

# LIBERATION THEOLOGY: HEGEL ON WHY PHILOSOPHY TAKES SIDES IN RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

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*Hegel famously identifies Protestant conscience and its corresponding state as reflecting the unity of ethical and religious principles, thereby bringing into actuality the truth of human spirit. However, he also reminds us that it is vital to free states that the Church remain divided, rather than unifying into one sect. Thus, he affirms a secular state above religious conflict, but explicitly takes sides in one such conflict, out of the interest philosophy has in the development of the Protestant nation-state. In this paper, I resolve this tension by articulating Hegel's account of philosophy's interest in historical movements in general, and of the historical relationship between religion and the state in particular. Focusing on his account of the contemporary struggle between Catholicism and Lutheranism, I then develop an account of philosophy's interest in religious conflict. I close with some schematic remarks on the 'Hegelianism' of some recent Catholic movements.*

Just before passing into "Absolute Spirit" at the end of the *Encyclopedia*<sup>1</sup>, Hegel famously identifies the Protestant conscience and its corresponding state as reflecting the unity of ethical and religious principles, thereby bringing into actuality the truth of human spirit. (cf. Enc, §552) Following closely on the heels of a scathing critique of Catholicism, such claims are easily and often read as affirming the Protestant form of belief as essential to right.<sup>2</sup> That is, Hegel's de-

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<sup>1</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke*, Bd. 10, (ed.) E. Moldenhauer and K. Markus (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970). All translations are my own. Hereafter parenthetically referred to in the text as Enc followed by paragraph number. Hegel's own remarks to his numbered paragraphs are referred to as Ann.

<sup>2</sup> For example, James Yerkes, *The Christology of Hegel* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983), while recognizing the essential particularity, and therefore transience, of all historical states nevertheless holds that the Germanic constitutional state and its corresponding Protestant conscience "represent the fulfillment of the *rational principle of freedom*...designated by Hegel as the 'Protestant principle' initiated by Luther" (107); and while rightly emphasizing that Hegel claims this

fense of the essential superiority of the Lutheran conscience and nation-state over all hitherto existent forms of religion and state organization can be read as declaring that only nations of Protestant faith would be able to securely found the institutional forms essential to the State.

However, in the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel reminds us that, while the

*unity of state and church...lies in the truth of [their] principles...if the state is to attain existence as the self-knowing ethical actuality of spirit, its form must become distinct from that of authority and faith. But this distinction emerges only in so far as the Church for its part becomes divided within itself.*<sup>3</sup>

While religion and state express a common truth, no particular religious conscience can be identified with the latter, and thus right demands that even Christianity must be internally split into conflicting sects. On the one hand, then, Hegel raises the State above all religious belief, thus exposing the essential distinction between faith and right, secured through perpetual religious division; on the other hand, however, he politically validates the victory of one sect over another, specifically because of the essential relationship between faith and right. Hegel, then, affirms a secular state above religious conflict (and a correspondingly secular philosophy to articulate its relations to religion), but explicitly takes sides in one such conflict, out of the interest philosophy has in the development of nation-states.

Of course, Hegel's views in the specific conflict at issue may reflect both his professed personal faith and his apparently vigorous prejudice against Catholics.<sup>4</sup> My interest, however, is less in what Hegel may have personally believed than in what the logic of his text may teach us not only about the enduring philosophical import of

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principle to simply be that of self-conscious freedom, Walter Jaeschke, "Christianity and Secularity in Hegel's Concept of the State", *Journal of Religion*, vol. 61, no. 2 (1981), 127–45, nevertheless seeks to maintain the historically Christian foundation of the principle, thereby distinguishing Hegel's conception of the state from the post-Hegelian, secular one.

<sup>3</sup> G. W. F. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, (ed.) A. Wood, (tr.) H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §270, Anm.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence S. Stepelevich, "Hegel and Roman Catholicism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. LX, no. 4 (1992), 673–91, usefully presents most of Hegel's professional and personal declarations regarding the essential inferiority of Catholicism to Lutheranism.

religious conflict, but about philosophy's interest in particular outcomes thereof. Should secular philosophers be partisan to particular religious movements? If so, on what grounds? Through a close reading of the "World History" section of the *Philosophie des Geistes* (Enc, §§548–52), I hope to make some headway in providing consistently Hegelian (albeit somewhat speculative) answers to these questions. I begin by examining Hegel's account of philosophy's interest in historical movements in general, and then proceed to examine the relationship between religious belief and the state. Next, I use the aforementioned account of Catholicism and Lutheranism to come to both a specific and a general understanding of philosophy's enduring interest, and role, in religious conflict. Finally, I close with some schematic remarks on the interest contemporary philosophers should have in some recent religious movements.

