This essay examines Hegel’s variegated understanding of the relationship of religion and politics, especially as articulated in his idea of state as a “secular deity” or “earthly divinity.” It does so by engaging and expanding upon themes explored by Ludwig Siep in his 2015 Der Staat als irdischer Gott: Genese und Relevanz einer Hegelschen Idee. Its focus is fourfold: 1) It affirms the special role played by a civil religion in sustaining and maintaining institutions of modern states. 2) It details the religious dimension of Hegel’s theory of the corporation to explicate an account of rights understood not just formally but with reference to substantive claims oriented to considerations of social justice. 3) It ascribes to Hegel a political theology rooted in the uniquely self-causative elements of his constitutional theory and directed to ongoing reflection by community members on the conditions of their commonality. 4) It asserts that Hegel’s notion of Weltgeist furnishes elements of a transnational account of human rights, yet one that both depends upon and entails proper development of Hegel’s notion of state as an earthly divinity.

In his recently published Der Staat als irdischer Gott¹, Ludwig Siep advances a wide-ranging account of the relationship of religion and politics under conditions of modernity. His distinctive claim is that the deification of the state that finds expression in the work of modern political thinkers allows for and facilitates the plurality of religious and other worldviews within a particular political community. For Siep, such deification equips the state with the authority ena-

¹ Ludwig Siep, Der Staat als irdischer Gott. Genese und Relevanz einer Hegelschen Idee (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as DS.
bling it to serve as the neutral body needed to regulate and balance
the diverse claims and values of the individuals and groups comprising modern societies. He advances this thesis by considering a range of related issues, including the idea of individual rights, social welfare policies, the ethicality of modern states, religious freedom, and the fate of individual rights following a demise in the power and authority of the neutral state. He explores these issues by considering the thought of seminal modern political theorists, including Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant and Fichte. His primary attention, however, is directed to Hegel, whose concept of a secular deity best articulates what Siep regards as the relationship of religion and politics under conditions of modernity. Tellingly, the book is subtitled the “Genesis and Relevance of a Hegelian Idea.”

I share Siep’s general view of the relationship of religion and politics and in particular Hegel’s relevance for explicating that relationship. I do so, however, in a way that departs from Siep on certain core matters. In what follows I clarify some those differences. My aim, however, is less to challenge Siep’s specific claims than to draw on his findings to explore additional ways in which to construe elements of the Hegelian account of the relationship of religion and politics.

Four matters in particular guide my analysis. First, while I accept the proposition that Hegel’s notion of the state as a secular divinity affirms the idea of a neutral political authority that at least ideally accommodates and oversees the diverse interests, views and belief systems that comprise modern societies, I do so by accentuating the idea of a civil religion that serves to sustain and maintain the institutions of neutral state. In this regard I follow Siep’s attention to the ethical (sittliche) foundations of the modern state, yet do so with appeal not to the idea of ethical war but to a political republicanism that conditions the viability of a modern polity.

Second, while I accept that Hegel’s idea of a secular deity entails commitment to a “neutral state...with equal rights for all citizens” (DS, 11), I argue that its sustaining principle of equality is to be construed not just formally but substantively as well, and in a way committed to rectifying the material inequities and forms of social disenfranchisement that commonly accompany purely formal notions of equal treatment. Here I focus on Hegel’s concept of the corporation, which I argue is sustained by an account of social justice infused with religious underpinnings. In this regard I draw a stronger connection than does Siep between Hegel’s idea of the religious community or congregation (Gemeinde) and the secular, socio-economically conceived corporation.
Third, I argue that analysis of Hegel’s conception of the corpora-
tion discloses what Siep contends is absent in Hegel: a commit-
tment to a political theology oriented to shared ends and values. However, I
hold that such commitment, though rooted in an affirmation of
Protestant Christianity, is not informed by a set of substantive values
or a specific comprehensive doctrine, something at odds with mod-
ern political pluralism. Instead, and consonant with his understand-
ing of Protestantism as der Geist des Nachdenkens, Hegel is shown to
espouse a uniquely reflexive account of shared ends, one sustained
by ongoing reflection by community members on the conditions of
their shared commonality. Here I reference Hegel’s constitutional
theory in order to delineate a notion of state understood not simply
as a source of political authority but as a secularly realized version of
Spinoza’s concept of the divine as causa sui.

Fourth, I contest Siep’s claim that current focus on the concept of
human rights entails an end to the idea of the state as an earthly
divinity. (DS, 188ff) I argue instead that Hegel’s understanding of
such a state not only is compatible with but entails a robust account
of both of global justice and universal human rights, even as that
account also affirms a notion of bounded political communities.

1. Religion, State Impartiality, and Modern Republican-

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In many respects Hegel advances a view of the relationship of reli-
gion and politics significantly akin to conventional liberal positions
on the issue. He rejects the idea of a state religion; he condemns
religious interference in the affairs of state and political life gener-
ally; he acknowledges the plurality of religious confessions; he claims
that the state must remain agnostic as regards any particular reli-
gious creed; he assigns to the state the task of protecting the right of
conscience and the free expression of belief; he refuses to grant

2 For a related discussion of these issues, see Andrew Buchwalter, "The Idea of a
Conception of the Relationship of Religion and Politics under Conditions of
Modernity and Globalization," Existenz: An International Journal of Philosophy,
Religion, Politics, and the Arts, vol. 1, no. 1–2 (Fall 2006).

