



**The Relationship of Religion and Politics  
under Conditions of Modernity and Globality**

**An Hegelian Account**

Andrew Buchwalter

*University of North Florida*

abuchwal@unf.edu

**Abstract:** This paper explores Hegel's distinctive account of the relationship of religion and politics, focusing on the manner in which it articulates the aims and assumptions of modern political thought while supporting cross-cultural dialogue and the possibility of a differentiated global culture. The paper details first how, for Hegel, the institutions of modern political life depend for their legitimacy and stability on an enabling culture whose underlying structure is religious. Second, it explicates the manner in which Hegel, via a distinctive reception of Protestantism, fashions a specifically modern notion of the common good, one committed to diversity and to ongoing processes of collective self-reflection. Third, it argues that while Hegel accepts modern notions of the separation of church and state, he does so with recourse to a political culture that is not only defined through religion but for which the very church-state separation is understood as a social construction whose particular configuration is the result of ongoing processes of cultural self-definition. Fourth, while Hegel's idea of a civil religion is inextricably intertwined with the historical legacy of Christianity, that concept of Christianity is shown to support a form of social criticism that not only challenges Western categories but displays an openness both to other beliefs and traditions and to the idea of a global ethos supportive of and constituted by them.

Hegel's account of the relationship of church and state bears strong resemblance to conventional liberal-Enlightenment positions. He rejects the idea of a state religion; he claims that the state must remain agnostic as regards any particular religious creed; and he assigns to the state the task of protecting the right of conscience and the free expression of belief. At the same time, his position deviates at crucial points from the standard liberal view. In addition to asserting that the state should promote religious beliefs and practices, he not only claims that politics must be based on religion but advances a religiously interpreted vision of a collective good. Significantly, though, these seemingly disparate

strands in Hegel's position are not incompatible. Endorsement of components of the liberal separation of church and state does not contravene wider commitment to the conjunction of religion and politics. Indeed, Hegel's position is that the possibility of a genuine liberal political order depends on forms of sentiment whose structure is essentially religious.

In what follows I clarify Hegel's seemingly paradoxical view of the relationship of church and state on the one hand and religion and politics on the other. My aim is to indicate how his position adumbrates rudiments of a theory of civil religion for modern pluralist societies — something as significant for the idea

of religion as for modern societies. A central focus is on how, for Hegel, religion provides the framework for a modern account of republicanism. In presenting position I also address the ineliminably Christian component of Hegel's account. My aim here is to show not only that Christianity is central to a modern account of a civil religion, but also that it enables a modern civil religion to perform a critical role as regards one-sided conceptions of modernity even as it facilitates openness to other traditions and beliefs. With regard to this latter point I seek to show how Hegel's idea of a modern civil religion can claim global reach and significance as well. The broader goal of this paper is to indicate how his position sheds light on ongoing debates in both the academic and wider cultural domains—e.g., liberalism and communitarianism, secularism and religiosity, modernity and tradition, and Westernism and globalism.

### Religious Ethicality and Liberal Modernity

Let us begin by recalling Hegel's conception of a legitimate political order under conditions of modernity. In line with much of modern political thought, Hegel maintains that the demise of theologically defined conceptions of state has released politics from its traditional attention to a pre-given conception of the good. Henceforth politics attends to the institutional structures and mechanisms needed to ensure rights and liberties. Included here are both the private liberties enabling individuals to define and pursue their own notions of the good and the public liberties enabling a people collectively to define and shape itself. Yet, for Hegel, such mechanisms are not self-regulating; they require an enabling public culture characterized by recognition of and support for the principles infusing liberal political institutions, e.g., individual rights, fairness, mutual respect, public deliberation, and the idea of political authority subject to public legitimation. The structures of a just society must be embedded in a common ethos characterized by a collective commitment to their value and desirability. Only when so anchored can modern societies repel threats emanating from the autonomizing of their own principles—either individual liberty operating against the public structures that that liberty presupposes or the institutional structures detached from the individual interests they are designed to serve. While rejecting appeal to a pre-existent notion of the common good, Hegel does hold that the political order thus liberated itself cannot be properly sustained unless its members are communally prepared

to affirm the principles and values upon which it is based and to which it is committed.