## I. Philosophy's Interest in World History

"World history," for Hegel, essentially treats the progression between nation states, not as the merely factual rise to prominence and subsequent surpassing of particular powers, but as the progressive unfolding of a common truth. It is thus not a chronology of major state-based events, but the essentially philosophical comprehension of that succession as a unified narrative grounded in human essence, and thus as implicitly striving toward a common human goal. Accordingly, Hegel's discussion focusses primarily on a defense of "philosophical history," or the *a priori* presupposition that "history has an essential and actual end...[i.e., that] there is reason in history." (Enc, §549, Anm) Affirming that philosophical history seeks an "objective purpose" in historical events (*ibid.*), he contrasts this view with the seemingly more objective "demand that the historian should proceed with impartiality." (*Ibid.*) Such historians insist that the facts must be approached with no presupposition or principle in accordance with which one could "separate out (*aussondere*), arrange (*stelle*) and judge (*beurteile*)" historical events. (*Ibid.*) Impartial histories simply present what happened as it happened, without criticism, and thus appear to be more objective than Hegel's rational account.

However, Hegel contrasts this view of objectivity with that required of a judge: while the judge should not interpret the facts of a case in the light of his or her contingent, personal interests, a judge "would administer his office foolishly and poorly, if he had not an interest, and an exclusive interest in right [*Recht*], [and] if he had not that for his aim and sole aim" in approaching the facts. (*Ibid.*) In

short, while a judge must not take a subjectively contingent side in a case, she must possess a “partiality for right [*Recht*]” (*ibid.*), or take the side of the essential ground and therefore aim of law. Judging is less a matter of grasping what happened when and why, than of understanding what facts essentially matter to right, and thus of properly distilling, presenting and critically appraising the merely given. As such, it is a principled, committed critique that both affirms the factual case as of interest to right and seeks to actualize right through it.

Just as the judge must possess a partiality for right, Hegel claims, so the historian must employ a partiality for the essential ground and therefore implicit aim of all human history, *i.e.*, human freedom, which, as Hegel claims, “alone is [history’s] moving principle [*Bewegende*].” (*Ibid.*) Freedom is the aim of human history because it is the ground of specifically human activity. Without freedom, the events we call historical would be indistinguishable from mere contingencies produced by physical forces, biological drives, or peculiar dispositions. As such, if there is any genuine history—*i.e.*, any comprehensive record of human action as it differentiates itself from merely natural or contingent givens—human freedom must be presupposed as its ground. Thus, truly objective history does not simply record what happened at various times, but justifies events as historical, or as resulting from freedom. As such, philosophical history inherently evaluates what happened in terms of the freedom manifested therein. History, then, does not seek the explicit, merely given reasons for individual or national actions, but judges the overall concrete effects of those actions in terms of the implicit, but essential aim of free humanity as a whole.

Humanity’s goal, of course, is the same as its essence: freedom, or liberation from that which is merely given, *i.e.*, the pre-existent natural, cultural and social conditions within which all subjects find themselves determined. If humanity is essentially free, then human essence is only actualized in the overcoming of given, external determinations. An event is thus only historical if it actually liberates free humanity or spirit from that which externally limits it. Philosophical history accordingly seeks the “substantial and underlying essence, not the trivialities of external existence and contingency” (*ibid.*), and thereby judges historical events in terms of “the liberation of the spiritual substance” from all that contingently attaches to it. (Enc, §549) Moreover, just as a judge’s sole interest is that justice be done in all legal cases, philosophy’s exclusive interest lies in seeing that freedom’s goal of self-liberation from the merely given is actually achieved in history. Philosophy, in short, is essentially the

affirmation that the historical “liberation of spirit, through which [spirit] works to come to itself and to realize its truth...is the highest and absolute *right* [*Befreiung des Geistes, in der er zu sich selbst zu kommen und seine Wahrheit zu verwirklichen geht...is das höchste und absolute Recht*]” (Enc, §550) This bears repeating: the pinnacle of right is neither the state-form of constitutional monarchy, nor any form religious conscience corresponding to it, but humanity’s essential activity of liberating itself from given, external determinations. By extension, philosophy does not simply concern what has been, but what currently is, *i.e.*, what contemporary movements influencing the historical progress of nation-states exist and what effect they are likely to have on the emancipatory destiny of human freedom. Philosophical history, then, is not just an account of the past, but its own time comprehended, *i.e.*, critically appraised in light of the free essence of spirit.