3 For the most explicit articulation of Hegel’s position on this matter, see G. W. F.
Hegel, Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts, in Werke, Bd. 7, (ed.) E.
Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1986), tr. by H. B.
Nisbet as Elements of the Philosophy of Right (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 1991), §270. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as GPR.
ecclesiastical organizations exemption from state laws; and he asserts that religious argumentation can play a role in political life only if it acknowledges public norms of rationality.

In other respects, however, Hegel proposes an account of the relationship of religion and politics that diverges from standard liberal understandings. This is so not simply because he regards as folly attempts to erect firm walls of separation between religion and politics. It is also because he holds that religion plays a crucial role in the life of a modern political community. Indeed, he contends that a modern polity entails notions of collective identity that draws on religious resources, even saying that the state should foster religious beliefs and practices. (See GPR, §270)

Yet acknowledgement of the role of religion in public life in no way undermines Hegel’s commitment to core elements of a liberal understanding of a polity. Instead, religion, at least in part, goes hand in hand with that commitment. Hegel makes this point in various ways. One is that noted by Siep: the deification of the state is one means to assign to it the independence and sovereign authority needed to oversee the presence and interaction of creeds, doctrines, and beliefs in societies lacking a common vision of the good. In addition, the very notion of individual rights, together with the “infinite” dignity of the person, is one that for Hegel derives from religion, Christianity in particular. Further, Hegel’s contention—and this is accentuated here—is that a genuine liberal political order depends on an ethos and a shared cultural disposition rooted in religion.

Consistent with much of modern political thought, Hegel maintains that the demise of theologically defined conceptions of state has released politics from traditional attention to a pre-given conception of the good. Henceforth politics attends to the institutional structures and mechanisms needed to ensure individual rights and liberties. Included here are both the private liberties enabling individuals to define and pursue their own notions of the good and the public liberties enabling a people collectively to define and shape itself. Yet, for Hegel, such mechanisms are not self-regulating. They require an enabling public culture characterized by recognition of and support for the principles informing liberal political institutions.

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e.g., individual rights, fairness, mutual respect, public deliberation, and the idea of publicly accountable political authority. The structures of a just society must be embedded in a common ethos—indeed, an ethical life (Sittlichkeit)—characterized by a collective commitment to their value and desirability. Only when so anchored can modern societies repel threats emanating from the autonomizing of its own principles—either individual liberty operating against the public structures that that liberty presupposes or the institutional structures detached from the individual interests they are designed to serve. Hegel may reject appeal to any preexistent notion of a common good; yet he does hold that the political order thus liberated cannot be properly sustained unless its members are communally prepared to affirm the principles and values upon which it is based and to which it is committed.

These considerations attest to the importance of religion for Hegel’s political philosophy, as they call attention to the cultural conditions presupposed by a modern polity. Religion is generally the cultural phenomenon whose function is precisely to mediate subjective sentiment on the one hand and objective norms and values on the other. Focused on “an inwardly revealed eternal verity,” it is the mechanism whereby received values and duties are apprehended as subjectively meaningful and ordinary beliefs and attitudes evince support for and embrace of norms that are objectively binding. Religion for Hegel is at once as the everyday concretization of publicly binding principles and the subjective commitment to them on the part of community members. Like Durkheim after him, Hegel discerns in religious communities practices of obligation that simultaneously bind and motivate its members. Such communities instantiate an ethos that itself serves as the core of a polity defined in the interpenetration of objective institutions and subjective sentiment. They crystallize Hegel’s claim “that religion is the very substance of ethical life and of the state.” (E3, §552)

Religion, however, connotes more than the central property of a genuine polity and a political ethos; it is the source of a political order’s stability and integration. In its explicit commitment to the interrelationship of universal and particular, religion nurtures the dispositions and cultural sensibilities needed to maintain a political

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order under modern conditions and circumstances. Not only does it foster sensitivity to how developed social relations and public institutions condition the modes of individual freedom central to modern societies; it demonstrates how the modes of mutual dependency constitutive of modern societies cannot be properly sustained unless individuals explicitly commit themselves to upholding public institutions and the structures that mediate public and private life. And inasmuch as a polity consists a limine in the conjunction of objective sentiment and supporting subjective sentiment— inasmuch as a polity has substance only as Volksgeist— religion helps constitute the very reality of a genuine political order. A source of civic education and engagement, religion sustains a political order, both in upholding its institutions and in informing the latter's basic structure. "[R]eligion is that moment which integrates the state at the deepest level of the sentiment of citizens." (GPR, §270A)

Hegel’s position is similar to that of Rousseau, whose concept of political life also depends on a religiosity that inter alia clarifies the concept of the political, informs the latter’s structure, and accounts for its sustainability. Yet important differences also separate the two positions. If both thinkers espouse a type of republican religion (something advocated as well by contemporary de Tocqueville6), Rousseau’s is presented as a “purely civil profession of faith.”7 By contrast, Hegel links his civil religion to Christianity, whose other-worldliness for Rousseau served to undermine a republican political culture. Christianity and specifically Protestant Christianity is for Hegel a constitutive element in an envisaged republican political culture. We leave aside for now Hegel’s general understanding of the special relationship between Protestant Christianity and a secular polity. Here it is enough to note that what has been termed Hegel’s “civic Protestantism”8 is compatible with his version of a political liberalism and his claims regarding state neutrality. Two points in particular merit attention.