The notion that a liberal political order may depend on an enabling public culture is of course not unique to Hegel. Many liberal political theorists—Rawls and Dworkin, for instance—have said the same thing. Still, there are significant differences between the Hegelian and the liberal position. For one thing, liberal political thought, committed to the idea of limited government and defending individual liberty against the state coercion, sharply demarcates the public from the private domain and indeed the sphere of social life generally. For another, liberal thinkers, operating against the backdrop of modern value pluralism, are typically committed to an emphatic championing of the right over the good, formal principles of justice over substantive notions of what is desirable.

By contrast, the enabling culture that Hegel envisions for a liberal polity is one that rejects any rigid distinction between either the public and the private or the right and the good. Rejecting such distinctions is, for Hegel, needed both to explain the sense in which principles of a liberal polity can be anchored in the everyday values and attitudes of individuals *and* how such values and attitudes can express acceptance of and commitment to objectively binding norms. Hegel's account of the relationship of both public and private and the right and the good is, to be sure, highly differentiated and eschews any reductionist construal. Still, only in conjoining the two—public norms and everyday beliefs, the norms of just institutions and their social embrace—can one account, Hegel argues, for a political culture that can properly sustain a modern polity. The notion of a modern concept of ethicality (*Sittlichkeit*) is predicated on the interpenetration of institutional structure and cultural sentiment.

These considerations bear on the importance of religion for Hegel's political philosophy. Here we need not rehearse Hegel's claims about the essentially social-political nature of religion. Instead we note that religion for Hegel serves as the quintessential expression of the ethos presupposed by a modern polity. Religion is generally the cultural phenomenon whose function is precisely the mediation of subjective sentiment and objective norms and values. Focused on "an inwardly revealed eternal verity,"<sup>1</sup> religion is the mechanism

---

<sup>1</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 487.

whereby received values and duties are apprehended as subjectively meaningful *and* everyday beliefs and attitudes evince support for and embrace of norms that are objectively binding. According special attention to the religious cultus of a religious community—termed by Theunissen "the foundation" of the state and of ethicality,<sup>2</sup> Hegel fashions religion at once as the everyday concretization of publicly binding principles and the subjective commitment to them on the part of community members. Like Durkheim after him, Hegel discerns in religious communities practices of obligation that simultaneously bind and motivate its members. Such communities instantiate an ethos that itself serves as the core of a polity defined in the interpenetration of objective institutions and subjective sentiment. They crystallize Hegel's contention "that religion is the very substance of ethical life and of the state."<sup>3</sup>

Religion, however, denotes more than the central property of a genuine polity and political ethos; it serves also as the source of the stability and integrity of a genuine political order. In its explicit commitment to the interrelationship of universal and particular, religion cultivates the dispositions needed to maintain a political order under modern conditions. Not only does it foster sensitivity to the degree that developed social relations and public institutions are a precondition for the forms of individual freedom central to modern societies; it demonstrates how the forms of mutual dependency so constitutive of modern societies can properly be sustained only if unless individuals explicitly commit themselves to upholding public institutions and the structures that mediate public and private life. And since a polity consists *a limine* in the conjunction of objective structure and supporting subjective sentiment, inasmuch as a polity has substance only as *Volksgeist*, religion helps constitute the very reality of a genuine political order. A source of civic education and engagement, religion sustains a political order, both in upholding its institutions and in informing their basic structure. "[R]eligion is that

moment which integrates the state at the deepest level of the sentiment of citizens."<sup>4</sup>

In this manner we may speak of a Hegelian civil religion. Such religion is, to be sure, not to be understood in a narrowly secular manner; at issue is not Rousseau's "purely civil profession of faith."<sup>5</sup> Against Rousseau Hegel remains here, as elsewhere, fully committed to the historical legacy of Christianity as he understands it. Indeed, the very notion of a civil profession of faith, as Rousseau understands, is for Hegel inconceivable without the Christian legacy. Later we will speak more of that legacy, as well as Hegel's view of the centrality of Christianity to secularism generally. Here we note only that, for Hegel, a viable concept of political life depends on a religiosity that clarifies the concept of the political, informs the latter's structure, and accounts for its sustainability. A genuine polity depends on a form of civic republicanism, and such republicanism depends on individual and communal sentiments that are best accommodated in the concept and practice of religion. Part and parcel of the claim that political community depends on an ethico-religious culture is the view—and here Hegel mirrors de Tocqueville<sup>6</sup>—that religion itself has a republican function.

