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TRANSCENDENTAL FRUSTRATION: A CRITICAL RE-EVALUATION OF
THE HEGELIAN LEGACY FOR PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

I.

For philosophers who would think “with” religion, rather than simply to theorize “about” it, the question of the relationship between religious imagination and philosophical rationality is a matter of constitutive importance. The way we answer this question would have far reaching implications for how we understand the work we do as philosophers who take religion seriously, and how we situate ourselves within broader academic contexts. Indeed, the answer to such a question –insofar as we can give any sort of definitive answer to it –would convey us to the core of what it means for us to “philosophically” appropriate religious and theological materials. We could do worse, I think, than to phrase the question in these terms: do religious imaginaries –representations, narratives, gestures, sacraments, etc. –anticipate a pure, conceptual reflexivity, or do they represent the impossibility of such a standpoint? This question is not only constitutive for philosophical reflection on religion. It is of a more general, formal relevance as well; it effectively raises the additional question as to whether the limits of conceptuality can themselves be conceptually *articulated* or whether they must be representationally *displayed* in such a way as to lead thought, obliquely, to an encounter or an experience of its limits. We can distill the question further: does philosophy *comprehend* religion, or does religion serve to mark the limits of what can be conceptually expressed by philosophy? Is religion the scene of the concept’s satisfaction? Its infinite longing? Or its transcendental frustration?

This dilemma –characteristic of the respective “idealist” and “romantic” responses to the unresolved antinomies of Kant’s transcendental philosophy – was a central concern for G.W.F. Hegel from the years running roughly from 1773-1806. While Hegel begins his career espousing the latter, “romantic” view, he eventually settles on the former, “idealist” option. Why and how Hegel changes his mind on this matter (and good reasons we might have for pressing back against him) is not a matter of mere historical interest. Hegelian philosophy and its long, storied, and contentious reception remain essential sources for continental philosophy of religion, despite their apparent eclipse by Heideggerian and Levinasian themes through the so-called “theological turn” in French phenomenology. Indeed, whether a partisan or staunch critic of Hegel’s thought, one is hard-pressed to find clearer example of someone who attempted to think “with” religion, to make philosophical use of what were putatively religious ideas and practices (in Hegel’s case from *one* form of religion especially, Protestant Christianity). Further, Hegel is an indispensable touchstone for understanding radical materialist thought. In an age of impending ecological collapse, fascist revanchism, and mind-boggling

inequality driven by runaway global capitalism, radical materialist perspectives on religion and politics have a renewed cultural currency. Critical engagement with Hegelian thought, the direct forbear of Marxism, will be essential to philosophers of religion who wish to think through the role of religious consciousness in the rehabilitation of such ideas. Reflection on the decisive shift from a romantic to an idealist conception of religion in Hegel's thought thus serves as an essential archive for philosophers of religion to consider the limits and possibilities of thinking "with" religion vis-à-vis contemporary challenges. This is not because the social and metaphysical problems Hegel seeks to address are or should be our own, nor because we are all faced with a stark choice between romanticism and idealism. Neither is the case. Rather, interrogation of Hegel's understanding of the use of religious representations –particularly sacrifice –in the development of the idealist viewpoint might spur us to further reflection on philosophical uses of religious materials as they occur and recur in our discourses, opening the way to a way of conceptualizing religion contrary both to Hegel's idealist construction of spiritual figures, as well as romantic longing for a real but transcendent beyond.

To develop this trajectory, it is necessary to first sketch the broad contours of the Hegelian view. Hegel's mature, idealist philosophy of religion can be schematized in the following propositions: (A) Religion and philosophy concern themselves with the same content, a single reality, integrally conceived –the "Absolute" –a whole which excludes nothing (B) Religious imagination expresses this content indirectly, through particular, sensuous, representations. (C) The task of philosophy is to clarify this representational form by dialectically resolving it into its genuine, conceptual basis, i.e., to demonstrate and know what religion merely represents and believes. Some version of the first two propositions are basically stable points of reference in Hegel's work. The final proposition, compatible only with the "idealist" view, emerges as the result of a long process of development.

It is possible to home in on the inflection point for the change from a romantic to an idealist theory of religious imagination in Hegel's works. It is located, I will argue, in what scholars typically identify as the fragments of Hegel's 1800 System, composed just before his move from Frankfurt to Jena. What is key in this fragment is Hegel's insistence that the religious representation of infinite life must include finitude – that is to say, death and the dead. Religions have historically done so, Hegel suggests, through acts of sacrifice. By identifying with an item which serves as an index of finitude through relinquishment or destruction, the sacrificer represents the disappearance of his or her finite existence against the horizon of an infinite whole within which it is recuperated. Christianity, Hegel believes, takes this a step further by introducing the negativity of death represented by sacrifice into the life of the infinite itself via its doctrine of "kenotic" sacrifice: God's incarnation, death, and resurrection as the "Spirit" which dwells in the self-consciousness of the community. This sets the stage for Hegel's retrieval of a kenotic model of sacrifice from Christianity and, subsequently, his transition from the romantic to the idealist interpretation of religious imagination in relation to