The first is largely strategic. In championing an ethico-religious culture as a condition for a liberal polity, Hegel is not simply making a theoretical claim; he is also participating practically in the public

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life of his time. As he does in his university lectures, so here as well he seeks to foster in his compatriots an appreciation of their political responsibilities. Consistent with his general claims about embodied ethicality, he holds that that goal is best achieved by appealing to existing values and assumptions. By engaging such beliefs, even if in ways that may depart from their conventional understandings, Hegel is able to invoke values already accepted by his fellow citizens, thus eschewing the impotent external moralizing against which he so often polemicizes. For Hegel, those values were intertwined with the “Protestant cultural context”\(^9\) of his age. In this regard, then, appeal to Protestantism is not an endorsement of a particular creed but rather part of a practical-political effort designed to cultivate in compatriots the dispositions needed to affirm and maintain modern political institutions. One can, to be sure, question whether institutions rooted in a Protestant system of values can in fact evince the desired creedal neutrality. Still, Hegel’s position is that they lack viability without a motivationally committed citizenry, and such commitment itself depends on an enabling set of values operative in the everyday beliefs and practices of ordinary individuals.

To be sure, Hegel’s endorsement of Protestantism is not simply strategic. He is committed—and this is the second point—to its substantive value as well, claiming that it founds modern notions of liberty and a liberal polity generally. Protestantism is indeed the “religion of freedom.” (GPR, §270Z) Committed as it is to the priesthood of every believer, it is rooted in and supportive of “the self-sufficient and inherently infinite personality of the individual, the principle of subjective freedom.” (GPR, §185A) As such, Protestantism undergirds modern notions of human dignity and individual rights. It also underwrites general expectations for the public accountability of political authority and in particular the view that everything valid in the state must proceed from “insight and reasoned argument.” (GPR, §316Z) With Protestantism, “the principle of freedom has penetrated into the worldly realm itself,”\(^10\) with the

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result that phenomena such as “law, property, social morality, government, constitutions, etc., must conform to general principles, in order that they may accord with the idea of free will and be rational.”

What merits emphasis, however, is that even such substantive endorsement of Protestantism does not entail endorsement on Hegel’s part of a particular creed or doctrine. Particularly distinctive in Hegel’s position is rather the way it accommodates support for the general conditions of a liberal polity. Central to Hegel’s notion of Protestantism as a “religion of freedom” is its self-reflexivity; indeed, he terms Protestantism itself as “the spirit of reflection” (der Geist des Nachdenkens). In the political context, this means Protestantism endorses a political practice in which individuals are focused not on a particular end but rather the processes of collective self-interpretation and self-definition themselves. As Hegel asserted already in his early System der Sittlichkeit, the “divinity of a people” lies in its character as a “deliberating and reflective people.” He argued similarly in his Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, claiming that religion is the domain in which “a nation defines what it considers to be true.” Christian republicanism, for Hegel, entails support not for a particular doctrine or creed but rather for the processes by which individuals, individually and in concert, define for themselves the nature and conditions of their shared existence.

VPR3. Page references, separated by a slash, will be first to the German original, then to the English translation.

14 Hegel, System der Sittlichkeit, 101/System of Ethical Life, 176.
15 G. W. F. Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte, Bd. 1, (ed.) J. Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1994), 125, tr. by H. B. Nisbet as Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 105, emphasis added. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as VPWG. Page references, separated by a slash, will be first to the German original, then to the English translation.
To be sure, such Christian republicanism does affirm a robust notion of collective or shared identity. Here, too, religion is the “articulation of a community regarding its own spirit.” (PhG, 482/398) Yet such commitment is still not affirmation of a specific substantive doctrine, vision of the good, or conception of collective identity. Here we leave aside the question of how for Hegel a notion of shared identity goes hand in hand with an account of political pluralism. It is enough to note, again, that appeal to Protestantism here allows for a robust notion of collective identity antagonistic to substantive accounts of what that identity might be. Understood as the “spirit of reflection,” and thus also as the reflexivity of spirit itself, Protestantism both permits and prescribes a distinctive notion of collective identity, one defined not by a particular set of values but with reference to ongoing reflection on the conditions for shared commonality itself. It is not coincidental that in the Encyclopedia Hegel characterizes the shared content of an earthly divinity as “indwelling self-consciousness” (E3, §552), where shared reflection on the conditions of common identity is the identity itself. In that same work he also defines religion as a “the rendering conscious of ethicality” (bewußtwerdende Sittlichkeit). (E3 §552) At issue here, however, is not the rendering conscious an already existing account of ethicality. In line with his thesis concerning the ontological creativity of spirit’s self-reflexivity, Hegel’s is a specifically reflexive account of ethicality, one for which communal attention to the conditions of community is the commonality itself.

2. Religion, Social Rights, and the Corporation

In his account of the neutral state entailed by Hegel’s idea of a secular divinity, Siep rightly references a political order that promotes and accommodates the “equal rights for all citizens.” (DS, 11) Hegel’s position on this score can be further clarified by recognizing that his support is not simply for a formal notion of equal rights. Indeed, he contends that an account of formal equality—one directed to, say, the abstractly uniform rights of person, property, and contract—can

easily engender a host of social inequalities that undermine and even deny the rights to which modern individuals are formally entitled. As he demonstrates in his account of civil society, modern societies foster modes of wealth-maximizing behavior that not only create and perpetuate significant disparities in wealth between rich and poor but engender boom-bust economic cycles that entail the systemic pauperization of large numbers of people. Part and parcel of such pauperization are forms of political disfranchisement that effectively deprive many individuals of the liberty and welfare rights to which they are entitled as members of modern industrial societies. Accordingly, a commitment to equal rights cannot take the form simply of a commitment to the principle of formal equality. That commitment must also address the inequities, deprivations, and actual forms of injustice that are commonly experienced—owing in part to society’s narrow adherence to that principle—by certain individuals in modern communities.