### Protestantism, Pluralism, and the Common Good

That religion might furnish tools for a modern political culture may on its face appear highly implausible. Religion, for Hegel, is not just a matter of personal belief; it describes what a people takes to be collectively authoritative. Religion is the domain in which "a people defines what it considers to be true."<sup>7</sup> Hegel's view would thus appear to comport rather poorly with an ethos committed, as a modern one must be, to principles of plurality and diversity. Indeed, it is in

<sup>4</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 295.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and the Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, ed. Lester G. Crocker (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), p. 145.

<sup>6</sup> See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, edited by J. P. Mayer (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), especially pp. 290-301.

<sup>7</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction: Reason in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Theunissen, *Hegels Lehre vom absoluten Geist als theologischer-politischer Traktat* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1970), p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 283.

opposition to such comprehensive efforts that liberal theorists and proponents of limited government insist on demarcating both the private from the public and notions of what is individually desirable from public norms of social life. In a modern polity formal structures of commonality can focus only on principles of justice rather than communally accepted notions of the good.

Yet while such concerns are warranted as regards traditionalist views of religion, they are inappropriate as regards Hegel's more modern account. The point is central to his reception of Protestantism. Protestantism is here important for several reasons. First, it provides quintessential expression of the concept of religion itself. With its notion of the infinite worth of the finite individual and the idea of truth as a common possession of humanity, Protestantism proffers pronounced expression for a view of religion based on the complication of finite and infinite, inner and outer, objective norm and subjective sentiment. In addition, Protestantism sustains the cultural values associated with a modern political culture. With its notion of the dignity of the person, Protestantism furnishes components of an ethos of liberalism, one which anchors in subjective beliefs and attitudes respect for the principles and values associated with liberal political institutions, including right, law, and justice, individual dignity, and reciprocal recognition. Similarly the concept of the right of the subject introduces an emphatic notion of publicly legitimized sovereignty, in particular the view that state practices and policies must proceed from "insight and argument."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps most significantly Protestantism provides the framework for a modern conception of a common good—a mediated or reflexive conception, one that does not endorse a preexisting set of values but attends instead to the *conditions* for individual pursuit of the good. In its respect for subjective conscience and the personhood of the individual, Protestantism culminates in an ethos that accommodates toleration of and respect for different beliefs and creeds, including Judaism, Anabaptism, and Quakerism.<sup>9</sup> Protestantism, for Hegel, supplies the underpinnings for a creed of tolerance in a culture devoid of any one substantive creed.

This is not to suggest that the shared values in modern societies reduce to procedural principles which

allow for the pursuit of individuals notions of the good but lack any specific content of their own. On Hegel's view, a modern political ethos is governed by commitment to substantive values as well. A narrowly procedural approach would be too thin to supply the needed motivation. Significantly, though, the substantive values as derived from Protestantism are fully consonant with the diversity and plurality of modern societies. This is the value of freedom or autonomy, understood as *Bei sich Selbst sein*, the value that "forms the basis of the Reformation."<sup>10</sup> With Protestantism "the principle of freedom has forced its way into secular life,"<sup>11</sup> with the result that such institutions as "law, property, social morality, government, constitutions, etc., must conform to general principles, in order that they may accord with the idea of free will and be rational."<sup>12</sup> An ethos shaped by this "religion of freedom"<sup>13</sup> (*Religion der Freiheit*) explains, as liberalism cannot, why individuals are and should be motivationally disposed to embrace a polity committed to tolerance, dignity, and reciprocity. An ethos shaped by a religion of freedom affirms the public norms of a liberal political culture while also fashioning such norms as matters of everyday belief and experience.

Hegel's point, though, is not just that a "religion of freedom" provides the conditions for a liberal polity; it provides as well the specific meaning of that polity, to the point of allowing the political as such to emerge. In particular, a religion of freedom sanctions a republican-deliberative notion of politics. A liberal polity focuses not just on safeguarding and facilitating expression of individual rights and liberties; it consists as well and perhaps preeminently in the process by which a people collectively interprets and defines the conditions and goals of social life itself. This follows in part from a specific application of the Protestant religion of freedom. Protestant freedom, for Hegel, is characterized by a commitment to the principle of selfhood in otherness. Such freedom cannot be construed merely as a matter of inward belief; spirit must find expression in

---

<sup>10</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy III* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), p. 154.

<sup>11</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion 3* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 138.

<sup>12</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 417.

<sup>13</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 303.

<sup>8</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 353.