philosophical demonstration. By introducing negativity into the “life” of the infinite, Hegel holds, Christianity provides a representational template for a revised idealist conception of the relationship of logical determination to the transcendental idea of God posited in Kant’s first Critique, i.e., of the infinite to the finite. For to *comprehend* the infinite as including death means, for Hegel, recognizing and developing the immanent logic of the representation of the Christian notion of “Spirit” or *Geist* which is achieved only through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of God. In other words, Hegel’s shift to idealism is occasioned by his self-understanding of a gesture of theological retrieval which is—interestingly enough—leveraged in the process of trying to overcome the limitations of religious representation as such. “Spirit,” on Hegel’s view, *represents* or *imagines* a solution to a central logico-metaphysical problem of post-Kantian idealism by rendering “natural” death, which is phenomenologically speaking *impossible*, thinkable as a “moment” of the Absolute. Philosophy develops this into a self-grounding, systematic comprehension of the absolutely-mediate whole. Identifying death with a species of dialectical negativity, represented in divine and human sacrificial action, entails an insistence upon the character of the Absolute as ultimately identical with its self-specification in thought. Christianity paints a picture of the relation of the finite and infinite, for Hegel. Philosophy takes this picture seriously, supposedly on its own terms, in order to explain what it means in purely logical terms. Philosophy thus *comprehends* religion. The supersessionist dynamic of Christianity’s relationship to Judaism thus becomes the model of Hegel’s view of the relationship of philosophy to religion and, by extension, the basic sense of historical time as actualization and fulfillment—the form of Spirit’s self-mediation and recuperation of its past “shapes” in various, less adequately reflexive forms.

Drawing on thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard and Georges Bataille, however, I want to suggest that there is another way of understanding death, namely as *non-dialectical* negativity. In phenomenological terms, such negativity cannot be understood in terms of a dialectical recuperation of presence since it is on the one hand “always already” accomplished and, on the other hand, never comes to pass (given that its achievement, the disappearance of the “I” constitutes the effacement of its very condition of possibility). This alternative view of the negativity of death and the ecstatic temporality it entails demand an interpretation of religious imaginaries and their constructive significance within philosophical discourses which militates against both the idealist and the romantic options sketched above. The repetition of religious forms within modern, apparently secularizing discourses such as Hegel’s would not be indicative of some transcendent, extra-conceptual reality, as in the romantic case. Nor would it function as the representational anticipation of idealist satisfaction in the concept. Religious imagination would appear vis-à-vis the concept, rather, as a phantasmatic register of the effects of non-dialectical negativity, a transcendental bricolage inscribed within the trace of the non-dialectical negativity of temporal finitude. This non-dialectical conception of religious imagination would thus emblemize the recurrence of the unthinkable or impossible, which de-stabilizes rather than grounds, interrupts rather than justifies.

II.

In the so-called *Oldest System Program of German Idealism*, written sometime around 1797, Hegel writes that the religion of modernity –one capable of affirming human freedom without lapsing into dualism¹ –would be constituted as “a monotheism of reason and heart [*Vernunft und Herz*], a polytheism of imagination and art [*Einbildungskraft und der Kunst*].”² This odd and audacious formulation should not be taken in the literal and apparently contradictory sense, i.e., that Hegel is here enjoining *both* the worship of many gods as well as the exclusive worship of a single god. It is rather, among other things, a manifesto for a certain way of conducting the philosophy of religion: to develop an account of the single, rational core of religious life (“monotheism of reason and heart”) which is expressed and actualized in a panoply of concrete, historically-determined forms (“polytheism of religion and art”). This demand for a unified account of rationality and its finite, sensuous expressions, is Hegel’s north-star. Through all his works Hegel emphasizes the fundamental unity (though not indistinguishability) of the rational and the sensible, subject and object, infinite and finite. In other words, while it is possible to critically distinguish between rationality and sensuality, subjectivity and objectivity, concept and intuition, freedom and necessity, the very distinguishability of these oppositions implies they are, somehow, a part of some more comprehensive unity, Hegel believes.

During his time in Frankfurt (1797-1800) however, Hegel does not think that the unity of such determinations can be grasped *conceptually*, i.e., as a matter of philosophical demonstration. Rather, in close keeping with Kant’s account of the transcendental idea of the *ens realissimum*, Hegel claims that such a unity is a regulative demand of thought –something which according to rational reflection “should” be but which is not an item of knowledge as it lies entirely beyond the legitimate employment of transcendental concepts.³ We can say for instance that given the *opposition* of subject and object in theoretical propositions, that there *should* be some antecedent ground which accounts transcendentially for the possibility of their being distinguished in thought. But this unity remains an ideal toward which judgments implicitly strive. Within the formal-conceptual language of syllogistic determination and demonstration, this “Absolute” –the transcendental analogue for God in monotheisms –is thus intimated but not *known*.⁴ Additionally, while it is the unconditioned ground of all possible finite conditions, the *ens realissimum*

¹ Robert B. Pippin, *After The Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism*. (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2014). 33-34.

² GWF Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* Band 2. Edited by Friedhelm Nicolin, Ingo Rill, Peter Kriegel, and Walter Jasechke. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2014.

616; “Earliest System-Program of German Idealism” in *Miscellaneous Writings*, 111.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Werkausgabe, Bd.3-4, Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Edited by Wilhelm Weischedel. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002); Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason, Second Edition*. Translated by Norman Kemp Smith. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), A571/B599-A583/B611.

