

3. Absolute Idealism

I

Through much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain, philosophy of religion had focused on the traditional arguments for the existence of God. Developments in the empirical sciences and in the empirical type of philosophy which dominated British thought during this period, however, challenged the validity of the arguments and helped open the way to religious scepticism. Thomas Reid (1710–1796) and William Hamilton (1788–1856) sought to overcome this scepticism, but the appeal to common sense belief on the one hand and to an unknowable absolute on the other hand provided little comfort for many nineteenth century British philosophers who wanted to avoid both religious scepticism and the appeal to religious authority. Their dissatisfaction with the available alternatives helped prepare the way for a resurrection of German Idealism in British philosophy some twenty years after its death in Germany. In the 1840s and 1850s many British students were reading the literary works of Carlyle, Coleridge and Emerson, and there had been early skirmishes with idealism in the work of the Scottish philosopher, J.F. Ferrier (1808–1864). Ferrier, however, often despaired in his efforts to unearth the secret of Hegel and was not himself able to establish a school of idealism.

J.H. Stirling's 1865 book, *The Secret of Hegel*, is often cited as a pivotal point in the development of German Idealism in Great Britain. Although the book was said by one critic to have kept well the secret of Hegel, it was praised by T.H. Green, Jowett, Carlyle and Emerson for making sense of Hegel, and Edward Caird said that "Hegel was first introduced in the powerful statement of his principles by Dr Hutchison Stirling."¹ Stirling was a student of philosophy at Glasgow University in the 1840s and although he won first prize in moral philosophy, he was little motivated by the Scottish Common Sense tradition which informed the work of his teacher. After graduating from

¹Edward Caird, *Hegel* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1883), p. vi. For a more extended discussion of the Glasgow Hegelians see my 'The Gifford Lectures and the Glasgow Hegelians', *The Review of Metaphysics*, December 1989, pp. 357–384.

Glasgow he studied medicine and became a physician in Wales. During this time he also wrote on Carlyle and other figures of the literary world. In the 1850s he and his family moved to Germany where he began in earnest the study of Hegel. In 1857 Stirling returned to Britain and three years later moved to Edinburgh where he spent his remaining years. For the academic year, 1888–1889, he was named the first Gifford Lecturer at Edinburgh University. In the first part of his Gifford Lectures, Stirling echoed a theme put forward in his earlier book, that Hegel's distinction between *Vorstellungen* and *Begriffe* provides a way forward from crude superstition in religion on the one hand and the Enlightenment critics on the other hand. Unfortunately, he did not develop this theme very far. It was the younger scholars who would get beyond the letter of Hegel and bring his spirit to bear on issues in contemporary philosophical thought. In the Preface to *Essays in Philosophical Criticism*, edited by Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison and R.B. Haldane in 1883, Edward Caird stressed the importance of separating the permanent meaning in Kant and Hegel from the accidents of its first expression in order to give it fresh expression and new applications. This collection of essays first made clear the range and scope of the idealist movement in Britain. Seven of the eleven contributors would become Gifford Lecturers.

Glasgow University was one of the important centers of Neo-Hegelianism and of the Glasgow Hegelians, Edward Caird (1835–1908) was most important. After graduating from the University of Glasgow, where he studied Arts and Divinity, Caird was elected to the Snell Exhibition and entered Balliol College, Oxford. There he came under the tutelage of the Greek Scholar, Benjamin Jowett who recommended Hegel to all his students. He also developed a close association with T.H. Green, the most influential of the early British Idealists. Caird was elected Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow in 1866 and remained there until 1893 when he accepted the position of Master of Balliol College. In 1877 Caird published *A Critical Account of the Philosophy of Kant* in which he presents Kant as one who saw clearly the impasse in contemporary philosophy between those who emphasized the subject and those who emphasized the object in knowing. Kant had seen that knowledge is a unity of elements distinguishable but not separable from each other, and the problems that arise when subject and object are separated from each other. But it was to Hegel that he would look for a solution. The central problem for philosophy, argued Caird, is the need to overcome various oppositions to the spiritual life that result from divisions between self and world, finite and infinite and secular and sacred. Caird was particularly sensitive to this issue in the sphere of religion where the foundations on which religion had depended were being challenged by science, biblical criticism and philosophy.

