

2. Introduction to Part One

Philosophy of religion at the turn of the twentieth century can be understood as a continuation and development of some central philosophical themes of the nineteenth century. These themes owe much to two early nineteenth century philosophers, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Auguste Comte. Hegel (1770–1831) sought to reconcile the worlds of the finite and infinite by taking the philosopher on a spiritual journey through the realms of the objective, subjective and absolute spirits. In the absolute spirit he sought to reconcile the tensions in Immanuel Kant's thought between the finite and infinite, subject and object, and faith and knowledge. The absolute spirit for Hegel is one, the infinite whole which contains all the contrasts of finite being. Religion is understood to picture or represent the absolute in imaginative form, and philosophy is understood to transcend and interpret the imaginative in conceptual terms. In so doing, philosophy helps provide a justification for religion in its absolute or Christian form.

While Hegel and the idealists were thinking about the absolute spirit in Germany, Auguste Comte (1798–1857) was in France moving thought away from metaphysics and towards the positive or empirical sciences. According to Comte, all knowledge evolves through the theological, the metaphysical and the positive or scientific stages. The theological stage explains phenomena by reference to supernatural, spiritual agencies. The metaphysical stage uses abstract powers to explain phenomena, and in the final or positive stage explanations are provided by empirical descriptions of relations between phenomena. The sciences all pass through these stages although some more rapidly than others. The metaphysical stage is understood to dissolve the authority of beliefs in supernatural powers ruling over the world, and Bacon and Newton inaugurated the positive era in which religious and metaphysical explanations are replaced by scientific explanations. Comte argues that in his day the social sciences, which are dependent upon the development of the natural sciences, are entering the positive stage with the result that society itself can be accounted for in scientific terms. Add to Hegel's absolute idealism and Comte's law of the three stages the striking development of the empirical sciences, including the publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin's *The Origin*

of the *Species*, and one has many of the ingredients that shape late nineteenth and early twentieth century philosophical studies of religion. Part One of this book is concerned with four primary movements, Absolute Idealism, Personal Idealism, Neo-Kantianism, and Positivism and the Science of Religion.

By the 1840s in Germany, Hegel's synthesis of the finite and infinite was being challenged in many quarters and Hegelians were themselves splitting into a right and a left wing. While the right wing continued the close association between philosophy and religion and sought to reconcile Hegel's philosophy with Christian theism, the left wing pointed beyond theism to naturalism and eventually atheism. For both Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx, religion is understood as a form of alienation from the self. This, combined with the rapid advance of the physical sciences, led to the end of idealism in Germany by mid-century. Towards the end of the century, however, there emerged in British and American philosophy what William James in 1880 called "a strange thing, this resurrection of Hegel in England and here, after its burial in Germany."¹ Idealism first began to make its appearances in the English speaking world through the literary works of Coleridge, Emerson and Carlyle. These works provided sustenance for many young philosophers and theologians of the 1850s and 1860's who were attracted neither to the rigid orthodoxies of the Churches nor the empirical and agnostic philosophies of the day. By the end of the nineteenth century absolute idealism had become the dominant philosophical movement in British universities and an important force in American philosophy. Anglo-American idealism, however, was neither a replica of Hegel nor a monolithic movement, and by the turn of the century idealists were engaged in disputes concerning pluralism, supra-rationalism and the indefeasible reality of personality. These disputes prepared the way for the development of personal idealism.

Following the chapters on Absolute Idealism and Personal Idealism is the chapter on Neo-Kantianism. In Germany, almost overnight it seems, idealism was replaced by a turn towards the empirical and the world of science. The positive sciences of which Comte had spoken seemed to have triumphed. Among those who were unwilling merely to replace philosophy with science there was a call to return to Kant. This call is often associated with the 1865 publication of Otto Liebmann's, *Kant und die Epigonen*. In Germany, as Karl Jaspers suggests, scientists found in Kant a philosophical justification of their empiricism and philosophers found a philosophy of science in his theory of knowledge. The Neo-Kantian movement was widespread in Germany and was characterized by much diversity. In general, however, the Neo-Kantians turned away from the construction of philosophical systems. They also shared with the developing empirical and scientific attitudes the general view that God is not an entity capable of being known through the methods of science or

¹The *Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 5 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), p. 149.

philosophy. The value of religion was often reduced to the practical, and religious beliefs were often judged to be beyond knowledge or even untrue.

The final chapter in Part One is entitled Positivism and the Science of Religion. This title is broad and is intended to capture a variety of scientific attitudes and approaches to religion. Closely connected with the development of Neo-Kantianism are those scientists and philosophers who tended to reject Kant's noumenal realm and identify truth with scientific theories. Here there is much diversity. Some of these thinkers had themselves been influenced by Kant. Some were scientists and social scientists, and some were scientists turned philosopher. What they share in common is a commitment to the scientific method of inquiry. Like the Neo-Kantians they stood in opposition to the building of metaphysical systems and many agreed with Comte that knowledge was passing from the theological and the metaphysical to the scientific stage. In some cases the spiritual and the religious were denied all together. In other cases a place is made for the spiritual within the realm of nature. Some thinkers essentially replaced religion with science and argued that all problems, including the problems of morality and religion, are capable of being solved by the scientific method. Others sought to develop a scientific approach to religion that would provide a less partisan look at religion and discover universal principles that could be found in religions at different periods and times. Included in this chapter are also some examples of later twentieth century approaches to the science of religion which, as we shall see, differ with earlier twentieth century approaches in being less reductionistic and more sensitive to the diversity among the different world religions.

Twentieth-Century Western Philosophy of Religion

1900–2000

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2000, XII, 538 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-0-7923-6285-2