⁴ Kant, 2002; 2007, A580/B608.

does not itself contain negativity which constitutes such determinations themselves; it grounds conceptually determinate negativity, but is ultimately opposed to, and other than, such negation. Erroneous attempts to consider this regulative idea as though it were a singular, concrete entity, leads us to contemplate objects of fantasy, “shadow images” [*die Schattenbilder*].

Unlike Kant, however, Hegel is hesitant to separate the faculty of imagination and the ideal of pure reason so completely.⁵ While we cannot *know* this unity, Hegel claims, there is in fact a concrete need to *enact* and *represent* this unity through the products of fantasy [*Phantasie*] which engage and affectively animate concrete, historical communities. *This* is the task of religion, on Hegel’s early view, whereby he aims to develop a theory of *Volksreligion* which would serve to attune human sensibility to “feel” the force of rational truths,⁶ mediating between discursive thought and sensual immediacy –in other words, something like a post-critical political theology which could link the demands of rationality with the historically particular products of shared religious imaginaries.⁷ Religion’s gestures of sacrificial love “suspend” [*aufheben*] the opposition of subject and object (though they do not *erase* this distinction).⁸ In love, one is related to an “other” of experience as beloved, rather than a theoretical object. I *find* myself in this other, rather than being limited by him or her. This is, Hegel writes, “a miracle which we cannot grasp,”⁹ and “a being exterior to reflection”¹⁰ since any act of theoretical reflection sunders the unity which love actualizes by separating it, once again, into subject and object.¹¹ The unity of love resonates with our origin and destiny in the infinite totality of the *ens realissimum* which we must assume but cannot grasp through demonstrative, logical procedures due to the formal constraints of syllogism.

It is necessary then, Hegel argues, for the religious imagination to *represent* the suspension of difference which occurs in acts of sacrificial love as a kind

⁵ Kant, *Ibid.*, A570/B598.

⁶ Hegel, *Hegel: The Letters*. Ed. by Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 35.

⁷ Cf. Hegel “*Fragmente über Volksreligion und Christentum*” *Werke in 20 Bänden*, Band 1. Edited by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel. (Frankfurt Am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969); “The Tübingen Essay.” Available in translation as “The Tübingen Essay” in *Miscellaneous Writings of G.W.F. Hegel*. Edited by Jon Stewart. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002).

⁸ Hegel, *Hegels Theologische Jugendschriften: Nach Den Handschriften Der Kgl.* Edited by Herman Nohl. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1907), 379; *Early Theological Writings*. Translated by T. M. Knox and Richard Kroner. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 305 (Translation modified).

⁹ Hegel, *Theologische Jugendschriften*, 277; *Miscellaneous Writings*, 120

¹⁰ Hegel, “Über Religion” in *Gesammelte Werke 2, Frühe Schriften II; Miscellaneous Writings*, 154 (Translation modified).

¹¹ The problematic of subjectivity and objectivity derives from Hölderlin’s critique of Fichte in “Über Urtheil und Seyn.” Cf. Dieter Henrich, “Hölderlin über Urtheil und Sein: Eine Studie zu Entstehungsgeschichte des Idealismus” in *Konstellationen: Probleme und Debatten am Ursprung der idealistischen Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1991); Also Cf. Thomas Pfau, *Friedrich Hölderlin: Essays and Letters on Theory*. (Albany, N.Y: SUNY Press, 1987);

of focal point for the religious imagination.¹² This will serve as a sensuous emblem of the demand of reason, motivate individuals and communities, and shape their dispositions such that they embody this seek to embody this “love.” Religion must, in other words, “show” something which cannot quite be “said” by way of philosophical demonstration.

In the posthumously published fragments known as “The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate” (1798), Hegel famously argues that while Christianity was a notable attempt at such a representation of love, it was ultimately a failure. Because of its fixation on the idea of a God which incarnates itself, dies, and is resurrected, Christianity ultimately only produces a confusion [*Vermischung*] of subject and object.¹³ Rather than a suspension of their difference, it posits the unity of God and humanity as “Spirit” –eternal, but also temporal. Superhuman, but also human. Alive, but also dead.

III.

No later than 1802, however, Hegel has completely changed his mind—not only about Christianity, but about the priority of religious imagination and philosophical demonstration. Hegel insists in *Faith and Knowledge* that not only must Christianity be rehabilitated, but it must be rehabilitated in a way which affirms precisely those elements which he found so “confusing” for religious imagination just a few short years prior. Indeed, it is in just such a way that this imaginative content be grasped as a purely conceptual truth, freed of the spatio-temporal limitations, externality, and contingency of representation. Philosophy, Hegel writes

...must thus retrieve the idea of absolute freedom and with it, the idea of absolute suffering [*Leiden*], or the speculative Good Friday [*speculativen Charfreytag*] which was formerly only historical. Good Friday itself must be retrieved in the whole truth and harshness of its godlessness [*Gottlosigkeit*]...the highest totality can and must achieve its resurrection solely from out of this harshness encompassing everything, and ascending in all its earnestness and out of its deepest ground to the most serene freedom of its shape.¹⁴

In other words, the rehabilitation of Christianity is linked, for Hegel, directly to his transition from the romantic position (that religion *represents* something which philosophers cannot conceptually *demonstrate*) over to the idealist position (that religion in fact represents, in a confused way, a fully

¹² Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* 2, Text 41, “Religion...”, 9; *Miscellaneous Writings*, 119 (Translation modified).