## II. History and Religion

Thus, philosophy’s permanent interest lies in human emancipation in general or the actualization of the free essence of human history. While it is certainly true that freedom is not a metaphysical abstraction, but always the freedom of real individuals, philosophy’s focus lies with the overall fate of the freedom possessed by all, not with its contingent employment by particular subjects. Hegel emphasizes the forms of nation-states, rather than the biographies of historical figures because philosophy must view individual actors as “*tools*” (*Werkzeuge*) (Enc, §551) of freedom’s work, not as essential in themselves. However, Hegel also holds that the institutional determinations of states simply reflect the common result of collective lived action. (cf. Enc, §535)<sup>5</sup> A genuine, non-despotic nation-state explicitly posits the implicit totality of the various actions, customs and beliefs of those who form its nation, that is, a nation consists of free individuals willing in accordance with their individual understanding of their essence (*i.e.*, the “ethical substance”), while the state explicitly posits the overall concrete product of those various willings (*i.e.*, the “self-conscious form of universality”). Nation-states, in short, reflect the implicit understanding of freedom utilized by contingently acting individuals (the nation/ethical substance) by

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<sup>5</sup> For Hegel’s full account of the relationship between individual action and the institutional forms of nation-states, see *Philosophy of Right*, esp. §257–70.

explicitly positing the “universal will” resulting from their total efforts in institutions and law (the state/self-conscious unity).

However, while the ethical substance reflected in state-forms is implicitly free (for all individuals have universal freedom for their essence), in actuality individuals always act within pre-existent conditions (geographical location, but also and perhaps more importantly the pre-existent laws and cultural mores that have already developed within that location). That is, each “national spirit...stands in external existence” (Enc, §552), for every people is composed of individuals already determined by given conditions. Living in a world shaped by historical activity, all subjects generally have their understanding of freedom determined (to greater or lesser degrees) by previous actualizations. As such, most individuals immediately understand their spiritual “content as something temporally given” in their external world. (*Ibid.*) Assuredly, many subjects—being free—seek to alter, renew or even destroy the social conditions within which they find themselves. However, even when a “thinking” individual “rises to know itself in its essentiality”, her knowledge “still has the immanent limitedness of the national spirit” within which she finds herself, just because freedom can only be understood somewhere, at some time, in relation to the already given conditions within which it can be actualized (*i.e.*, humanity can only seek to overcome the given in terms of the givens to be overcome). (*Ibid.*)<sup>6</sup> Thus, a nation-state on “its subjective side is tainted with [the] contingency [of] unconscious ethical customs [*bewusstlose Sitte*].” (*Ibid.*) Individuals grasp their universal freedom through particular givens just because freedom is always the freedom of historically situated peoples. Thus, while all historical states have their ground in the universal freedom equally possessed by all, this freedom is only historically actualized through particular subjective activity, and to particular subjectivity essentially, ineradicably “belongs [the contingency of] feeling, intuition, representation.” (*Ibid.*)

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<sup>6</sup> While Hegel exempts himself, *qua* philosopher, from this restriction (cf. Enc, §552, Anm), it is impossible to see on what grounds. Philosophers, of course, treat essences, and thus no doubt possess a less determined, highly mediated understanding of freedom, and so they do self-consciously understand what is to be actualized and how; however, it is simply unclear how they could completely rid themselves of historical influence. It is no doubt both more accurate, and closer to Hegel’s overall account, to assume that philosophers, like everyone else, are prone—albeit less so than most—to the biases of their place and time. This is also why speculative readings of Hegel are likely truer to his method than those that over-identify his philosophy with culturally specific motifs.

