HEGEL AND PROTESTANTISM

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the text ‘Concerning an Accusation of Public Disparagement of the Catholic Religion’ (Über eine Anklage wegen öffentlicher Verunglimpfung der katholischen Religion), Hegel claims to be born, to be educated and to live as a Lutheran, and to give courses at a Lutheran university.¹ Such a statement shows that Hegel remains a Lutheran Protestant, while also being a philosopher who claims to present truth philosophically. This leads to the question, what could be the philosophical value and thus the true rationality of Lutheran Protestantism as a specific form of Christian religion.² Is this denomination really as prominent in Hegel’s writings and courses, as it seems to be in his personal letters?³ A simple observation, however, seems to contradict Hegel’s Protestant claim: at least in his courses on the philosophy of religion (and what were a better place to show it?), Hegel focuses only on how the Lutheran confession gives the most insightful interpretation of the Christian Eucharist. Moreover, his interpretation of religion more generally seems eclectic and transconfessional.⁴ Is Hegel fundamentally a Protestant; or is he first and foremost a speculative philosopher? Moreover, how are these two roles linked together?

Hegel was in fact born and educated in a Protestant family, followed the courses at the Stift in Tübingen to become a preacher, and gave lessons on religion at the Protestant Gymnasium in Nürnberg, a Protestant city in Catholic Bavaria. However, these biographical details do not sufficiently address the questions about the rationality and philosophical

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, Berliner Schriften, Werke 11, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 1970, pp. 68–70; this text is part of a defensive answer against an attack by a Roman-Catholic priest, following Hegel’s courses given at the University of Berlin.
² Let us be prudent from the beginning: the notions of Protestantism (and of other Christian denominations) discussed here are only those of the beginning of the 19th century, not those of our—hopefully more ecumenical—time.
³ See P. Jonkers, ‘Hegel on Catholic Religion’ (in this volume).
importance of Protestantism as such. Even the claim (given only in E²)⁵ that religion and philosophy have the same content, is too vague to be helpful on this point.

To answer the question on the relative significance of Hegel’s Protestantism and his philosophical presentation of it, I will focus on Hegel’s later period (1827–1831), the period that follows immediately after the (either personal or strategic) confession quoted above.⁶ Hegel’s presentation of Christianity (even of its highest form—Protestantism) is too differentiated to summarize effectively in one paper.⁷ The publications on which I will focus are the second and third versions of the Encyclopaedia (E² from 1827 & E³ of 1830), some book-reviews from the Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik (16: 17–310) and the Latin Oratio (Speech for the Celebration of the Jubilee of the Confessio Augustana, 1830; 16: 311–322). The most interesting and important texts for our purposes here will be the courses on the philosophy of religion from 1827 and 1831 (the latter of which is only extant in summaries),⁸ and the further courses on the Proofs of the Existence of God (1829; 18: 215–218 & 228–336) and on history (1830/31, with a new introduction-manuscript, 18: 119–214) from this period.⁹ Even as Hegel’s work progresses further (it is visible in the

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⁵ To be clear on the difference: Encyclopedia (1817) (further E¹) gives no parallel claim, but stresses the beginning of philosophy (such as the Science of Logic), and only from the second Preface of the same book (1827), is there a difficult discussion with people of simple faith. The third Preface (1830), on the contrary, may be read as a full discussion with all those who cannot distinguish between religious forms ‘of the catechism’ and the task of philosophical thinking, a discussion, which has its origin in the criticisms of anonymous writers as well as of non-philosophers, refuted by Hegelian Recensions.

⁶ The basis of this restriction is that Hegel (by 1827) seems to have elaborated a good deal of his philosophical problems. He is neither under academic pressure as he was when writing E¹, nor under the stress of the competition with Schleiermacher as he was when composing his first course on religion (1821). Instead, he was at the pinnacle of his renown, but even then still under harsh criticism, just on the point of the Christianity of his philosophy (on the issue of his or Schelling’s pantheism).

⁷ Even the quote from the handbook, that religion could or should be the representation of absolute knowing is, as position within the framework of the PhSp, limited to that book or time. Moreover, even there it should be said, that it is not religion, but religious, speculative knowledge (9: 407), which is the first content containing aspect of absolute knowing.

⁸ It would be very useful and interesting to find a new student notebook of the course on religion of 1831, to be certain of the changes in structure and content of the concept and of the elaboration of religion there.

⁹ I’m quoting here in each case Hegel’s writings from the Gesammelte Werke with Volume and page number (the Encyclopaedia with E² or E³ and §, if necessary also with A (=remarks)); the Courses (Vorlesungen, Hamburg: Meiner Verlag 1983 ff) are cited by V{olume} and page; the course on world-history, G. W. F. Hegel, Die Philosophie der Geschichte, 1830/31 –Heimann, Hrsg. Kl. Vieweg, München: Fink 2005 (quoted as Vie and page).