¹³ Hegel, *Theologische Jugendschriften*, 300; *Early Theological Writings*, 251.

¹⁴ Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* Band. 4. Jenaer Kritische Schriften. Edited by Hartmut Buchner Und Otto Pöggeler, (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1968), 413-414.; *Hegel: Faith and Knowledge: An English Translation of G.W. F. Hegel's Glauben Und Wissen*. Translated by H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), 190-191 (Translation modified).

conceptual, reflexive, and systematic account of the Absolute). Why is this the case? What is it about retrieving Christianity—often maligned by Hegel in many earlier works—which recommends to Hegel this fundamental revision of his view?

As I noted above, this shift is rooted in Hegel's meditations on the conditions of possibility of such a representation vis-à-vis the negativity of death. In fragments dating to 1800, Hegel revalues Christianity—particularly the idea of the God which divests itself of its own infinity. In the following two years, Hegel deploys this conception in the context of Schelling's philosophy of identity, aiming to address a major logico-metaphysical problem of post-Kantian idealism, namely the relationship of finite logical conditions to the *ens realissimum* or regulative "transcendental" idea of God as unconditioned ground. By 1806, the representation of "Spirit" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* provides Hegel with an imaginative sketch for a fully speculative logic, which putatively expresses the identity of identity and difference by interpreting human and divine kenosis as the imaginary anticipation of immanent, dialectical negativity of the concept.¹⁵

In the fragments of the 1800 System, Hegel argues that religion represents the infinite in terms analogous to organic life. There is a problem here, however. That which is "infinite" has no limit. This is not limitlessness in the sense of a continual succession of finite states of affairs, like a never-ending number line or Kant's view of the *ens realissimum* as an idea to which we must approximate in thought without reaching (these are examples of what Hegel will famously come to describe as the "bad" infinite [*die schlechte Unendlichkeit*], an infinite conceived in such a way as to militate against its own infinitude through the reproduction of finite opposition).¹⁶ The infinitude of the true infinite is, rather, that beyond which there is nothing—the all-embracing totality from which nothing is excluded. But if the infinite is represented by religion as a form of as infinite "life" to which divine beings, humans, and nature belong, how are we to grasp the relation of infinite life to death and the dead? Does not the idea of an infinite "life" mean the exclusion of the finite as it passes away in death?

Although the manifold is here no longer regarded as isolated but is rather explicitly conceived as related to the living spirit, as animated, as organ, still something remains excluded, namely the dead, so that a certain opposition persists. In other words, when the manifold is conceived as an organ only, opposition to itself is excluded; but life cannot be regarded as union or relation alone but must be regarded as this opposition as well.¹⁷

¹⁵ Hegel, *Phänomenologie*, 588; *Phenomenology*, 490.

¹⁶ Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris, UK ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1991) §94.

¹⁷ Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke 2*, 343; *Miscellaneous Writings*, 154.

Hence, Hegel offers what is –to my knowledge –the first rendition of what will become his famous remark on the “identity of identity and non-identity.”¹⁸ The representation of “infinite life,” he writes, must *include* death as one of its moments, must integrate death and the dead into the total picture of what the infinite is. Infinite “life” must be a process of self-restoration which includes that which, in virtue of the finite understanding, it would seem to exclude as finite: not only as *Verbindung* (or “unity”) but also as “*Verbindung der Verbindung and Nicht-Verbindung*” (the “unity of unity and non-unity”).¹⁹

According to Hegel, it is the actions of destructive religious sacrifice which *represent* our relation to this infinite life, a reality which is “exterior to reflection.”²⁰ In order to represent the infinite, it is necessary that the religious individual be “reminded of his destiny, which demands that he admit the objective as objective or even that he make of the living being itself into an object.” This intimation of mortality occurs through the representation of negativity. “It is necessary” Hegel thus writes, “that life should also put itself into a permanent relation [*bleibendes Verhältnis*] with objects and thus maintain their objectivity up to the point of their destruction [*Vernichtung*].”²¹ I take this to mean something like the following: in order to represent infinite life, it is necessary for the subject to represent its disappearance (i.e., “to affirm the objective as objective” and not as merely a modification of the subject, to insist upon its endurance beyond the disappearance of the subject, and even to identify “Life” itself with such objectivity, as if it were a horizon of infinite presence.) Hence, it is necessary for the subject to disappear, but also to remain, so as to be capable of imagining object as object, since objectivity can only exist in co-implication with subjectivity. To that end, one must maintain the objectivity of objects even to the point of destroying them, i.e., the subject must identify with the object which is destroyed, reminding it of its destiny, and thereby rendering a horizon of infinite presence in the imagination.²² Such ritual sacrifices are, Hegel claims, the propaedeutics to more rarefied acts of ethical sacrifice which affirm and transcend one’s individuality as a member of an ethical community.

¹⁸ Hegel, *Differenz des Fichte’schen und Schelling’schen Systems der Philosophie* in *Gesammelte Werke* 4. “Jenaer Kritische Schriften.” Hrsg. von Hartmut Buchner und Otto Pöggeler (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1968) 64; *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy: An English Translation of G. W. F. Hegel’s Differenz Des Fichte’schen Und Schelling’schen Systems Der Philosophie*, trans. Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977) 156.