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 295.

external reality itself, surmounting the opposition of subject and object. Yet such surmounting cannot obtain just for the external observer; freedom demands that it must obtain for the subject matter itself. This means that political community informed by the Protestant idea of freedom must itself be understood as "the self-knowing ethical actuality of spirit."<sup>14</sup> The idea of a religion of freedom demands a comprehensive notion of politics, one dedicated to processes of collective self-scrutiny and self-definition.

The notion that a religiously informed concept of politics might attend to issues of collective self-definition may seem to reaffirm that public commitment to a common notion of good that is the bane of modern liberalism. Yet Hegel's position is more nuanced. First, processes of collective self-interpretation focus on the conditions for public deliberation rather than on the results achieved. Indeed, the very demand for self-scrutiny would rule out any specifically achieved end. Also, the process of *deliberative* self-scrutiny itself affirms the forms of pluralism that appeal to comprehensiveness in politics are presumed to preclude. Indeed, Hegel maintains that appeal to collective processes of self-definition is mandated because of the breakdown in conventional views of what is collectively desirable, because what is binding has become a matter of diverse interpretation. Furthermore, inasmuch as processes of collective self-interpretation inevitably trigger differences in interpretation, attention to matters of collective identity contributes to the affirmation of plural forces and tendencies. Indeed, given that a politics committed to collective self-definition can subject to debate and deliberative scrutiny the basic norms of society, it is arguably more accommodating of pluralism than is a notion of politics such as Rawls' which, in its effort to safeguard pluralism, seeks to specify essential structures which underlay public life but are not themselves available to public deliberation. For Hegel, revival of a religiously conceived notion of political comprehensiveness goes hand in hand with affirmation of the values of a modern, pluralist political order.

### **The Separation of Church and State and the Conjunction of Religion and Politics**

These considerations bear on Hegel's general account of the relationship of religion and politics. To say that

politics depends upon religion does not mean that politics must be subordinated to religion. In keeping with his role as a theoretician of political modernity, Hegel emphatically opposes this solution, not least because he is mindful of the political fanaticism associated with subordinating political to ecclesiastical authority. Moreover, such subordination undermines the nature of a free and rational polity, whose legitimacy depends on its ability to constitute itself as an autonomous domain, one able to account for its own legitimacy. Furthermore, Hegel argues that a polity, far from occupying a subordinate role vis-à-vis religion, possesses a foundational role as regards the latter. Not only must ecclesiastical institutions, qua owners of property, observe secular laws; not only religious beliefs when entering the public arena observe the norms of public reason; not only does the state assume the role of the preeminent instance of social authority in light of the modern diversity of confessional belief-systems; the state, in providing the mechanisms for a comprehensive reflection on what is collectively meaningful, is a precondition for the realization of religion itself. Genuine religion is dependent on the emergence of a genuine polity and is inconceivable without the institutions of modern life: "outside the ethical spirit therefore it is vain to seek for true religion and religiosity."<sup>15</sup>

Yet if genuine religion presupposes the legal and political structures of modern societies, politics remains no less dependent on religion. If the political does assume an autonomy vis-à-vis the religious, this autonomy is itself the product of a religious ethos. The idea of sovereign legitimacy, for instance, is for Hegel only intelligible against the backdrop of a notion of self-causation nurtured in religion. In addition, a modern religious ethos is distinguished precisely by an appreciation of its limits with regard to the political. In the same way that a modern political domain must accept constraints even as it promotes and accommodates the religious, so a modern religious ethos displays a nuanced relation to the political, serving at once as the latter's foundation "but only a foundation."<sup>16</sup> For Hegel, there is no place for religious legislation. It is in this differentiated character that one perceives the parameters of Hegel's uniquely modern notion of a civil religion, one predicated on the

<sup>15</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 283.

<sup>16</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 292.

<sup>14</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 301.

separation of church and state even as it conjoins religion and politics.