Caird was invited twice to deliver the Gifford Lectures, first at Saint Andrews University during the academic years 1890 and 1892, and then at Glasgow University during 1900 and 1902. The first lectures were published under the title, *The Evolution of Religion*, and the second under the title, *The*

Evolution of Theology in the Greek Philosophers. In both series he makes it clear that religion stands in no need of proof from philosophy and that concrete religion is not in the first case a result of conscious reason or argument. Religion is a matter of intuition, impulse or feeling and is not something created by philosophy or theology. Religion, as Hegel had said, is the elevation of the soul to God. In time, however, it becomes almost impossible for religion to avoid bringing this unreflected experience into reflection. This is particularly the case in Christianity, argues Caird, where, even in its more concrete New Testament expressions, there is evidence of the germ of a theology or philosophy of religion. Theology, he says, is not religion. It "is at best the philosophy of religion, the reflective reproduction and explanation of it; and as such it is the product of a time that has outgrown simple faith and begun to feel the necessity of understanding what it believes."²

In his second series of Gifford Lectures, Caird shows that a fundamental characteristic of the period of Greek and Roman antiquity was the independence of philosophy from religion. Philosophy was essentially free from any external authorities and became a refuge for those who could not live with the mythologies. Yet, to the extent that it lifted persons above the mysteries of mythologies and fostered rational reflection, it helped prepare the way for the Christian era to the time of the Reformation. During the Christian era the relation between philosophy and religion was essentially reversed. Philosophical reason lost its independence and by the time of the great Scholastic systems, arguments for foregone conclusions had replaced scientific and philosophical investigations. At the hands of the Scholastics, argues Caird, Christianity was converted from a living truth to a dead body of dogma. The Reformers challenged the system of medieval Christianity demanding a faith dependent on experience of the divine, but they did not reassert the independence of reason.

In modern philosophy, reason regained its independence but for the most part assumed a critical attitude towards religion, pushing it more and more to the perimeters of life. Philosophy could not, however, ignore religion as had been done in the Greek period. Religious experience was a force of sufficient complexity that philosophy had to provide an explanation for it in the context of modern life and science. This process gained prominence in the work of Kant and in the speculative tradition that followed him. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, philosophy was often understood to be an enemy of faith and even many philosophers who attempted to preserve a place for religion did so in a manner that reduced God to the unknowable. At the same time theologians argued that philosophers substituted abstract thought for the experience and transformation of life that accompanies religion. This dichotomy between religion and philosophy set up a schism between

²Edward Caird, *The Evolution of Theology in the Greek Philosophers* (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1904), Vol. 1, p. 2.

our immediate experience and our reflective efforts to understand ourselves in our relations to persons, world and God.

It is the aim of Caird, following Hegel, to overcome this schism. Philosophy is understood to be human experience brought to self-conscious articulation. Philosophy, he argues, cannot be a substitute for the experience from which it springs. Yet it cannot be separated from human experience. Thinking, feeling and willing are all forms of consciousness which are ultimately bound up with an all comprehensive whole, a unity. This is a unity, however, that does not deny difference. "And to believe in God is, in the last resort, simply to realise that there is a principle of unity in that whole, akin to that which gives unity to our existence as self-conscious beings."³ The key to understanding religion is this principle of unity and it is this which distinguishes the religious from the secular view of reality. Religion begins from the unity that underlies all differences between subject and object and finite and infinite. Caird argues that this can be shown by a study of the history of the development of religion. Religions are successive stages in one development in which the later religions presuppose and include the earlier.