¹⁹ Hegel, “Über Religion” in *Gesammelte Werke* 2, 343-344; *Miscellaneous Writings*, 154; This phrase anticipates Hegel’s later formulation, in the context of Identity Philosophy: “Das Absolute selbst aber ist darum die Identität der Identität und Nichtidentität; Entgegensetzen und Einsseyn ist zugleich in ihm.” Cf. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* 4, 64; *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System...*, 156.

²⁰ Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* 2, 344; *Miscellaneous Writings*, 154 (Translation modified).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 346, 155 (Translation modified).

²² Compare to Bataille “Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice.” NB: there is no indication Bataille was aware of these fragments, but his argument in this essay seems to help make some sense of them.

The sacrificial acts which negate the finite are not enough, however, to render an actual representation of the infinite, but only to affirm finitude. Developing his view on the relation of death to “infinite life,” Hegel further suggests that this action of self-negating must be understood to occur within the infinite itself. He thus begins—for the first time—to invoke incarnational language as a modification of transcendental theology. In these fragments, the incarnation is deemed as a way of overcoming the “antinomies” of temporality and spatiality. “The infinite being, filling the immeasurability of space, exists at the same time in a definite space, as is said, for instance, in the verse: ‘He whom the heavens ne’er contained lies now in Mary’s womb.’”²³

This situates religious representation vis-à-vis a theoretical problem anticipated in Kant’s critique of transcendental theology and identified by Schelling as common to both Fichtean metaphysics of infinite subjectivity and Spinozistic metaphysics of infinite substance.²⁴ To wit: we cannot, apparently, *cognize* the way in which an infinite ground of being expresses itself in finite beings, given that the demand of thinking that relation seems to imply that we grasp the infinite as finitizing-itself while simultaneously remaining infinite. But this is apparently precisely what the sacrificial imaginary of Christianity, interpreted in Hegelian terms, seems to accomplish in a constellation of representations. The invocation of ritual and divine self-sacrifice in the kenosis of Christ attested in dogmatic Christianity thus lays the groundwork for a revision of the relation of logical determination to the *ens realissimum*. For Kant, as noted above, this transcendental idea of a highest totality formed an analogue to the idea of a monotheistic God in the realm of metaphysics.²⁵ But according to Kant, this notion had to remain a regulative idea, and could not be an *object* of knowledge. All objects of knowledge are transcendently subject to the principle of complete determination through the use of disjunctive syllogisms.²⁶ This means that the complete conceptual determination of any object of knowledge (necessary for reason but impossible to grasp concretely in experience) would constitute a reduction from the totality of all possible conceptual determinations.²⁷ The *ens realissimum*, as the “most real” being, would ground the sum of all possible conceptual determinations, but could not itself be subject to the theoretical determinations of objects for three reasons: (1) it never is “given” to experience through sensory intuition, and hence cannot be subsumed under a concept; (2) while all possible objects receive their determinations from the

²³ Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* 2, 345; *Miscellaneous Writings*, 155.

The original third stanza, from which Hegel’s gloss is taken, reads: “Den aller Welt Kreis nie beschloß / Der liegt in Marien Schoß” Cf. Martin Luther, *Luthers geistliche Lieder und Kirchengesänge* (Köln: Böhlau, 1985), 165.

²⁴ FWJ Schelling, “Philosophische Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kritizismus” in *Werke*, 3. Edited by Thomas Buchheim, Jochem Hennigfeld, Wilhelm G. Jacobs, Jörg Jantzen, and Siegbert Peetz. (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1982) 84, 96-97; “Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism” in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays* trans. by Fritz Marti (Lewisburg: Associated University Press, 1980), 178, 186.

²⁵ Kant, A580/B608

²⁶ Kant, A571/B599-A572/B600

²⁷ Kant, A574/B602-A576/B604

sum total of possibility grounded in the *ens realissimum*, the idea of an unconditional ground is not dependent upon actually instantiated conceptual determinations of any possible object; and finally, in keeping with this last point, (3) the *ens realissimum* is essentially opposed to all finite conceptual determinations which are articulated through the negation of a given term of a disjunctive syllogism -i.e., the *ens realissimum* would contain no negations, and would thus be beyond any form of philosophical demonstration save to indicate its role as a regulative idea “exterior to reflection”. But Hegel’s reading of ritual and theological conceptions of sacrifice from Christianity insinuates to him the possibility of leveraging Christian representations as correctives to the limitations of Kantian critique. The suggestion that the religious representation of “infinite life” *must* contain negativity sets the stage for a revision of the relationship of logical determinability to this transcendental (and transcendentially self-occluding) notion of God. The point Hegel strives to make through his invocation of religious sacrifice as a complex of human and divine self-negations is that both particular objects *and* the infinite have no comprehensible reality beyond their articulation as moments of a conceptual whole. The *ens realissimum*, modified by a kenotic interpretation of dogmatic Christianity, suggests not an ideal and vanishing infinite, but an actual and self-manifesting infinite which appears in and through its kenotic self-finitization and which returns to itself *as thought*.