Hegel's culturalist approach is significant—and here affinities to Arendt are evident—because it sidesteps the rigidity attendant on more juridical approaches to the church-state separation. First, he avoids the state of affairs where separations easily atrophy into rigid oppositions, a phenomenon discernible in today's increasingly balkanized political culture. Inasmuch as Hegel locates the source of separation principally not in formal constitutional requirements but in shared cultural sentiment, he construes the separation itself, not as manifestation of conflicting factions, but as a desideratum of public life itself. In line with his conception of *modern* tragedy and in particular his notion of the tragedy *in*—and not *of*—the ethical, a modern public culture affirms opposition as a constituent component of a greater commonality.<sup>17</sup> Second, Hegel's culturalist approach concretizes and stabilizes the separation itself. Inasmuch as a modern civil religion is, on his view, committed to deliberative conception of public life, it allows for the separation to be perceived not as something constitutionally prescribed or imposed—a state of affairs that often only engenders resistance—but as product of public communication itself. What counts as a society's understanding of the separation of church and state, including the criteria for making that separation, are determined and validated in a process of public discourse; these determination are the product of an overlapping consensus—one, however, which exists, *pace* Rawls, not just for philosophical reflection, but as the product of everyday politics itself.<sup>18</sup> Nor does recourse to a common discourse in any way vitiate the force of a church-state separation. For Hegel, it is only in the deliberative process, in recognition of what is *shared* in common, that differences are also properly perceived. In this respect as well, ratification of a separation of

church and state is the byproduct of a functioning public culture.

This, to be sure, is not to imply that separation is ratified in any definitive way. Because it is the product of public deliberation, it is always subject to revision and renegotiation. Yet, for Hegel, this is not in any way a drawback. For one thing, the very notion that the domains of religion and politics can be definitively demarcated is folly. "It has been a monstrous blunder of our times to try to look upon these inseparables as separable from one another, and even as mutually indifferent."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, any radical separation is also undesirable, for a genuinely vibrant public sphere depends on the degree to which the two domains complement and mutually enrich one another—to the degree that they are indeed "reciprocal guarantees of strength."<sup>20</sup> Still, what Hegel does allow is that any societally binding separation is one achieved not through formal precommitments but with regard to the manner of its constitution in the culture generally.

These considerations also bear on the nature of public culture itself. At issue for Hegel is not simply a constitutional framework which, as with liberalism, safeguards the expressions of beliefs which themselves are consigned to the sphere of private life. Because Hegel's is a deliberative public sphere, individual beliefs, like the ends of public life themselves, are also shaped and defined in the context of public discourse itself. For Hegel, public and private life not only interpenetrate but also mutually enrich each other. Hence the public domain is not one, as with liberalism, that merely tolerates or even accommodates private belief system; it is one that necessarily engages them as well. With Charles Taylor, we might say that Hegel public ethos of tolerance is also an "ethos of other understanding."<sup>21</sup> In this respect, too, Hegel's notion of a modern civil religion serves to question any rigid separation of church and state, and indeed the distinction of religion and secularity, even as it also underwrites them.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> See my "Political Pluralism in Hegel and Rawls," in William Rehg and James Bohman (eds.), *Pluralism and the Pragmatic Turn: The Transformation of Critical Theory* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2001), especially pp. 354-356.

<sup>18</sup> A recent version of the Hegelian position has been articulated by Seyla Benhabib: "The democratic citizens, and not just the judges and legislators, have to learn the art of separation by testing the limits of their seemingly overlapping consensus." *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton: PUP, 2002), p. 131.

---

<sup>19</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 284.

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 291.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Taylor, "Comparison, History, Truth," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). See also his "A World Consensus on Human Rights," *Dissent* (Summer 1996).

<sup>22</sup> Jürgen Habermas addresses related issues in articulating the parameters of a "post-secular" society. See "Religion in the

### Christian Criticality, Western Rationality, and the Possibility of a Global Culture

As indicated, Hegel's idea of a civil religion—in contradistinction to that of Rousseau—is fully intertwined with Christianity and in particular Protestant Christianity. Moreover, Christianity is conceived by Hegel as the consummate religion itself. These features of his position raise myriad questions about the viability of his approach—not least whether his is merely Christian ethic, whether it might hold more universal significance, and what application it might have for other beliefs and traditions.

To answer these questions, let us first to note that while Christianity is central to Hegel's conception of a political ethos and social-political life generally, it is a notion of Christianity that entails no simple ratification of existent or historically received notions of that faith. Instead, his is a conception, appropriate to the idea of a political ethos that incorporates the dimension of reflexive self-legitimation, that calls into question such received conceptions. Christianity in his own day was largely defined either by a Lutheran orthodoxy committed to two-world doctrine and the impotence of human will or a radical subjectivism that, rooted in the Protestant theology of Schleiermacher, eschewed social concerns altogether. For a civic republican like Hegel, such views held little purchase. Unlike other republicans, however, Hegel pressed his opposition not as an outright dismissal but in the form of a restatement and further development rather than outright dismissal. Against the authoritarianism and repressiveness of orthodox Lutheranism (and in anticipation of 20th century liberation theology), he presents Christianity quintessentially as a "religion of freedom." With its commitment to the comprehensive conjunction of the finite and infinite or the human and the divine, Christianity above is the religion that affirms and thematizes "the self-sufficient and inherently infinite personality of the individual."<sup>23</sup> As such, Christianity is committed equally to: (i) the idea of legal freedom and the inalienable rights of the individual person, (ii) a moral freedom predicated on the notion that the individual is accountable only for actions and events that are knowingly the product of

