>23</sup> Hegel, *Phil. of Religion*, vol. 3, p. 161; *Jub.*, vol. 16, pp. 365f.