As such, it is almost inevitable that subjects primarily grasp freedom “as religion in its immediate reality.” (*Ibid.*) After all, while a form of representation or what has come to be known in the Anglo-phone literature as “picture-thinking” (*Vorstellung*) (Enc, §565), religion nonetheless in its representational content concerns human essence as distinguished from merely natural, individual and cultural contingencies, *i.e.*, as *spiritual*. Religion therefore implicitly contains the possibility of “ethicality [*i.e.*, the ethical substance] coming to consciousness of the free universality of its concrete essence.” (Enc, §552, Anm) Religion, in short, is the aspect of ethical life that, while always given in some form (for we always find ourselves amongst existent religion(s)), implicitly posits in its content the free ground of ethical life, or the non-natural, spiritual essence of humanity. Religion is thus both an external determination (*qua* representation) and yet the most potent representation we have of our essential freedom from externality (*qua* spiritual).

### III. Catholicism and Protestantism

As such, religion can induce believers to relate to their free essence in one of two ways, depending on the “relationship of self-consciousness to [its] content.” (Enc, §552, Anm) Firstly, because religion is a given determination of ethical life, composed of myth, doctrine, church, ritual, etc., it may present itself as an external determination to which we must submit. That is, the content of religion (free human spirit) may be subsumed into the representational form (myth, ritual and church), thereby creating “a relationship [of the believer to their religion] lacking freedom.” (*Ibid.*) It is just such a relationship that Hegel locates in Catholicism.

While Hegel famously holds that Christianity raised the content of religion to a strictly spiritual principle (*i.e.*, divorced religion from the “natural element”), “in the Catholic religion, this spirit is in actuality rigidly opposed to self-conscious spirit.” (*Ibid.*) Hegel explains Catholicism’s essential flaw through the doctrine of transubstantiation, in which “God is presented to religious worship as an external thing, in the host.” (*Ibid.*)<sup>7</sup> That is, on Hegel’s reading (which we are not questioning here), Catholicism places the spiritual principle of

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<sup>7</sup> A similar critique can be found in *Hegel’s Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, Vol. III: The Consummate Religion*, (ed.) P. Hodgson, (tr.) R. F. Brown, P. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart with the assistance of H. S. Harris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 154–55.

religion into something external, consecrated by church authorities through traditional rituals, which can therefore only be passively received by the believer. As such, the Catholic requires the mediation of the given (the wafer, the priest and the church) in order to receive a religious content which is grasped as material, rather than spiritual. Thus, Hegel's critique of Catholicism is not essentially doctrinal (as though transubstantiation were simply incorrect as Christian dogma), but relational: it is because transubstantiation weds the believer to external determination by material wafer, priestly consecration and ultimately papal authority, that it reflects the repressive side of religion.

From this first "externalization" of the spiritual principle, Hegel argues, "flows all of the other external, and therefore unfree, unspiritual and superstitious relations." (*Ibid.*) This is undoubtedly Hegel at his most rhetorically excessive, but it is indicative of philosophy's interest in religion. What Hegel rejects in Catholicism is not the spiritual truth contained therein (which is at bottom the same as all other forms of Christianity, and of right), nor even (as we shall see) its rituals, but the fact that the relation it posits between believer and ritual "essentially requires an external consecration" and therefore results in a conscience that "receives the knowledge of divine truth as the direction of its will and conscience from the outside and from another order." (*Ibid.*) Catholicism is a religion of objective determination, for belief in it essentially binds the subject to externalities (indicated by the host, but primarily found in the institutional church).

It is for this reason, Hegel claims, that Catholicism is often (correctly, in his view) touted as the religion which "alone secures the stability of governments." (*Ibid.*) Positing the submission of believers to external powers, Catholicism is an essentially conservative, even reactionary faith, and thus its believers are perfectly suited to holding up state regimes as they exist. However, and consequently, such states will only be propped up if "such governments...are connected with institutions grounded in the un-freedom of the spirit which should be legally and ethically free." (*Ibid.*) Bound to external church authority, Catholics, for Hegel, serve to bolster only states whose institutions are amenable to the dogmas of Catholicism. Put more broadly, all religions of external determination (which bind us in obedience to pre-existent authorities, such as church, ritual or text) likewise bind us to corresponding forms of state and ethicality as they exist or have existed, thus placing us voluntarily in a condition of "legal and ethical unfreedom." (*Ibid.*) Such believers can only bolster states that reflect reactionary values (*e.g.*, the negation of



human liberation, the submission to traditional authority, and the condemnation of political and ethical progress). Thus, any state containing such believers finds within itself a "terrible power" which, if confronted by any changes in state-form inimical to its religious conscience, in particular emancipatory ones, will inevitably "move in hostility against" the state. (*Ibid.*) Grasping freedom through traditional determination, Catholics (or, more widely, believers in religious externality) provide at best a shaky ground for static and/or theocratic states, and at worst forge a committed force for reactionary revolt in progressive and/or secular ones.