his/her own will, and (iii) a notion of social-political freedom based on the idea individuals fully attain autonomy only when reciprocally finding recognition in what is other or alien to themselves. Similarly, against the asocial subjectivism of regnant Protestantism, Hegel presents Christianity as a "religion of ethicality" (*die Religion der Sittlichkeit*),<sup>24</sup> where commitment to the unity of the human and divine culminates in a "universal self-consciousness"<sup>25</sup> characterized by a comprehensive and historically existent community of cooperation committed *a limine* to the idea of social commonality itself.

Here we ignore the question of the adequacy of what in his own days was a heterodox view of Christianity. Important instead is Hegel's general approach in engaging the ruling forms of Christianity. Committed though he was to the principles of a modern and secular political culture, he had no interest in dismissing Christianity itself—a point of likely disagreement with Jaspers and Arendt. For one thing, the very notion modern secularity might be demarcated from Christianity is for Hegel, as Karl Löwith has so ably demonstrated,<sup>26</sup> folly. More important in the present context is Hegel's view that the practical implementation of the modern secular republicanism has little prospect of success unless the latter can be publicly accepted by members of the socially dominant Protestant Christian culture as a possible and desirable consequence of their own belief system. Hegel's characterization of Christianity, presented in the form of lectures to university students who would occupy positions of power in German culture, is thus motivated as much by practical as theoretical consideration. In ways that may be relevant for those critical of forms of Christian fundamentalism in our society, Hegel's engagement with Christianity derives in part from the conviction that a defense and implementation of the core principles of modernity are best achieved through the immanent critique, development, and restatement of the beliefs and values conventionally associated with Christianity.

<sup>24</sup> The phrase belongs to Arnold Ruge, but he uses it to characterize Hegel's position. See Laurence Dickey, "Hegel on Religion and Politics," in Frederick Beiser (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* (Cambridge UP: Cambridge, 1993), p. 333.

<sup>25</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy II*, p. 377.

<sup>26</sup> Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

Public Sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14:1 (2006), pp. 1-25.

<sup>23</sup> *Philosophy of Right*, p. 223.

Hegel's conception of the criticality of Christianity is also reflected in the relation of a civil religion to modernity. On the one hand, such a religion has a decidedly affirmative function. Expressive of the principle of subjective freedom that emerged with Protestantism, this religion serves to promote and sustain the economic, legal, moral, and social freedoms associated with modernity generally. In this regard, Hegel's position reveals affinities to Max Weber, for whom a Protestant ethic also undergirds modern social life. Yet the differences between the two positions are significant.<sup>27</sup> In the case of Weber, the Protestant ethic facilitates and fortifies the economic and administrative rationality he associates with capitalism. By contrast, Hegel ascribes to a Protestant ethic a critical function, one that challenges features of capitalist modernity itself. Rooted in the notion of the infinite freedom of the person, Hegel's Protestant ethic discloses how modern industrial society promotes a calculating egoism that undermines the forms of sociality modern individualism presupposes. Similarly, it also demonstrates how forms of bureaucratism undermine the individual freedoms they purportedly serve. In both cases Hegel's ethic seeks to prevent the nexus of modern economic and administrative structures "from becoming a self-constituting and independent power."<sup>28</sup> Correlatively, his Protestant ethic promotes an alternate view of modern social life, one which, in appropriately immanent manner, discerns in the system of interconnections forged by modern political economy not a just society of individual dedicated to pursuit of economic gain but a system of ethicality characterized by relations of mutuality and a public spiritedness committed to the communal ends of public life itself. The "Protestant principle," for Hegel, mandates realization of a "system of an ethical world" (*System der sittlichen Welt*)<sup>29</sup> understood in part as secular actualization of a notion of infinite freedom that determined to surmount any distinction between internal and external determination. It is also understood as a normative assessment and reconstruction<sup>30</sup> of the

institutions of modern life from the perspective of a more complete realization of the principle of freedom articulated with Protestantism.<sup>31</sup>

