RELIGION OF NATURE

Heinz Kimmerle

1. Introduction

In his *Lectures on the philosophy of religion* (1821), Hegel departs from the idea of a ‘religion of spirit’, which has the same content as his philosophy, that is: a ‘philosophy of spirit’. In this context, he cannot give an adequate explanation of the ‘religion of nature’. Especially he cannot do justice to the African form of a ‘religion of nature’. In his writings of 1800–1802 he defends a ‘religion of life’, which corresponds to the central meaning of the concepts of life and nature in his ‘system of philosophy’ of that time. This forms a more adequate presupposition to explain the ‘religion of nature’. Although there is no direct relation possible between Hegel’s ‘religion of life’ and the animist religious representations and practices in sub-Saharan African tradition, the outlines of a philosophical discussion is sketched in the following contribution, in which this relation becomes meaningful.

‘Philosophy of Spirit’ and ‘Religion of Spirit’

‘God is Spirit and those who worship Him must worship Him in Spirit and in Truth’; ‘this same Spirit testifies together with our spirit that we are God’s children’. These two quotations from the New Testament (John 4; 24 and Romans 8; 16) are the key-texts upon which Hegel’s ‘philosophy of religion’ is founded. This is especially true with regard to the claim that Christianity is the highest form of religion. Philosophy, as it is worked out as the last stage of Hegel’s ‘system of philosophy’, has the same contents as this religion. His ‘system of philosophy’ is *philosophy of spirit* in all its parts: in the ‘Science of Logic’, spirit is presented as idea, in the ‘Philosophy of Nature’, spirit exists as its other and in the ‘Philosophy of Spirit’, we encounter spirit as spirit. According to Hegel—and he uses among other arguments the two above given quotations for that—the Christian religion is *religion of spirit*, which is testified both by God’s Spirit and by our human spirit. Therefore the dispute whether (Christian) religion is
sublated and thus surpassed by philosophy or not, is of no use.¹ Both of them express the ‘Absolute spirit’, and that means the absolute truth, in an adequate way: religion in the medium of representations and philosophy in the medium of concepts.

Of course, philosophy is paramount to religion, but religion is broader than philosophy. Religion enables the absolute truth to become accessible to people who are not familiar with philosophical thought and the language of concepts. In addition, philosophy, if it is true philosophy—that means: self-development of spirit (Hegel speaks in this connection of ‘speculative’ philosophy)—is in itself religious. The self-development of spirit covers the following stages: first of all, it knows itself, in a next step it observes itself in nature, then it puts its elements beside and opposite to each other by means of reflection, and finally it unites them in the wholeness of perceiving itself. Moreover, this happens also, in a way, which is accessible for everybody, in religion and its history. Therefore is ‘religion . . . the truth for all human beings’.²

Systematic Explanation and History of Religion

These elements of true religion are present in the ‘revealed religion’ of Christianity as absolute religion. For this religion is a ‘religion of spirit’. This can be summarized, with Hegel, also in a more religious language: (1) ‘God is only God insofar as He knows Himself’; (2) ‘His knowledge of Himself is also a self-consciousness in the human being’ who is aware of the outside nature and perceives himself as spirit. Thus self-consciousness is reached, in which knowledge is attained that the finite human being has of God, how imperfect that may be. (3) The human knowledge of God transforms itself finally into ‘the self-knowledge of the human being within God’.³ In the Encyclopaedia of the philosophical sciences these three elements of true religion are explained systematically. These will be left aside


² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse (1830), ed. Friedhelm Nicolin & Otto Pöggeler, Hamburg: Meiner 1959, pp. 451–452 (§573). I am quoting here and in the following text from this German edition and give my own translation. Reference to the paragraphs (§§) makes it possible to find the quotations in any other edition of this work.

³ Hegel, Enzyklopädie, p. 447 (§564).