However, because religion also implicitly posits humanity as spirit, it is equally possible for religion to persuade believers to grasp their free essence. That is, religion can representationally express the return to essential self from out of external determination. In this case, the external side of religion is put in the service of the spiritual essence it expresses, in that the believer comes through their faith to at least in part see herself as an essentially free being. Such religions utilize given dogmas but nevertheless, through a different interpretation of them, induce the believer's self-conscious possession of "the certainty of [his- or her-]self in this content as [being] free." (*Ibid.*) Protestantism, Hegel argues, reflects just such a religion of the spirit.

Looking again at the ritual of the Eucharist, Hegel argues that, lacking a theory of transubstantiation, the Protestant faith locates the divinity of the host "first and only in the consumption [of it], i.e. in the negation of its externality [and therefore] in belief." (*Ibid.*)<sup>8</sup> Here, the host is host only through the subjective belief of its recipient, not because it is consecrated by another of authoritative rank. More broadly, Protestantism supersedes Catholicism, for Hegel, just because it makes all religious content a matter of self-conscious, internal faith, not unconscious, external determination. Again, it is worth noting that, as Hegel's focus on the host shows, there is little essential change in representational content at stake (both affirm the same God, revealed through the same son, represented through

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<sup>8</sup> There is a similar discussion of the Lutheran Eucharist in *Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Vol. I: Greek Philosophy to Plato*, (tr.) E. S. Haldane (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 74. See Lawrence S. Stepelevich, "Hegel and The Lutheran Eucharist," *The Heythrop Journal*, vol. 27, no. 3 (1986), 262-74 for discussion of the essentially secular difference Hegel locates between the Protestant and Catholic version of the ritual. As will become evident below, while I agree with much of his analysis, I think Stepelevich exaggerates the degree to which religious conscience, for Hegel, having emancipated itself from Catholic authority, thereby also "destroyed its base", passing into secular philosophy. (272)

nearly identical ritual). The difference between the two sects is not their representational content, but their relational form, *i.e.*, the “consciousness and subjectivity” of the believer called for by the faith itself. (*Ibid.*) One faith binds the subject to objective externalities, while the other negates the givenness of determinations through the subjective act of belief. Thus, Hegel sides with Protestantism over Catholicism just because its form of belief comparatively reflects and affirms the believer as “free, self-certain spirit.” (*Ibid.*)

Liberated from spiritual bondage, then, the believer is free to shed other external restrictions to their ethical life. Or, put more precisely, in freeing themselves from priestly determination by understanding their spirit no longer through external authority, but through and as subjective activity, Protestant nations inevitably produced emancipatory advances in the institutional forms of state. Hegel identifies the actual ethical advances made by Protestant nations in three areas predictable to those familiar with his *Philosophy of Right*: family, civil society and state. By eliminating the Catholic “vow of chastity” (*ibid.*), Protestantism posits marriage as the free use of one’s body in loving monogamy. In civil society, the contradictory vow of poverty (which condemns the rich, but paradoxically demands that they enrich others in impoverishing themselves), is superseded by the free “activity of personal acquisition [Tätigkeit des Selbsterwerbs] through reason and industry.” (*Ibid.*; Hegel’s emphasis) And finally, in place of the externally imposed “vow of obedience” we find free “obedience to the law and to the legal institutions of the state.” (*Ibid.*) In other words, the Protestant states do not command obedience because they exist; they come to be obeyed because they reflect the emancipated conscience of their nation. Protestant states comparatively allow free individuals to realize their essence as self-emancipating spirit just because the freer ethicality of the Protestant form of belief is reflected state structures (*e.g.*, in the institutions and laws concerning marriage and commerce).

While Hegel’s account is arguably reductive and overly simplistic, what is telling is its focus on institutional progress, rather than confessional creed. In fact, despite claiming that Protestantism’s “divine spirit must immanently penetrate the worldly”, he immediately informs us that this “concrete indwelling [of the divine spirit] is the aforementioned institutional forms of ethicality.” (*Ibid.*; my emphasis) That is, as far as philosophy is concerned, “Protestantism” is not primarily a form of faith, but a set of institutional forms that arose from the willed activity of Protestant nations. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, he informs us that “Protestantism” is not

simply these forms, as though they reflect a final vision of the essential institutions of right perfected by Protestant states; it is rather the concrete emancipation they provide from previous and competing ethical determinations—"the ethicality of marriage *against* the holiness of the unmarried order, the ethicality of activity toward fortune and acquisition *against* the holiness of poverty and its idleness, the ethicality of the law of the state given obedience *against* the holiness of obedience lacking duty and law." (*Ibid.*; my emphasis) Thus, the superiority of "Protestantism" over "Catholicism" lies not in their competing doctrines, or even in their distinct state-forms, but in the institutional advances in human freedom concretely made by Protestant nations against the previously given ethical institutions that Hegel identifies as externally determined by the "holy."