Hegel addresses these issues in the final section of the doctrine of civil society, that devoted to the Police (Polizei) and Corporations (Korporation). If in the previous section, the Administration of Justice (Rechtsplege), he explicates an abstract conception of justice and equality, the Police and the Corporation have the task of addressing the material inequities and forms of political disenfranchisement experienced by individuals adversely affected by the operation of market mechanisms. The Police denotes a centralized public authority charged not only with regulating commerce, but underwriting resources enabling individuals to function in market societies while providing assistance to the poor and needy. The Corporation denotes self-organizing professional and work-related associations dedicated to the particular well-being of its members. In the case of the police the relationship of general and particular interests remains largely “external,” relying on formal institutional structures that administer to the welfare needs of everyday individuals. By contrast, the corporation evinces an internal or “immanent” relationship of general and particular, as here community attends to the particular well-being of its own members, just as individual members come to appreciate that their particular well-being is intertwined with that of the community. (GPR, §249) In what follows I examine the account of social justice Hegel advances in his theory of the corporation, focusing on how it, too, instantiates his view of the relationship of religion and politics.

A central function of the corporation is to address the subsistence needs of the poor and others adversely affected by the dynamics of market mechanisms. Committed as it is to the particular well-being
of its individual members the corporation thereby explicitly addresses the concrete needs neglected in purely formal accounts of equal rights. Significantly, though, that commitment is itself rooted in certain religious and, in particular, Protestant convictions. Here we leave aside Hegel’s general view that for Christ “the gospel is preached for the poor”\textsuperscript{18}—a view that has led some to call him a Christian socialist.\textsuperscript{19} Instead, it is enough to note the place occupied in Hegel’s conception of social justice by the “infinite” worth of the individual. Appeal to this conception underwrites the “right to life” (“absolutely essential to human beings”) presupposed in an account of subsistence rights; it is also a source for rights generally, including the liberty rights of person, and property, all of which, Hegel claims, depend on an absolute right to life.\textsuperscript{20}

A second consideration pertains to the threats posed to the infinite dignity of human beings by the normal operations of market societies. Those operations and the wealth disparities they engender can so distinguish the life situation of the poor from that of the rich that the former’s very membership in a shared humanity is itself called into question, and not just by the wealthy but by the poor themselves, who increasingly internalize their social disenfranchisement. For Hegel, the problem is addressed by the corporation, which recognizes its fellow members not in terms of specific achievement but simply by virtue of membership status alone. The same recognition extends even to the wealthy, who in the corporation are also acknowledged as such, and not—as is characteristically the case in market societies—through external displays of wealth. In both cases “corporate” support for the intrinsic dignity of the individual reflects a secularly realized religious culture animated by commitment to the “inherently infinite personality of the individual.” (GPR, §185A)

A similar point pertains to respect for the principle of individual particularity accommodated in the corporation. Proper to the esteem or honor conferred by and received in corporate bodies is precisely


the understanding that the individual is recognized not as a bearer of the abstract rights uniformly possessed by all citizens but as a person distinguished by the particular talents, skills, and capabilities specific to membership a corporate community. In this way the corporation serves to actualize one of the central principles of civil society itself—the “particular person” with concrete needs and wants. (GPR, §182) But it also actualizes Protestant Christianity, which, in locating the divine “in the depths of man’s inmost nature,” likewise affirms the infinite value of the “individual as particular.”

Corporate membership is further distinctive, as the individual is here recognized not just for his or her particular set of skills and talents but as one who as a general matter is deemed worthy of recognition. In the corporation the individual is honored in his particularity not just for the particular attribute itself but because he or she is assumed to instantiate a general right of particularity. It is this capacity for “mediated representation”—one that recognizes the particular as the expression of a universal (PdR, 204–206)—that distinguishes the corporate community’s particular esprit de corps. Yet this sensibility—the generalized appreciation of the individual as particular—is also fostered by Protestant Christianity, which introduced an “an entirely new spirit” to that effect. (VPG, 415/343) As part of its “incorporation [Einbildung] of reason in reality,” Protestantism initiated a general Bildungsprozess whereby members of a cultivated humanity (gebildete Menschheit) increasingly recognize one another qua particular individuals as bearers of a general right of subjective freedom. (GPR, §270) In this respect the corporation, itself shaped by what Hegel calls the “reflexivity of Bildung” (PdR, 205), articulates a dimension of Christian culture supportive of a


corporate culture informed by a highly mediated understanding of universal and particular.\textsuperscript{24}

The salience of the corporation for Hegel's account of the conjunction of religion and politics is evidenced by its affinity to his view of religious communities, associations or congregations (\textit{Gemeinde}), especially the core members comprising what he calls the cultus. Religious communities and, in particular, members of cultic communities play an exemplary role in the realization of spirit in the world, as the task of such "citizens of the kingdom of God" (VPR 3, 254/331) is just to realize the unity of human and the divine both in their own lives and the life of the religious community as a whole. Motivated by a "mutual love of community" (VPR 3, 149/218), members of a cultic community seek to embody principles of reciprocity in their own relationships, while forging the communal conditions for mutuality generally. In many ways, the corporation replicates features of a religious community. Not only does it articulate the bonds of mutuality and "solidarity" (GdR, 203) appropriate to a spiritual community; inasmuch as the activity of corporate members involves promoting the cooperative itself, the corporation, like the congregation, acquires full reality only in its members' commitment to communality itself. In this respect the corporation is itself the "spirit of the corporation" (GPR, §289A), for like a community of spirit, it attains reality to the degree that that community reflexively makes its own commonality the object of consciousness and will.

