

The Problem of Faith and Knowledge

A Historical-Critical Treatise

Preface

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This work reproduces, in all essential respects unchanged, the content of the lectures I delivered at the University of Copenhagen in the autumn semester of 1867 on the relation between faith and knowledge, between religion, philosophy, and ethics. These lectures encompassed the historical-critical part of the investigation and formed the preparation for an attempt at an independent resolution of the problem under discussion, which will be published in the course of this year.

The historical-critical part of the investigation provides, beyond a brief sketch of the problem's genesis, a detailed critique of those proposed solutions that have acquired a special significance in our literature — among them one, the solution originating with S. Kierkegaard, that was executed with an originality, a seriousness, and a depth that will preserve for it this significance at all times. Through the critique of these proposed solutions — which, in the course of their development and justification, have stood in a sustained polemical or mediating relation to earlier and foreign contributions, and which can partly be regarded as results of previously dominant tendencies, and have partly substantially accomplished the critique of such tendencies — the most significant of the older and contemporary proposals have been illuminated, and in part the complete preconditions have been supplied for a final judgment upon them. This historical critique will then find its supplement in the work that attaches itself to this one.

The present state of the problem in our literature is marked by the conflict between, on the one side, a form of theology that borrows in an eclectic fashion

from newer philosophical hybrid formations the weapons with which it will defend the union of faith and knowledge, and, on the other side, the anti-theological-religious standpoint, which, by means of the principled opposition between faith and knowledge, aims to secure the validity of religion and science in their mutual independence and the possibility of their peaceful coexistence within consciousness — while at the same time, by virtue of this same principled opposition, denying theology all right to bear the name of science, a name theology claims for itself by demanding to be a “science of faith” [*Troesvidenskab*].

The philosophizing theology, which maintains the possibility of appropriating and expressing the content of faith in the form of knowledge, and which therefore not only wishes to claim the name of science for theology but assigns to it, as the concluding form of revelatory science, primacy among the sciences and judicial authority over them, has had as its historical point of departure the speculative system that, through an ambiguous extension of the concept of “religion,” brought religion in its specific sense into an identical relation with philosophy, from which it was to be distinguished not by any difference of content, but only by a difference of form. After this ambiguous unity had to be abandoned in the struggles that developed following the emergence of Hegel’s philosophy of religion, the theology influenced by philosophy, exchanging the designation of speculation for that of the Christian, nevertheless preserved the tendency toward mediation; but it now rests primarily upon a different philosophical orientation — and in particular upon the system that, by introducing a redoubling into philosophy, creates room for a “free thinking” which borrows from its close relative, the imagination, the “magic cloak” [*Fjederham*] enabling it to soar above the abysses of mystery; and it cautiously inserts a qualification that cuts off even the “higher science’s” consequences whenever thought, despite its “freedom,” involuntarily comes to follow its own essential laws.

The anti-theological theory, which likewise presupposes Hegelian philosophy, but whose relation to that presupposition is originally negative and polemical, had as its historical incitement also the protest — lodged by a philosophy that presents itself at once as the consequence of and as the opposition to that speculative doctrine of mediation — against the unity of religion and philosophy. The most significant representative of this tendency is Feuerbach — a man whose writings are known only very incompletely and judged only very superficially by those in our literature who have criticized him. Conceiving religion’s standpoint as practical in opposition to science’s theoretical standpoint, and determining the former ever more

sharply through the emphasis on its alogical element, he arrived at the irreconcilable opposition as his view of the relation, and demanded, in the interest of genuine cognition and genuine ethical action, that religion be absorbed into passion and ethics. Religion as such was to disappear — as something alogical, as an imperfect transitional stage in the development of the human spirit's self-consciousness — leaving behind only its name in an improper and figurative sense.

In agreement with Feuerbach regarding the opposition, but disagreeing as to its grounds and its application, S. Kierkegaard draws the distinction between religion and philosophy in religion's interest. The human spirit, which in the restlessness of existence cannot grasp the Eternal in the objective certainty of cognition, and which acknowledges the limits of its own cognition, finds only in the religious relation, in faith, a subjective existential certainty regarding what is its deepest interest; it finds there, and only there, its true reconciliation. The validity of knowledge is not denied, but objective knowledge is bounded to a domain in which the spirit's deepest interests cannot find their satisfaction. Faith and knowledge thus each receive their own territory, and through this, and through knowledge's subordination, the compatibility of both within the same consciousness is to become possible.

This Kierkegaardian conception of the problem of the relation between faith and knowledge has been taken up by Professor R. Nielsen and presented in such a way that some have wished to place him on a par in originality with the theory's originator, attributing to him the resolution of a task of the same creativity as the one Kierkegaard strove to resolve. How little this view is warranted will be demonstrated in this work. It will emerge that the problem has not been advanced by Professor Nielsen; that the form he has given the solution has introduced only uncertainty and vacillation into the decisive determinations; that the attempt at a psychological and metaphysical grounding of the separation of the principle of faith from the principle of knowledge as absolutely heterogeneous with it has failed and leads to irresolvable contradictions; and that the same holds for his grounding of the proposition that the absolutely heterogeneous principles can be united within the same consciousness.