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* –often considered Hegel’s *magnum opus* –was the propaedeutic to the full expression of this conceptual truth, a series of negations or self-sacrifices which Hegel terms a “path of despair [*Verzweiflung*].” In that text, Hegel explicitly develops a speculative interpretation of kenosis or self-emptying [*Entäußerung*] which was only intimated in his earlier comments on incarnation (1800) and death (1802). In the *Phenomenology* Hegel, echoes Luther’s rendering of the Epistle to the Philippians: “[Jesus] emptied himself” [ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν] (Phil 2:7) becomes “*entäußerte sich selbst*.” God becomes flesh, divests itself of its transcendence, and dies. This is a divinity of whom we must say “God himself is Dead,” according to Hegel.²⁸ God must disappear through the incarnation to be “*arisen in the Spirit*.”

In other words, Hegel’s sacrificial modification of transcendental theology requires that death itself take on an “ideal” meaning over-and-above its material and existential significance, and the speculative rendition of the kenotic lexicon is the lynchpin of Hegel’s shift from romanticism to idealism. It is only in imagining death and resurrection in Spirit that we can grasp the unity of finite and infinite, here and beyond, subject and object which, as we saw above, must be described in their integral and mutual self-expression, as *moments* of the Absolute. “Death loses its natural meaning in spiritual self-consciousness, i.e., it comes to be just its stated Notion; death becomes transfigured from its immediate meaning, viz., the non-being of this *particular* individual, into the *universality* of Spirit who dwells in His community, dies in

²⁸ Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* 4, 414; *Faith and Knowledge*, 190.

it every day, and is daily resurrected.”²⁹ While this may seem a sort far-flown, dramatic way of phrasing matters, it can be parsed in prosaic logico-metaphysical terms. The upshot is that the Absolute or infinite is not abyssal or occluded, but is essentially self-manifesting. The infinite is not – as in Kant’s transcendental idealism or the romantic reactions that followed – set into an inexorable antithesis with the finite objects of experience and the transcendental concepts which make those objects of experience possible. It is not the ideal of the *ens realissimum* by which reason can dream of satisfaction. It is, rather, the *Parousia* of the Absolute in and as thought, the conceptual self-interpretation of Spirit. This possibility is sketched in the religious imagination as the kenotically self-sacrificing God. The Absolute is self-revealing in and through the finite, finitizing itself while “remaining the selfsame Spirit in its kenosis”.³⁰

Hegel’s famous attacks on intuitive “givenness” –influential in his recent appropriations by Sellars and the Pittsburgh School—are also profoundly if obliquely inflected, I think, by this retrieval of kenotic thinking about death. To say that the death of God must be elevated to the level of speculative philosophy is tantamount to saying that there is no pure gift, no getting access to the “givenness” of the “given”: “The power of Spirit is only as great as its expression [*Ausserung*] its depth only as deep as its dares to spread itself out and lose itself in its exhibition [*Auslegung*].”³¹ What is given is only given as such in virtue of its thoroughgoingly-conceptual character. Save what appears in the concept, nothing appears. There is no “outside” or “beyond” –rather a sphere of immanence which articulates its conceptual structure through a process of self-negation and recuperation. Hegel sees the Christian representation of “Spirit” realized in and through kenotic self-negation as the representation of a new logical form capable of expressing this movement. The repetition of the sacrificial imaginary of dogmatic Christianity in an attempt to conceptually articulate the structure of the *ens realissimum* is thus interpreted by Hegel as the anticipation of a pure conceptual reflexivity, a self-grounding, systematic science which proceeds from and returns to the self-specifying Speculative Idea. Hegel’s earlier view of kenotic sacrifice is thus reversed, and his view of the relation of religious imagination and philosophical rationality follows.

No longer does Hegel see religious acts, narratives, and representations as showing something philosophy cannot conceptually demonstrate. Rather, he sees religious imagination as a formally deficient shape of conceptual reflexivity which must clarify itself dialectically. “[T]he content of religion proclaims earlier in time than does Science, what *Spirit* is.”³² But this clarification of Christian religion by philosophy does mean that Christianity disappears. Rather, it is described within the system as a historical form of

²⁹ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Frankfurt am Main: (Suhrkamp, 1986), 570-571; Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 775.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 588; 490.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 18; 6 (Translation modified).

³² *Ibid.*, 585-586; 488.

discourse, subjectivation, and sacrificial imagination which form the necessary condition for the emergence of Hegel's dialectical system. It is thus clear –as I noted above –that we may construe Hegel's speculative rendition of Christian kenosis as a redoubling or recursion of figural and supersessionist interpretation of Judaism by Christian theologians. Hegel's interpretation of Christian kenosis as dialectical negativity constitutes the application of figural interpretation to itself; the supersessionist impulse is the theological adumbration of the teleological construction of spiritual forms in Hegelian history. However, with an alternative account of the temporality involved in kenosis, there appears a different way to interpret the significance of Hegel's invocation of the kenotic representations of Christianity which neither eventuates in an idealist apotheosis of thought, nor terminates in romantic longing for some real, extra-conceptual transcendent reality.

IV.