In sum, Hegel sides with Protestantism against Catholicism for entirely secular, and essentially emancipatory, reasons. Because all religions are grounded in the same content as history and right, *i.e.*, free human spirit, it is only the relational form of belief represented therein that allows for their critical evaluation. Hegel's critique, then, expresses a secular commitment to the sect whose relational form more explicitly and successfully calls the believer to enact freedom's self-emancipation from the merely given. As such, he sides less with one faith over another than with freedom, manifested differentially in history by two sides of an ongoing conflict within Christendom. Philosophy's interest in religion lies in the concrete effect on the historical destiny of human freedom actualized in state-institutions resulting from the dominance of a religious conscience within a nation. This may explain why Hegel informs us that the final paragraph of the "World History" section "is the place to elaborate on the relationship between religion and the state." (*Ibid.*)

Thus, in vaunting the Protestant faith over Catholicism, Hegel's arguments should be read as articulating philosophy's interest in the historical effect of a continuing religious dispute. Extrapolating from Hegel's account of this conflict, we can say that, in all cases of conflict between determining and liberating forms of religious conscience, philosophers should always side with the creed whose form of belief comes closest to explicitly expressing the freedom merely picture-thought by all religions, while simultaneously persuading the religious to ethically act to produce emancipatory changes to the institutions of right. Religion is of interest to philosophy only in so far as it affects the destiny of freedom through nation-states, and is of vital interest in so far as it occupies a unique position of influence in the wills and lives of individual, representing subjects.

This makes clear why Hegel, despite siding with Protestantism over Catholicism, elsewhere affirms his hope for continued division with the Christian church. Freedom is not essentially actualized by any religion or state; freedom is self-emancipation from external determination and as such is actualized in states when, and only when, institutional restrictions to freedom are concretely removed through the emergence of a new, emancipatory institutional determination against a given, static one. Protestantism, then, represented for Hegel a historical form of religious conscience that concretely facilitated the emancipation of believers from the external authority of church authority and corresponding institutional determinations. As we now know, however, many forms of Protestant conscience have since come to place similar, perhaps even harsher restrictions on human freedom, and have equally sought to suppress or repeal institutional advances to human freedom. In the now dominant Protestant state, for example, free loving monogamy, industrious trade and state service have given way to 'traditional' family values, unbridled, unfair and unproductive markets and a mixture of rote patriotism and reactionary revolt. Much contemporary Protestantism demands fealty to the fundamentalist authority of apparently unchanging and unquestionable dogmatic texts, and casts suspicion on the "religiosity" of emancipatory interpretations of them. This should no more surprise us, however, than the fact that Hegel's accounts of ethical institutions in the *Philosophy of Right*, then subtly emancipatory, now look reactionary to freer eyes. Even emancipatory religious sects produce given ethical determinations in the world, thereby creating external determinations that must once again be overcome, precisely because free "spirit has its actuality in the activity of its self-emancipation [*in der Tätigkeit seines Befreiens seine Wirklichkeit habenden Geistes*]." (*Ibid.*) Protestantism is not the 'true' faith and/or state-form that Catholicism misrepresents; *all* faiths/states contain the risk of entrenching external, reactionary ethicality simply by virtue of positing ethical determinations. Philosophy should take sides with the 'freer' side in all religious conflicts in the interest of producing emancipatory institutional reforms, which themselves will inevitably have to be overcome, thus demanding that religious conflict again arise so that new forms of faith and state can emerge, *ad infinitum*.

However, while much of this is explicitly clear in Hegel's text, it is certainly no stretch to read him, here and elsewhere, as defending specifically Protestant conscience. If religion is always, *qua* representation, something external to free thought, why does Hegel not, *e.g.*, simply defend or prescribe emancipatory institutions grounded in

the explicit discourse of freedom, rather than wedding them firmly to their Protestant roots? Why, in short, side specifically with a popular "picture-thought" of freedom, rather than with emancipatory freedom itself?