There are, however, important differences between the religious community and the corporate body. Chief among these is the decidedly worldly character of the fellowship operative in corporations. Whereas religious associations are centrally informed by humanitarian appeal to principles of brotherly love, corporations are constituted and sustained in response to the systemically induced threats to mundane sociality resulting from the dynamics of market societies.\textsuperscript{25} They are thus more directly attuned to forms of material degradation and legal disenfranchisement experienced by modern individuals. In addition, the forms of social action specific to corporate community are directed less to fostering social fellowship as such but to correct-

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ing the social pathologies that undermine both fellowship as well as individual well-being.

Still, appreciation of the worldly character of corporate fellowship in no way undermines its religious dimension. Indeed, one might even say that, owing to this character, corporate bodies are more “religious” than religious communities themselves. This follows from an account of religion that, directed to the unity of the infinite and finite, itself depends on worldly realization. What Hegel says generally of Christianity obtains here as well: “What is required...is that this reconciliation should also be accomplished in the worldly realm.” (VPR 3, 331/340) It is noteworthy that in his 1830 “Address on the Tercentenary of the Augsburg Confession,” Hegel, invoking Protestantism, explicitly commends, not theologians or ecclesiastical leaders, but those individuals—princes, secular authorities, and members of the general lay community—who hold responsibility for realizing freedom and ethicality in the existing world.26

In this regard Hegel’s Gemeindetheologie is indeed, pace Siep, political theology as well. (DS, 134f) For one thing, Hegel suggests that if the Gemeinde is indeed committed to “service to the community” (GPR, §270A), then it cannot simply take the form of a religious body distinct from other social entities. Given Hegel’s understanding of religion as a principle of both mediation and world realization, the Gemeinde must itself find expression in the social world generally. Further, Hegel’s advocacy of Protestantism is based on an understanding of Christianity predicated not on the monastic denial of mundane needs typical of Catholicism, but in the manner in which individuals conduct themselves in everyday worldly affairs. (E3, §552) Moreover, the effort to establish ethical community in the face of the myriad conflicts and bifurcation confronting corporate bodies represents a vibrant affirmation of a notion of Christianity that, positing “itself as what is differentiated from itself” (VPR 3, 216/291), itself seeks to span the chasm between the infinite and the finite, spiritual unity and worldly bifurcation. (GPR, §184) For Hegel,

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“religious commonality” (religiöse Gemeinschaftlichkeit) does indeed find realization in the corporation. (GPR, §270A; trans. mod.)

3. The State as Secular Deity, Constitutionalism, and the Idea of Political Self-Causation

Central to Hegel’s account of Protestantism and its notion of worldly realized spirit is the contribution of individuals to that realization. This for Hegel is a feature of the Protestant conviction that individuals must “accomplish the reconciliation in themselves.” It is also a feature of spirit itself, which, qua unity of substance and subjectivity, depends for its realization not just on the objective reconciliation of the infinite and the finite, the sacred and the secular, and the spiritual and the profane, but on conscious affirmation of that mediation by those comprising secular reality. Nor does realized spirit merely affirm a received conception of spirit. Rather, spirit itself is only first actualized in its conscious appropriation. Realized spirit, for Hegel, is the self-knowing actuality of spirit. (GPR, §270A)

The point speaks to Hegel’s notion of state as a secular divinity and the uniquely creative nature of a polity expressive of a Christian “religion of freedom.” Such a polity denotes a community constituted in the relations of mutuality and reciprocity expressive of a notion of freedom understood as Bei sich selbst sein. As such, it articulates and enacts the Protestant principle of interdependence of humans and the divine and a notion of freedom shaped via an emphatic account of the relationship of selfhood in otherness. (VGP, 351f/149f) In addition, however, a political community is constituted not just in relations of commonality but above all in the reflexive commitment to the conditions of commonality itself. In this way Hegel’s secular divinity, understood as “indwelling self-consciousness” (E3, §552), articulates the idea of spirit and in particular a notion of Protestant-
ism understood as “the spirit of reflection.” Further, in line with a
notion of spirit whose proper reality is established only in the pro-
cess of substance becoming subject to itself, the very being of a
community is properly constituted only in reflexive processes of self-
interpretation and self-definition. In this respect Hegel’s notion of a
polity gives voice to the notion of absolute creativity associated with
divine power. Understood as “the world which spirit has created for
itself” (GPR, §272Z) or a “world of spirit produced from within itself
as a second nature” (GPR, §4), a properly realized political commu-

ty articulates an account of humanity which, while “considered finite
for itself, is at the same time the Image of God and a source of infinity
in itself.” (VPG, 403/333; trans. mod.) Hegel thereby also invokes
Spinoza’s concept of divine self-causation—“a fundamental notion in
all speculation” (VGP, 168/333)—in fashioning an account of politi-
cal sovereignty. (GPR, §66; E3, §17)