To look at this possibility I would like to turn to remarks of two arch anti-Hegelians, Søren Kierkegaard and Georges Bataille. In “losing its natural meaning” in the Christian representation of Spirit, death is effectively identified by Hegel with a form of dialectical or logical negativity. And, as I noted in my gloss of the 1800 System fragments, it is necessary for Hegel to think death through in just this way if he is to articulate an account of religion wherein religion represents the “true” infinite and not the “bad” infinite of perpetual repetition. This representation forms the historical precondition of a genuine, absolute idealism, for Hegel. But, as Kierkegaard writes under the heteronym “Climacus” in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, death as such is not something one can know about “in general,” as Hegel apparently seeks to achieve in his speculative rendition of the Christian *mors mortis*. Knowing about the biological processes that tend toward or stave off death, knowing about cultural norms regarding death, or artistic representations of death, or—as in the case of Hegel, the assimilation of death to dialectical negativity, as a negation which ultimately conceptualized as a passing moment recuperated as the self-expression of an intelligible whole—none of these can tell me anything about the death as it relates to the *me* that I apparently am, distinct from any other self.³³ However, the apparent unintelligibility of the concept of death is not an occasion for shrugging off our finitude, in Kierkegaard's view.

The Epicurean view that death should not be a matter of great concern since “when death tightens the snare it has indeed caught nothing, because then all is over” is a “jest by which the cunning contemplator places himself on the outside” of the mortal condition, Kierkegaard argues.³⁴ It is not that Epicurus is wrong in his identification of the self-contradictory character of the idea of

³³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*. Ed. and transl. by Alastair Hannay. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009). 138-139.

³⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, “At A Graveside” in *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*. Ed. and Trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). 73-74.

mortality, but that he appropriates this aporia in the wrong way, on Kierkegaard's view. By using the aporetic character of the idea of death to argue that it is not a matter of genuine concern, Epicurus suppresses the radical finitude of which the contradiction is itself an expression. It is only by dwelling within this aporia—that the reality of death effaces its own condition of possibility—that we can face death “earnestly,” Kierkegaard claims, that we might find in this impossible thought a well-spring for the intensification of life itself. Impossible death, or death as the impossible, appears as the abyssal dimension of human finitude which calls us to responsibility for our choices in the face of an inexorable and unthinkable end.

Hegel's appropriation of kenotic sacrifice from Christianity is certainly distinct from the Epicurean project. But it no less involves a philosophical strategy which suppresses radical finitude. As atheist mystic Georges Bataille suggests, the invocation of representations of religious sacrifice in Hegel's works in much the same way. “The problem of Hegel” Bataille writes, “is given in the action of sacrifice [*est donné dans l'action du sacrifice*].”³⁵ And in some significant sense, given the content of the fragments of the 1800 system and their continuity with the sacrificial language and imagery of the *Phenomenology*, this seems to be true.³⁶ According to Bataille, Hegel invokes a kenotic interpretation of the Crucifixion narrative in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* for precisely the same reason that the “man of sacrifice” is enthralled by spectacles of violence and loss. Identification with the victim of sacrifice provides an original representation of death. For *my* death, as such, is never present within my experience. It is neither mediate nor immediate. And yet appropriating the reality of death is essential to the self-knowledge of Spirit, through which the speculative system is realized. It allows me to imagine dying, to represent this movement to myself, and so form the idea of a stable horizon—in the form of a certain shared “life,” i.e., Absolute Spirit within a community—which outlasts my own finite being. The “problem of Hegel,” to which Bataille refers, is thus the integration of the negativity of death into the Absolute as one of its “moments.”

By the time it arrives death robs me of the possibility of learning what it might have taught me, however. Sacrifice, much like Hegel suggests in his own work, attempts to *re-present* what can never be *present* as such, to mediate what has no immediate meaning. Death can only be understood *as* death where I undertake to understand it as *my* death. But this is apparently impossible, since it is always a *fait accompli* in some sense and, in another, never arrives.³⁷ Hegel's invocation of kenotic sacrifice as the basis for speculative logic would thus appear as a sustained negation of this aporia. *Nolens volens*, Hegel's interpretation of his decisive gesture of theological

³⁵ Georges Bataille, “Hegel, la mort, et le sacrifice” in *Oeuvres complètes, tome 12 : Articles II 1950-1961* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988); Georges Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice.” Trans. Jonathan Strauss. *Yale French Studies*, no. 78 (1990).

³⁶ Cf. W Ezekiel Goggin, “Hegel and Bataille on Sacrifice,” *Hegel Bulletin* 39, no. 2 (October 2018): 236 – 59.

³⁷ Thomas Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 40-49.

retrieval would thus rely upon a suppression of the non-dialectical negativity announced by the “impossibility” of death and its ecstatic temporality. In other words, Hegel’s shift from a romantic philosophy of religion to an absolute-idealist philosophy of religion relies upon a *non-dialectical negation of non-dialectical negativity*. The representation of Spirit—invoked to address the metaphysical problem which is apparently “given in the action of sacrifice”—thus inhabits a hiatus of meaning, rather than marking its closure. The narrative-representational capacity of “Spirit” which recollects its self-negations in and as the production of shared cultural memory is simultaneously animated and frustrated by the rupturing effect of an ecstatic temporality which it cannot contain, a perpetual and constitutive fugitivity, rather than the *Parousia* of the Absolute. We might suggest then, that repetitions of religious representations of sacrifice in Hegel’s speculative system are not rather the historical anticipation of pure conceptual reflexivity in the form of imagination but are better understood as phantasmatic representations which respond to the *impossibility* of pure conceptual reflexivity. Hegel’s philosophy— from the vantage of radical finitude explored above—is a form of transcendental bricolage which deploys sacrificial kitsch in the face of this impossibility.