In tracing the historical development of religion, it is not Caird's intent to argue that there are clearly independent and separate stages. There are three primary stages in the history of the development of religious consciousness, the first dominated by the object, the second by the subject and the third by the principle of unity in both subject and object, but even in the earliest stages persons are not without knowledge of unity or God. In the first stage God is represented as an external object or force to whom persons submit themselves with little recognition of their unity with the object to which they submit themselves. This stage of religion is illustrated in the earliest forms of religion from fetishism to the Vedic hymns. Increased spiritualizing of divine objects prepares the way for the second stage where God is conceived as a spiritual being transcending both nature and humans. This stage of development is illustrated in different ways in Buddhism, Stoicism and Judaism and appears in modified form in Puritanism and in philosophical form in the work of Kant. God takes the form of self-consciousness but the relation between persons and God, as in the first stage, is primarily an external one. In some cases the external world is conceived as unreal and in other cases persons stand in awe and hence separated from God.

In the second stage, a longing for union with the divine develops and this prepares the way for the third stage in which the divine is understood to be manifested as other than nature and self-consciousness and yet in both at once. This is the stage of absolute religion. This, argues Caird, is the only form that religion can take for modern persons who are acquainted with the spirit of science. Science concentrates on the object but it seeks to discover universal laws and this presupposes the relation of thought to its object, a unity in difference. Modern persons are said to find repugnant the worship of God as

³Ibid., p. 33.

an object of nature or an idealized person, and even less able to worship a multiplicity of gods. God must be universal. If the idea of God is to be acceptable to modern men and women, it has to be shown that the idea of God as a unity of knowing and being can be developed in a consistent manner. And it is in absolute religion or in Christianity in particular that Caird believes this unity can be found. God is conceived neither as a natural power nor as a spiritual being or absolute monarch set over against nature. God is conceived as manifesting himself in the process of nature and in the process of spirit as it rises above nature. God is spirit as in subjective religion, but God does not exclude nature. God is immanent in nature as in objective religion, but also transcends and uses it as a means to the life of the spirit. Like all religions Christianity has its evolution and its full meaning is realized only in its latest forms. Caird believes, however, that the idea of unity is already expressed in the life and teachings of Jesus and that it is possible for all persons to become conscious of this unity.

Edward Caird shared with his elder brother John a close and intimate relationship and a focus on the unity of the divine and the human. John Caird (1820–1898) served as Professor of Systematic theology at Glasgow University and later as Principal. His first, and perhaps his most important book, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, was based on his Croall Lectures delivered at Edinburgh University during the 1878–1879 academic session. Here he argued for familiar Hegelian themes that we have seen in the work of his brother. Philosophy of religion begins with a distinction between religion, in which the objects are present in an immediate way for spiritual enjoyment, and philosophy, in which religious ideas become the objects of rational reflection. Religious feelings expressed in figurative representations contain only implicit or virtual knowledge and stand in need of expression and justification in a higher form of intellectual apprehension or speculative thought. The final goal of all thinking, he argued, is not the limit or negation of thought but the unity of thought and being. This approach set Caird against the theories of Hamilton, Mansel, and Spencer, but also caused suspicion among the religious leading to an open attack on him in the Presbytery of Glasgow.

In his posthumously published Gifford Lectures, *The Fundamental Ideas of Christianity*, John Caird calls the distinction between natural and revealed theology arbitrary and untenable. The effect of this, he argued, is that revealed religion is fenced off from the critical or philosophical intelligence. The question, however, whether reason can comprehend revealed ideas is distinct from the question of the source of the ideas, whether or not they are communicated from a supernatural source. Revelation, he argues, does not add to our ordinary knowledge a supernatural level, but enables us to penetrate to the moral and spiritual meaning and principles of the world in which we live. It is the function of reason or philosophy to elicit and verify these principles. Even if there is an outward and supernatural revelation, it has to be appropriated within the experience and intelligence of humankind. This process

Twentieth-Century Western Philosophy of Religion

1900–2000

Long, E.Th.

2000, XII, 538 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-0-7923-6285-2