To be sure, the language of self-causation should not be misun-
derstood. If a people can be said to constitute itself in this emphatic
way, it is not through autarkic self-creation; at issue is no creation ex
nihilo. Not unlike Edmund Burke, Hegel stresses that political self-
constitution always occurs against the backdrop of received customs,
traditions, and practices. Indeed, consistent with the concept of spirit
itself, a political community constitutes itself only in the process of
renewing and restating its identity in the face existing and often
changing customs, traditions, and practices. If a political community
is self-creative, it is by way of the historical process in which it
reconstructively cultivates and thereby actualizes existing realities.
At issue is indeed “the self-developing principle of a people in histo-
ry”; self-constitution denotes the process through which “a people
makes itself in history through itself.” (VNSW, §134)

Yet none of this gainsays the emphatically “religious” dimension
of Hegel’s notion of political self-creation. Religion for Hegel is ex-
emplified by Reformation Christianity. Central to Hegel’s view of the
Reformation is an account of the realization of spirit intertwined
with a transformation of existing practices—indeed, the “transfor-
mation of secular life by the principle of freedom.” (VPWG, 62/54;
emphasis added) The task of the Reformation is thus itself recon-
structive: to establish that “the laws, customs, constitutions and all
that belongs to the actuality of spiritual consciousness should be
rational.” Nor could it be otherwise. If the absolute or infinite is

31 Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie II, 501/Lectures on the
History of Philosophy, vol. 2, 22.
properly established only locating itself in what is alien to itself, then
divine self-causation itself depends on processes by which human
beings reinterpret and redefine themselves in ongoing efforts to
come to terms with the existing conditions of their existence.

The notion that Hegel’s idea of a secular divinity takes the form of
processes of political self-constitution may seem at odds with Hegel’s
well-known championing of the constitutional monarchy, a point
made by Siep in questioning the present reading of Hegel’s position.
(DS, 127, 135f) Nor is there any doubt that the monarchy plays an
important role in Hegel’s political thought or even that he ascribes to
it divine status. Still, recognition of the role the monarchy does play
does not deny the arguably more important role played by processes
of political self-constitution in Hegel’s notion of a secular divinity.
Noteworthy, then, is that, whereas the decisions and conduct of the
monarch are subject to constitutional requirements, the legislative
branch, directed to “new and further determination” of law, “is itself
a part of the constitution.” (GPR, §298) Accordingly, the modes of
collective self-interpretation and self-interpretation that inform
legislative decision-making are indeed elements, as is not the case
with monarchical agency, in the processes of self-constitution central
to a secular theory of divine self-causation. In addition, while Hegel
does claim that, qua realized reason in the world, the monarch is a
form of divinity, it remains a “natural divinity,” hereditarily linked to
circumstances of birth. As such, it possesses a constitutional status
inferior to that of a self-constituting polity, which, able to provide—if
qualifiedly—for its own foundation, has the form of a “rational
divinity.” (VNSW, §139)

4. The State as Secular Deity and the Idea of Universal
Human Rights

One of the important claims Ludwig Siep makes in his book is that
Hegel’s notion of an earthly divinity has been undermined by recent
historical developments. Developments in international law and
global economics, for instance, have called into question Hegel’s state
centrism and his claims about the absolute authority of the sovereign
state. In this regard Siep notes the role increasingly played by anoth-
er resource for securing the worth and dignity of the individual: the

32 For a related discussion of the issue considered in this section, see Andrew
Buchwalter, “Hegel’s Conception of an ‘International We,’” in Dialectics, Politics,
201–13.
idea of universal human rights. In doing so, he does not claim that
global developments entail an end of the nation-state; indeed, he
contends that nation states remain essential to the defence of human
rights. Still, his view is that global economic and political develop-
ments have raised questions about Hegel's notion of state as a secu-
lar divinity and the political authority attached to it. (DS, 196–220)

It is undeniable that the realities of globalization have challenged
traditional notions of state sovereignty. It is undeniable as well that
the idea of universal human rights plays an increasingly prominent
role in normative discourse. It is doubtful, however, if these devel-
opments evince an end to the notion of a secular divinity as under-
stood by Hegel. In this section I claim not only that they do not but
that they are in some measure entailed by that notion. I make two
points: (i) while Hegel clearly does champion a notion of nation-state
sovereignty, he does so not in an exclusionary state-centric manner
but in a way that facilitates and forges transnational connections
among states and peoples; and (ii) such transnationality goes hand
in hand with an Hegelian understanding of universal human rights,
even as the latter also reaffirms a notion of bounded communities.