Hegel's point though is not just that Hegel's version of a Protestant ethic challenges a one-sided view of modernity. It also challenges modernity, Western culture and indeed Christianity itself. Cultural identity, for Hegel, focuses ultimately on some sense of *self-identity*. Self-identity, in line with Hegel's celebrated critique of Cartesian subjectivity, is itself possible only in recognitive processes, where the self recognizes, is recognized by, and recognizes its own recognition in, the other. All meaningful self-identity is necessarily affirmation of a self other than and alien to itself. In the present case affirmation of one religious culture ineluctably involves affirmation of other cultures as well; Christian culture can properly assert its own identity only with reference to other cultures, something Hegel claims occurred historically with regard to Christianity's to the Greek, Roman, and Jewish religions. Central to the comprehensive self-apprehension of an individual religious culture or spirit, as with a *Volksgeist*, is its "alienation and transition" (*seine Entäußerung und sein Übergang*).<sup>32</sup>

As issue, however, is not just an instrumental need to fulfill own sense of identity by way of the other. If the recognition process is to be genuine it must also be one in which incorporates the other's autonomous perspective on the original culture, and indeed in a way that alters, transforms and shapes the latter. Western culture may indeed be rooted an identity shaped through in Christianity, but the full realization of that identity itself depends on a process of recognition that incorporates impulses from other traditions, impulses that serve to alter that identity of Christianity even as the encounter with Christianity alters the other's self-conception. Anthony Giddens has recently characterized the relationship of Western culture to globality as follows:

Although still dominated by Western power, globalization today can no longer be spoken of only as a matter of one-way imperialism.... A world where no one is 'outside' is one where pre-existing traditions cannot avoid contact not only with others but also with many alternative ways of life. By the same token, it is one where the 'other' cannot any longer

<sup>27</sup> For one of the few accounts of the relationship of Hegel and Weber, see Reinhardt Bendix in his *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 493.

<sup>28</sup> Hegel, *Natural Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), p. 95.

<sup>29</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, p. 424.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Compare José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 231ff.

<sup>32</sup> *Philosophy of Right*, p. 372.



be treated as inert. The point is not only that the other 'answers back,' but that mutual interrogation is possible.<sup>33</sup>

If not as suggestively Hegel has spoken similarly of the relationship of the European—the "Christian-Germanic"—culture to the non-European. On the one hand, the European spirit, expressive of the principle of infinite self-determination, is actuated by an appropriative attitude to the other, one linked to the nullification of all that is alien.

The principle of the European spirit is ... self-conscious reason which is confident that for it there can be no insuperable barrier and which therefore takes an interest in everything in order to become present to itself therein.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time, that same principle of freedom, as a principle of *Bei-sich-selbst sein*, also engages the other as other. The European spirit "opposes the world to itself, makes itself free of it, but in turn annuls this opposition, takes its other, the manifold, back into itself, in its unitary nature."<sup>35</sup> If not with all desirable precision, Hegel suggests that even in its expansiveness Christianity must not only be respectful of other traditions but receptive to be shaped and transformed by them.<sup>36</sup>

Hegel, to be sure, does not understand globality simply as the interplay of diverse cultures, as a process of mutual interrogation. He claims as well that this interplay gives rise, however gradually, to a shared identity, a global convergence of beliefs, values, and practices forged in the reciprocal recognition of particular peoples and cultures. As he asserts in his philosophy of history, the dialectic of finite and "restricted" national spirits gives way to an infinite and "unrestricted" world spirit;<sup>37</sup> to use the language of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the "I" tendentially becomes a "We." At the same,