V.

This reconstructive critique pertains to overarching questions regarding the method and significance of “continental” philosophy of religion in a number of ways; it is not merely an item of historical and exegetical interest in the fate of Hegel and the reception of his thought. An understanding of Hegel’s transition from romanticism to idealism, hinging on his treatment of death, can serve as an archive from which contemporary philosophers of religion can draw as they propose ways to think philosophically with sources which have been, according to various scientific and cultural canons, traditionally regarded as “religious.” It points to a useful (if tendentious) example of philosophical analysis of religious *action*, rather than succumbing to the repeated (and too-often, true) charge that philosophy of religion, in keeping with Christian and especially Protestant orientations in the field, focuses narrowly on religious ideation and doxic commitment.

There are also wider ramifications for specific exegetical questions pertaining to post-Hegelian philosophy of religion. *Entäußerung*, the Lutheran translation of Pauline kenosis, appears in Hegel’s work as the imaginary representation of the negative moment of mediation which must be re-appropriated in the concept. The same term is linked, decisively, to the transformation of Hegel’s thought after his death. Hegelian kenosis, *Entäußerung*, is essential to Feuerbach’s and Marx’s respective analyses of alienation; it appears as the central concept of in Feuerbach’s psychologistic iteration of Hegelian kenosis as “projection,”³⁸ as well as Marx’s re-interpretation of Hegelian kenosis as

³⁸ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen Des Christentums in Gesammelte Werke*, Band 5. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1973), 377n2.

disclosive of the material dialectic of labor.³⁹ While this has been noted by Marxian theorists such as György Lukács,⁴⁰ failure to adequately deal with the theological legacy of the term forecloses potentially fruitful explorations into the kenotic roots of their respective critiques of alienation, and the supersessionist language of their secularizing programs which echo of the tendency of Hegelian criticism described above.⁴¹ The account of the ecstatic temporality of death and sacrifice offered by thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Bataille suggest a wholly different conception of religious representation and historical time than appears within Hegelian sublation. Because the temporality of death bears a relation to the impossible intimated in the non-dialectical negativity of death, historical time becomes organized around a perpetually missed encounter, non-dialectical negativity.

Finally, through an analysis and critique of the role of sacrificial action in Hegel's works, it becomes clear how the affirmation of non-dialectical negativity re-configures the relationship between religious imagination and philosophical conceptuality in Hegel's philosophy of religion. This not only serves as a historically relevant touchstone for understanding the way in which religious imagination has been appropriated and deployed in post-Kantian thought; it also calls for further reflection on how we should think about philosophical reflection "with" religious concepts vis-à-vis the inherent interdisciplinarity of contemporary religious studies. Instead of seeking to resolve the question of the interdisciplinarity of religious studies through a procedure which reduces various concrete forms of religious expression ("polytheism of imagination and art") to whatever set of methodologically dictated "basic facts" or "principles" are in play ("monotheism of reason and heart")⁴² such a philosophy of religion would constitute what we might call a "polytheism of the impossible," which identifies and traces historical moments at which conceptual demonstration meets its limit, breaks down, and attempts to leverage concrete religious representations as a gesture of self-reparation (just as kenotic sacrifice representationally facilitates for Hegel the development of a speculative logic to respond to the unresolved antinomies of transcendental critique). Repetition of religious representations in philosophical discourse would appear as a form of transcendental bricolage which respond to the non-closure of the ideal. In light of the reversal of the Hegelian philosophy of religion charted above, the interdisciplinarity of religious studies would appear neither as a problem to be solved through the imposition of some disciplinary regime, nor a confusion to be dissolved through the fragmentation and absorption of religious studies into the various other humanistic and social-scientific disciplines which treat "religious" materials. The apparent methodological chaos of religious studies

³⁹ Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, trans. Martin Milligan, (Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 1988) 149.

⁴⁰ Georg Lukács, *Der Junge Hegel und die Probleme der Kapitalistischen Gesellschaft*. (Aufbau-Verlag, 1954, 1948) 611.

⁴¹ Cf., Feuerbach, 74n7; Marx, 241.

⁴² Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* 2, 616; "Earliest System-Program of German Idealism" in *Miscellaneous Writings*, 111.

is not *merely* the historical effect of a dissolving crypto-theological synthesis which attempted to reify “religion” in the name of European political and economic projects (though it is also this, considered from a straightforwardly historicist perspective). It is also transcendently, or quasi-transcendently, explicable. It is the unavoidable methodological promiscuity of a field which would take stock of an apparently endless range of possible religious representations and the strategies whereby they are deployed vis-à-vis the non-closure of the ideal, phantasmatic expressions of its “transcendental frustration.” This “transcendental frustration” of the concept, its inability to conceptually demarcate its own limits, offers us a frame by which to understand the diverse range of phantasmatic representations which inhabit the hiatus of the concept or the “non-closure” of the ideal: kitsch, dream-images, commodity forms, and various other material and representational traces. These traces constitute “religion” through a process of recurrent encounters with the non-dialectical negativity which both animates and interrupts putatively homogenous historical time. Such traces are not the index of romantic longing for a divine, extra-conceptual, transcendent reality. Nor are they scenes which anticipate idealist satisfaction in the pure self-mediation of thought. They are, rather, emblems of the transcendental frustration of the concept.

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