As we have seen, Hegel's account of a secular divinity is de/g976ined
by self-causative processes of collective self-constitution. As such, it
comports with his understanding of nation-state sovereignty. Con-
sistent with his theory of freedom, sovereignty is not simply the
independence from external interference associated with conven-
tional notions of territorial inviolability. Nor does it just denote
internal structural mechanisms, such as the institutional measures
that protect and facilitate the private and public liberties of citizens.
Instead, collectives, like individuals, are properly sovereign when
they also know and establish themselves as free. A sovereign politi-
cal body is indeed a “being in and for itself.” (GPR, §/g865/g865/g863)
In this respect, self-consciousness is a de/g976ining feature of sovereign political
entities. Sovereignty is re/g976lected in a community's “self-
consciousness in relation to its own truth and being.” (VPWG,
114/96)

Hegel understands self-consciousness roughly on the model of
Kant's transcendental unity of apperception and, in particular, the
idea of the identity of identity and difference. This entails a notion of
sovereign identity as selfhood in otherness. On this view, a communi-
ty is properly sovereign when its members can know and recognize
themselves in the conditions shaping their existence. Among other
things, this affirms a notion of sovereignty at odds with atomistic and
“monological” accounts. Consonant with his rejection of a Cartesian
notion of self-consciousness, Hegel maintains that I know and under-
stand myself as a self only in relation to others selves. To recall the celebrated sentence from the Phenomenology of Spirit: “Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.” (PhG, 144/110) Hegel makes this point above all with reference to the identity of individuals. But he argues similarly with regard to cultural communities. Here, too, a community establishes itself as such only with reference to other communities. It is in “the relationship of nations to other nations” that a people is able “to perceive itself...and to have itself as an object.” (VPWG, 121/101) Nor is Hegel suggesting that a sovereign nation makes such external reference simply in order to enhance an existing and already established conception of identity. He asserts instead that that identity itself is properly first constituted only when a subject integrates the other’s perspective into its own self-apprehension. In line with the theory of reciprocal recognition that informs his account of interpersonal relations, he claims that one community can acquire an expansive perspective on its own self-perception only if it both takes into account how it is perceived by the other and incorporates that perception into its own sense of identity. One nation is “completed” in recognition of and by the other. (GPR, §331; trans. mod.) For Hegel, sovereign states are self-conscious communities, autonomous in the consciousness of their self-sufficiency, and thus “depend[ent] on the perception and will of the other.” (GPR, §331)

Hegel’s theory of reciprocal recognition is important, however, not just for the identity of individual states or peoples. He also maintains that such recognitive processes give rise—fitfully and often tragically, to be sure—to a transnational form of shared identity, a Weltgeist, as it were. The reciprocal process through which the identities of communities are reciprocally transformed and (re)shaped is also process of mutual adjustment and adaption wherein communities at least tendentially forge agreement on common norms and values and therewith even a shared sense of self-identity. As in the relation of individual persons, so, too, with communities: the “I” becomes a “We.” The dialectical interchange of national self-consciousnesses contributes to a “trend...towards unity”33 culminating in the “universal self-consciousness” (VPR, 69/133) Hegel variously terms a “universal identity” (GPR, §331) or a “universal spirit.” (GPR, §339Z)

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Hegel characterizes such shared identity, equally understood as an expression of spirit realized in the world, with reference to the then current state of “European nations,” which increasingly have come to “form a family with respect to the universal principles of their legislation, customs, and culture.” (GPR, §339Z) Underlying such commonality, however, is an emergent law of peoples (Völkerrecht) informed by a principle of universal right. (GPR, §333) This principle is also central to the account of international law sketched by Kant in Perpetual Peace. Unlike Kant, however, Hegel does not construe right as a moral postulate or a priori principle contraposed to the life forms and self-conceptions of individual cultures. On the recognitive account, universal right is a principle generated, clarified and validated in the historical interactions of peoples themselves. While Hegel follows Kant in presenting rights as a universal principle, he does not assign it universality because it articulates some essential property or capacity of human beings. Its universality is instead an inner universality (GPR, §339), one that derives from the real process of the world’s persons and people actually forging agreements about the norms governing their sociation. It is not coincidental that for Hegel right finds its most complete expression in his account of world history, for it is just in the arduous process of historical development that the principle of right is concretely validated and realized. (GPR, §345) World history is indeed “the world’s court of judgment” (Weltgericht). (GPR, §340)

To be sure, Hegel is not suggesting that right is wholly a product of recognitive relations. If for no other reason, this is precluded by his particular understanding, central as well to his account of the historicity of reason, that the recognitive relations themselves presuppose some prior acceptance of norms of right and cooperative mutuality. Appreciation of this point, however, does not gainsay Hegel’s general view that the validity of the principle of right is itself the product of recognitive relations. For Hegel, universal right is that which possesses “validity in and for itself.” (GPR, §333) In his thought such validity denotes that which is true not only for the theoretical observer but also for those to whom it applies. On this account, then, the principle of rights acquires validation in the actual processes by which those affected forge, acknowledge and endorse

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34 Immanuel Kant, Perpetual Peace and Other Essays, (tr.) T. Humphrey (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983), 118ff.
35 For his part, Siep follows Hegel in invoking an account of “historically educated reason”—one that is neither “a priori” nor “merely conventional”—to ground an account of human rights. (DS 203f)
claims concerning the conditions of their sociation. However much, then, relations of recognition may draw on received conceptions of right and justice, those conceptions themselves acquire validation only in and through historically actual processes of reciprocal recognition. In this sense world history is not only the world’s court of judgment but also the final element in the justificatory program that is Hegel’s philosophical science of right, devoted as it is to “the Idea of right—the concept of right and its actualization.” (GPR, §1)

Hegel further characterizes this culminating dimension of his science of right by asserting that, against the “restricted” principle of individual Volksgeistern, Weltgeist denotes right’s “unrestricted” realization. But in doing so he does not dismiss the continuing significance and viability of particular Volksgeistern. In line with his account of dialectics, Weltgeist reaffirms these individual realities even as it surpasses them. As a principle of Geist, Weltgeist is affirmed as “unrestricted” only inasmuch as it is perceived and known as unrestricted. (GPR, §340) Yet such knowledge depends on concurrent appreciation of what is also is distinct, differentiated and restricted. In addition, while Weltgeist is for Hegel the final realization of reason in the world, its achievement does not entail an end to conflict or further development. As spirit’s “unending struggle with itself” (VPWG, 152/127; trans. mod.), it is itself sustained in the ongoing interaction of peoples and communities establishing and reestablishing the nature and conditions of their recognitive relations. Further, as the “absolute” right in the Philosophy of Right, Weltgeist is not a definitive account of right itself, but rather—qua spirit’s “interpretation of itself to itself” (GPR, §343)—an expression of the reflexive activity of members of the global community collectively defining and redefining the conditions of their sociation.