however, Hegel is not hereby advocating—commonplace understandings notwithstanding—a global mono-culture indifferent or antagonistic to local and particular identities. His is not the uniform system of global dominion that for him defined the hegemony of Rome—an "abstract universality ... in which the individualities of peoples perish in the unity of a pantheon" and which itself was actuated by "an abstract and arbitrary will of ... monstrous proportions."<sup>38</sup> More in agreement with Jaspers and Arendt than they would likely acknowledge,<sup>39</sup> Hegel advances a notion of World Spirit rooted in what he calls a *Weltweisheit*, a worldly wisdom respectful and supportive of the plurality of the planet's peoples and cultures. Anything else remains blind to what Hegel, following Herder, sees as the indefeasible fact of worldwide cultural diversity; it also misconstrues the idea of global totality itself, which for him is defined, not in terms of abstract principles of uniformity juxtaposed to the particulars to which they apply, but as a concrete or differentiated totality constituted in the organic permeation of parts and whole. To be sure, Hegel defines this totality *a limine* as "universal self-consciousness," a notion that for him articulates the Christian notion of the conjunction of the human and the divine. Properly construed, however, this notion itself affirms and depends upon a global diversity of the world's cultures and belief systems. Not only does universal self-consciousness, qua consciousness of self-identity, presume the reality of individual self-conceptions; a self-conscious unity depends on the deliberate acceptance of a commonality by the individual member cultures—and in particular the explicit awareness of the degree to what is common also expresses the particular situation. Universal self-consciousness, for Hegel, is consciousness of *glocality*, a self-awareness on the part of member cultures of the relation of the global and the local.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, far from proffering a notion of world spirit defined as some abstract or coercive principle of uniformity, Hegel suggests that unity itself is constituted and sustained in just the ongoing contestation by individual member community of what that unity should entail. World

<sup>33</sup> See Anthony Giddens, "Living in a Post-Traditional Society," in Ulrich Beck et al. (eds.), *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Stanford, CA: SUP, 1994), p. 96f.

<sup>34</sup> *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 45.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Compare Erzsébet Rózsa, "'Versöhnlichkeit' als europäisches Prinzip: Zu Hegels Versöhnungskonzeption in der Berliner Zeit," in Michael Quante and Erzsébet Rózsa (eds.), *Vermittlung und Versöhnung: Die Aktualität von Hegels Denken für ein zusammenwachsendes Europa* (Münster: LIT, 2001), pp. 21-52.

<sup>37</sup> *Philosophy of Right*, p. 371.

<sup>38</sup> *Philosophy of Right*, p. 359.

<sup>39</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World," in Paul Arthur Schlipp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers* (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1957), pp. 539-549.

<sup>40</sup> See Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?* (Cambridge UK: Polity, 2000), especially pp. 42-52.

spirit, termed spirit's "unceasing struggle with itself,"<sup>41</sup> is just humanity's never ending process of collective self-interpretation in the light of the plurality of its individual self-conceptions. Here we cannot pursue further Hegel's idea of a world spirit or a global ethos, something left frustratingly vague in his own writings. Implicit in this idea, however, is a model for a civil religion that has truly global application, one that not only undergrids the diversity of world's culture and belief systems even as it is shaped and defined by them. In sum, although Hegel's position undeniably prioritizes Christianity, that prioritization entails neither dogmatic commitment to that faith nor unreceptiveness to other traditions and belief systems. Hegel's notion of Christianity is a critical one, meant to challenge, with the immanent tools that he claims are alone appropriate for consequential social criticism, a conception of Christianity which, however dominant, is insufficiently attentive to its own advocacy of freedom, justice, and social reciprocity. Second, it is meant to challenge and to present an alternative to a narrow and one-sided view of modernity, one that subordinates the requirements of personal and political freedom to the exigencies of economic and administrative rationality. And finally it intimates a notion of a global religiosity, one that not only challenges a narrow understanding of Christian hegemony but also promotes the idea of a global ethos supportive of and constituted by the diversity of world's beliefs and traditions. Here we leave aside Hegel's call for a philosophical "supersession" of religion itself,<sup>42</sup> intended less as a critique of religion—evidently the case with Jaspers—than as a way of formulating a notion of global universal self-consciousness in a way not readily accessible to traditional religious thinking, with its imagistic and mythic representations of the relationship of the human and the divine. Suffice it to say that if rational human coexistence depends on a religiously based communal ethos supportive of political sociality itself, then the idea of global community implicit in Hegel's account of the global relation of peoples—

*Völkerrecht*, as he terms it<sup>43</sup>—itself depends on a global ethos rooted in an ecumenical, post-Christian form of religiosity.

---

<sup>41</sup> *Reason in History*, p. 127, amended.

<sup>42</sup> See Karl Löwith, "Hegel and the Christian Religion," in *Nature, History, and Existentialism and Other Essays in the Philosophy of History*, editor Arnold Levinson (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966).

---

<sup>43</sup> See my "Hegel's Conception of an International 'We,'" in Philip Grier (ed.), *Identity and Difference: Logic, Philosophy of Spirit, and Politics* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2007).