The answer is that freedom, as we have seen, essentially has a subjective, and therefore representational, side. Our understanding of freedom always develops out of some immediately lived reality. For the vast majority, this lived reality is significantly harsh to afford little time or opportunity for philosophical reflection. As such, the understanding most have of their free spirit is usually, perhaps necessarily, religious in nature. Philosophy always arrives too late to recommend abstract courses of action to those who are already living ethically according to the religious representation of spirit.

Thus, Hegel is right to regard as "mere modern folly [the attempt] to alter a corrupt system of ethical life...without an alteration of its religion." (*Ibid.*) For those who believe, religion is not separable from their ethical life; it immediately expresses the essential humanity that they are. So long as spirit is understood religiously—and we have no reason to suppose it will be understood differently by the vast majority, and every reason to assume the opposite—"it is but an abstract, vacuous representation to delude ourselves that it is possible for individuals to act only according to the terms [*Sinne*] and letter of the law and not according to the spirit of their religion, in which lies their innermost conscience and highest duty." (*Ibid.*) Thus, Hegel claims, institutional changes deduced from abstract philosophy, "even if their content were to be [spiritually] truthful, [would] breakdown on the conscience, whose spirit differs from the spirit of the laws and does not sanction them." (*Ibid.*) Philosophy cannot vainly prescribe what state-forms should be, because such institutions can only be grounded in and sanctioned by the lived nation.

In sum: because a) religious belief predominantly influences national sanction; b) national sanction is required for all institutional change, c) institutional progress is required for the historical actualization of freedom, and d) philosophy's interest lies solely in freedom's emancipatory actualization, then in all religious conflicts, philosophy must take sides with the form of faith whose plausible victory would produce the greatest degree of actualized freedom. Correspondingly, philosophy's limited but vital role in contemporary religious conflict lies in a) discerning the ethical religious movements whose positing in state-forms would lead to concrete progress in right, and b) persuasively articulating their essential connection to human spirit as free. That is, philosophy's job is to locate, justify and help secure the victory of the emancipatory side in existent religious

conflict, *i.e.*, that national conscience amenable to, and hopefully achieving, liberating ethical and political change. Striving toward this conscience does not simply offer hope for concrete social progress, but provides the only path toward the liberation of human spirit from the picture-thinking that always, to some degree, shackles it. Thus, philosophy sides with the religious movements that will (hopefully) bring about the social changes that for now (and the foreseeable future) only religion can make manifest, justifying them in part out of the hope that they will eventually bring about the liberated conscience that no longer needs religion to emancipate itself. In religious conflicts, as in all historical movements, philosophy seeks the actualization of freedom, and thus identifies, justifies and makes common cause with the existent religious movement(s) whose victory in the conflict over national conscience would secure the progressive liberation of the human spirit. Hegel's philosophical Protestantism, then, may be less a result of personal faith than an implicit expression of solidarity with between philosophy and the dominant contemporary emancipatory historical movement through its representational language, the better to bolster its membership and perhaps draw other, non-Lutheran Christians to it.

This last claim is, of course, quite speculative, and almost by definition admits of no explicit textual confirmation from Hegel's published works. Somewhat suggestive, however, is the following account by Hegel's Catholic friend, Victor Cousin, regarding a visit the two made to Cologne in 1827:

We were both convinced that religion is absolutely indispensable, and that one must not give oneself over to the fatal chimera of trying to replace religion with philosophy.... I was a strong partisan of a sincere entente between these two powers, one of which represents the legitimate aspirations of a small number of elite minds, the other of which represents the permanent needs of mankind. *Hegel was of the same opinion....* But Hegel believed that no reconciliation was possible outside Protestantism.... One day...we found in the square before the Cathedral women and tattered old men displaying their misery and doing a business in little sacred medals and other objects of superstitious worship, he said to me in anger: "There is your Catholic religion for you, and the spectacles it presents us with! Will I die before I see an end to all that?" I was not at a loss to give him a reply, and *in the end he admitted that Christianity, being the philosophy of the masses at the same time that it is the religion of the philosophers, cannot remain at the heights to which it is raised by Saint Augustine, Saint Anselm, Saint Thomas and Bousset, and that he himself had to be-*

*come a man of the people among the people.* But the old Lutheran muttered nonetheless.<sup>9</sup>