In summary, Hegel’s notion of the state as a secular divinity does represent an emphatic affirmation of the principle of nation-state sovereignty. Yet Hegel does not thereby advance an atomistic-exclusionary view of states or a realist view of international relations. Proceeding from a conception of sovereignty understood in terms of an intersubjectively conceived notion of self-identity, he not only maintains that state sovereignty is compatible with a robust notion of international cooperation; he claims as well that forging a proper notion of sovereignty identity goes hand in hand with establishing and reestablishing agreement on a set of transnational norms and values. Included in such agreement is also a general account of reciprocal rights and duties—principles that both undergird and flow from the processes in which the world’s persons and peoples establish and reestablish the conditions of their sociation. In addi-
tion, while such notions of right and duties serve to limit and challenge narrowly state-centric notions of political sovereignty, they are not incompatible with the continuing existence of sovereign political entities themselves. Rather, a binding conception of global justice, including one delineating universal human rights, is clarified and concretized precisely in the process of nations and peoples, in defining and redefining the conditions of their sociation, also defining and redefining their sense of sovereign identity.

These considerations demonstrate the unique role Hegel and the resources of Hegelian analysis can play in discussions regarding cosmopolitanism, transnational justice and universal human rights. But they also shed light on his views regarding the relationship of religion and politics. On the one hand, it shows that Hegel’s notion of a secular divinity is compatible with and indeed dependent upon a universal notion of human rights. On the other hand, it also shows that realization of such a notion proceeds isomorphically with proper realization of the state as a secular divinity. In this regard the realization of spirit in the world not only assumes both restricted and unrestricted forms, but does so through their complex interpenetration. Stated in more theological terms, realization of the principle of a particular Volksgeist gives rise to a universal spirit that in its “absolute” dimension takes the form of a “divine spirit.” (VPWG, 52/60) Yet on Hegel’s understanding of Christianity such divinity, qua unity of the infinite and finite, entails and incorporates the principle of individual Volksgeistern. In addition, as the instantiation or “incarnation” (VPWG, 106/126) of worldly realized spirit, it depends on a community of nations whose conceptions of self-conscious identity, on Hegel’s intersubjective account, affirm, enact and engender the universal self-consciousness that is realized spirit itself. Hegel’s idea of the state as an earthly divinity gives rise to a notion of divine spirit expressive of principle of freedom and right, just as that spirit is sustained in the experiences of individual political communities which qua forms of secular divinity are properly realized in forging shared principles of right and justice.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have considered various elements of Hegel’s account of the relationship of religion and politics, accentuating those that can speak to current conditions and realities. His account supports a liberal-pluralistic polity, as regards both the state as a neutral arbiter vis-à-vis diverse beliefs and values and the political ethos needed to support and sustain liberal institutions. In addition, it conceives such ethos as committed not simply to an abstract and formally uniform notion of rights and liberties but one that addresses the material disadvantages and inequities experienced by particular individuals in modern societies. Further, it entails a view of political legitimacy linked to a community’s capacity to engage in historically sensitive practices of self-constitution. Moreover, it affirms a notion of the state as an earthly secular divinity that entails and mandates an openness to other cultures and communities, one that itself contributes to fostering and sustaining a global culture of shared norms and values. And central to this culture is a notion of transnational of justice and rights forged, validated and maintained in the ongoing interplay and reciprocal adjustment of national and transnational, global and a local, restricted and unrestricted considerations.

Hegel, of course, advances these claims by way of an interpretation and appropriation of Christianity and in particular Protestant Christianity. In this regard his position is afflicted with a parochialism at odds with the type of global extension required of a comprehensive and currently viable account of the relationship of religion and politics. Nor is it a parochialism easily defused by invoking, *inter alia*, Hegel’s heterodox view of Christianity, his universalist understanding of that religion, or the fact that he was writing principally in a Protestant cultural context. Nonetheless such parochialism should not detract from its general and continuing value. Nor should it even detract from its capacity to furnish the type of more ecumenical account absent from Hegel’s own view. Indeed, such an account is arguably mandated by Hegelianism itself. Unlike thinkers like Schleiermacher Hegel made clear that the abiding and “living” truth value of historically transmitted philosophical content is clarified only in its contemporary appropriation. At issue “is at once reception and

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use of an inheritance."38 This paper has not attempted to delineate in any systematic way the elements of such an ecumenical re-appropriation. However, an understanding of Hegel’s account of the relationship of religion and politics with the help of core elements of his thought (e.g., the theories of dialectics, internal self-reflexivity, and reciprocal recognition), provides some indication of how such a reception and further elaboration might be conceived.

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