When, then, alongside S. Kierkegaard — the genuine representative of the anti-theological-religious standpoint — such detailed attention is devoted to Professor Nielsen, it is not because the theory has received from him a deeper grounding or a richer development, but because it has through him exchanged the character of an esoteric doctrine for an exoteric one, penetrated into the broad circles of "the

cultivated,” and in these circles is in the process of changing from a question of knowledge into a question of faith, and of being fixed as dogma by virtue of an unappealable *ipse dixit*.¹

As representative of the philosophizing theology, Bishop Martensen appears in this work; but since the argument is closely tied to what is given in his writings, the universal, the typical in the standpoint is nowhere lost from view, nor forgotten in favor of the individual. It has not been necessary to give direct consideration to other theological attempts in our literature.

The ultimate task, whose resolution is prepared through the critique — which immediately can yield only a negative result — is the vindication of a standpoint that has not found expression in our discussions, and that has been advanced elsewhere only in forms that cannot satisfy. This standpoint maintains such an opposition between science — philosophy in particular — and the positive forms of religion, between knowledge and faith understood as revelatory faith, that knowledge and this faith cannot be brought to unity within the same consciousness; — it maintains the impossibility of a genuine and substantial ethics, one that encompasses the whole, real human life, developing on the basis of positive religion with its supernatural law of action; — and it maintains the inner, indissoluble unity between genuine cognition and genuine ethical action, the necessary dependence of the latter upon the former. But while it maintains this opposition, it asserts with equal decisiveness, on the other side — distinguishing the essential determination of the religious from the phenomenal forms of the positive religions, in which it sees only a partial, imperfect, finitizing expression of the former, and thus distinguishing what is religious in the religions from the religions in their historical forms — the inner unity of the religious, the philosophical, and the ethical, and through this inner unity the inner unity of human life: the condition for its true and complete reconciliation, the reconciliation within reality, the reconciliation of undivided human nature with itself in its essential ground. In affirming the essentiality and necessity of the religious relation for the human being, whose self-consciousness is first fully actualized therein, through God-consciousness, and who according to the fundamental relation of its nature has never been and never will be without religion; — in further seeing ethical action and genuine cognition as gaining a higher significance through their unity with the religious fundamental relation; — and in allowing genuine knowledge and genuine ethical action to become an adequate form of actuality for the religious, it

¹Brøchner’s text has the Greek: *αὐτὸς ἔφη* — the Pythagorean formula, “He himself said it,” used to denote unquestioned reliance on authority.

conceives this knowledge and this action as containing within themselves a Highest and Unconditioned, in which what is essential in the religions is preserved. This standpoint we designate as *the religiously reconciled humane consciousness*.

It differs from the position occupied by Feuerbach not merely in that its metaphysical fundamental concept is a different one — one upon which a cognition and an action bearing the stamp of ideality and universal validity can be built, and from which the concept of human freedom can be vindicated and a religious relation grounded to the Absolute, with which the human being is in essential unity — but also in that it combats theology and dogma not only in the interest of ethics and science, but first and foremost in the interest of religion itself, in the interest of the infinity of the religious relation.

It differs from the old Hegelian school's conception of religion's relation to cognition, in that it does not see the religious merely as a form of knowledge, but as the expression of a fundamental relation encompassing the whole of human nature in its concreteness, and in that it does not let the medium of spiritual life be an illusory abstract element of eternity, but reality with its real conditions and limits.

With the anti-theological-religious theory it concurs in its conception of theology's relation to science. Since it rests upon scientific cognition and, in undivided human nature, assigns primacy to cognition, it must be its task to vindicate the clear concept of science and science's autonomy, grounded in its own nature, against equivocations and against attempts, based on equivocations, to subordinate science to the dominion of a foreign, heterogeneous authority. But while there is thus, in an essential point, an agreement between it and that theory, it enters into a decided opposition to the latter when the relation between faith and knowledge, between religion, philosophy, and ethics, is to be determined. This opposition concerns Kierkegaard's conception, with respect to which it will be shown that it undermines the certainty of all cognition and allows the ethical to disappear into an abstract and reality-less religious sphere. But it concerns even more precisely the form in which the theory has been elaborated and presented by Nielsen — a form that Kierkegaard would certainly not recognize as his own. The form in which Nielsen develops the theory leads, despite all the more or less adroit turns that are made in order to avoid this consequence, to an actual dualism in human nature, to a division of the life of the spirit from its very ground by means of the "absolutely heterogeneous" principles, to the inevitable self-dissolution of consciousness; it corrupts the ethical at its root and opens the path to the religious for all that is superstitious and absurd. With the

conviction that the absolute heterogeneity Nielsen posits between the principle of knowledge on the one hand and the principles of faith and action on the other is “a misunderstanding that is ruinous for religiosity, morality, and all genuine character development,” I have subjected his theory to a thoroughgoing critique, and sought to demonstrate its untenability, its deficient grounding, its self-contradictions, its ruinous consequences.

In publishing this contribution to the investigation of a problem that through the centuries has had, and will continue to have, the most decisive significance for the human spirit, it is my hope that it may occasion a renewed, serious, and conscientious discussion — a sharp and open conflict between principles. Such a conflict, even if carried on with sharp weapons, can only serve the interest of the cause; and one must therefore hold dear the combatant for whom the cause, and not some egoistic self-regard, is the highest consideration. A firm and deep personal conviction I shall always respect; by sound reasons I shall always be just as open to influence as I intend to be impervious to anything other than these.