This at least suggests that Hegel may have continued to concern himself with his youthful goal of being a philosophical leader of popular movements, or *Volkserzieher*—one whose earliest models included Christ.<sup>10</sup> Compare Hegel's early account of Christ's teaching:

A teacher who intended to...convince [a people] of the inadequacy of a statutory ecclesiastical faith must of necessity have based his assertions on like authority [for] if the moral sense has entirely taken the direction of the ecclesiastical faith, if this faith has got sole and complete mastery of the heart...then the teacher has no alternative have to oppose to it an equal authority, a divine one.<sup>11</sup>

These passages at least suggest that Hegel—throughout his career—held that the philosopher, seeking to actualize freedom in history, must pay heed to the dominant influence religion plays in the lives of people in order to help bring about the political changes required in particular nation-states. It is thus not surprising that his secular, emancipatory political philosophy sides with, and expresses itself through, the most commonly held, emancipatory religious discourse of his day, for it is (as yet) only through religious spirit that the secular goal of actualizing freedom within one's time can be achieved.

#### IV. Conclusion

Thus, it is—with appropriate irony—precisely Hegel's secular, emancipatory condemnation of Catholicism that should lead contemporary Hegelians to side with a more recent offshoot that faith—liberation theology.<sup>12</sup> After Vatican II, liberation theology arose in

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<sup>9</sup> *Hegel: The Letters*, (ed.) and (tr.) C. Butler and C. Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 663–64; my emphasis and ellipses.

<sup>10</sup> For discussion, see H. S. Harris, *Hegel's Development: Toward the Sunlight, 1770–1801* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

<sup>11</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, (tr.) T.M. Knox (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948), 76.

<sup>12</sup> The seminal text in the field remains Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, (tr.) and (ed.) C. Inda and J. Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988). A useful primer on the diverse developments that arose in its wake can be found in Deane William Fenn, *Third World Liberation Theologies: An Introductory Survey* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books,

Latin America and quickly spread across the developing world—through the texts and works of Gustavo Guitiérrez, Leonardo Boff and, more recently political figures such as Jean-Bertrand Aristide—as a religious movement committed to concretely inducing emancipatory social and political reforms (mainly concerning structurally imposed impoverishment produced through repressive labour conditions) through popular pressure and struggle. Inspired by Christ's words and works for the poor, such Catholics interpret scripture both through the position of the oppressed and as a perpetual call to ethical and political action. Liberation theology is a believer-centered religion of emancipatory praxis, rather than a church-centered religion of obedience; it is Catholicism of and for the people against the “stable order” originally imposed (as Hegel rightly noted<sup>13</sup>) upon the people by the Catholic Church, but eventually exacerbated and currently maintained (as Hegel could not anticipate) by the former “land of the future,” with the lived, often conscious approval of its Protestant nation. In other words, by utilizing Christian texts, rituals and traditions already given to and accepted by the people, liberation theology has fostered a consciously emancipatory spirit amongst those oppressed by Protestant and Catholic states alike.

In closing, let me cite Aristide's remarkably Hegelian understanding of the historical import of liberation theology:

Liberation theology can itself only be a phase of a broader process. The phase in which we may first have to speak on behalf of the impoverished and the oppressed comes to an end as they start to speak in their own voice and with their own words.... Liberation theology then gives way to a liberation of theology, which can also include liberation from theology.<sup>14</sup>

Given the sheer magnitude of its adherents, the nature of the repression it faces, and the liberating challenge of its belief and resulting praxis, there is arguably no more emancipatory movement presently

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1987). For accounts of the some of the emancipatory progress in political institutions inspired by it, see e.g. Peter Hallward, *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide, and the Politics of Containment* and Noam Chomsky with David Barsamian, *Propaganda and the Public Mind* (Cambridge: South End press, 2001), esp. 70–79.

<sup>13</sup> See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, (tr.) J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 83–84.

<sup>14</sup> “‘One Step at a Time’: An Interview with Jean-Bertrand Aristide (20 July 2006)”, in Hallward, *Damming the Flood*, 317–54, here 318.



struggling for universal free spirit. In contemporary Christianity, the reactionary, fundamentalist Protestantism of post-Reagan America is pitted against the Liberation Catholicism of Famni Lavalas and Brazil's MST, inverting the sectarian roles from Hegel's time. Were he alive to witness it, Hegel surely would have switched sides.

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