

Philosophy of Religion

Introduction

R. Nielsen

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Faith and knowledge are as principles absolutely heterogeneous.

The heterogeneity of the principles makes no breach in the universally valid laws of thought, but shows the impossibility of any scientific transition whatever, either from knowledge to faith or from faith to knowledge.

The long conflict between religion and science has its original ground in an obscure conflation of the heterogeneous principles, and must therefore cease when the conflation ceases.

The proposition that truth in religion is not truth in science is no longer a paradox, once the absolute boundary of knowledge coincides with the mystery from which the cognition of faith proceeds and to which it returns.

It is these principal theses that the Philosophy of Religion in its present form will develop and substantiate. Whether the development and the substantiation have any validity, examination must decide.

Copenhagen, 28 December 1868.

R. Nielsen.

INTRODUCTION

The relation of the philosophy of religion to religion cannot be stated satisfactorily in ordinary conceptual determinations; its peculiar nature demands a peculiar treatment. What is said religiously—“Show me your faith by your works”—must be said philosophically: Show me your principle by its execution.

Religion and Philosophy

§ 1

If philosophy as a whole is a science, then the philosophy of religion, insofar as it is to deserve the name of philosophy, must naturally also be a science; but precisely the distinctive feature that it is a science *of* religion gives it a character diverging from the other sciences and stamps it with a mark of its own. What this means will best be understood by a glance at the principal forms the philosophy of religion has assumed in recent times.

The scientific form must be determined by the principle. The fundamental question is: do religion and philosophy share the same principle, or are the principles different? If religion's principle differs from philosophy's, which principle should science then follow—philosophy's or religion's? Only by answering these questions can the concept and method of the philosophy of religion be determined.

If one proceeds from the presupposition that religion and philosophy share the same principle, the philosophy of religion becomes a *speculative science*; if one assumes that the principles are indeed different but that truth must nonetheless be judged by the principle of knowledge, the philosophy of religion becomes a *critical science*. If, finally, one takes the principles to be absolutely heterogeneous and lays the religious principle as the foundation for the scientific illumination, the philosophy of religion becomes an *inverted science*. The first of these standpoints is represented by Hegel; the second principally by L. Feuerbach; the third is the one brought to application in the present treatment.

a) *The philosophy of religion as speculative science.*

The object both of religion and of philosophy is, according to Hegel, the eternal truth in its objectivity—God, and nothing but God, and the explication of God. Philosophy only develops itself in developing religion, and in developing religion it develops itself. Thus religion and philosophy coincide into one. Philosophy is in reality worship, is religion,

for it is the renunciation of subjective notions and opinions in the occupation with God. Nonetheless the occupation with God in philosophy is a different one, proceeding in a different way and manner than in religion. In religion, God is the immediate object of consciousness; in philosophy, consciousness of God is God's own consciousness of himself: the difference lies in the form. Religion as religion is popular, is for all, and for that very reason is referred to the figurative form of representation; but such a form is inadequate to the content. The form is finite, the content infinite: this is a disproportion. Can this disproportion be overcome? Can the same content, without altering itself, be presented in two entirely different forms?

Here lies the difficulty, and on this difficulty Hegel founders. For wherever truth is at stake as truth, the Idea is so absorbed into the form that the form cannot possibly be changed without the content being changed. In the course of its movement of thought, speculative philosophy of religion is imperceptibly led to a result different from the one it originally aimed at. The movement is this: it begins with science needing to acknowledge and substantiate the truth of religion; the truth of religion is determined by the true element in the content—that is, by the greater or lesser quantum of vital ideality that a given religion, relative to the stage of formal development at which it finds itself, is capable of expressing; since religion's form is not scientific, but the scientific form is the only perfect one, it is brought to consciousness that even the perfect religion has an imperfect form, and on account of the imperfection of its form can only express the true in an imperfect manner. What distinguishes the perfect religion from philosophy is therefore a form that must be sublated; but in sublating the form, what is distinctive to religion is sublated, and therewith religion itself. In losing its form, religion simultaneously loses its content, for the truth of the content depends on the form. The upshot, then, is that philosophy, in order to comprehend what is true in religion, must comprehend religion itself as an untruth. The negative, repellent relation between philosophy and religion, seen from science's side, has found vigorous expression in Neo-Hegelianism.

b) The philosophy of religion as critical science.

While the speculatively positive tendency holds principally to the content common to religion and philosophy and strives to develop this true content of truth into its true form, the negatively critical tendency—recognizing the principled difference between religion and philosophy—proceeds principally from the form peculiar to religion, demonstrates its manifest conflict with reason, and so arrives through a demonstration of the untrue in the form at the untrue in the content.

Immediately it looks as though religion had to do with nothing but actual, if supernatural, facts; but reason developed to knowledge comprehends that the supernatural facts are not actual, and the actual ones not supernatural. It is not spirit as spirit, but the ideal natural forces of the psychic life, that originally stir in the originally religious consciousness. Religious representations are indeed not products of conscious arbitrariness; on the contrary, they are owed to an unconscious creation, a drive of souls toward self-objectification, a psychological necessity by which the imagination, overwhelmed by the Idea, has placed the divine in the human being before the human being by placing it outside the human being. Religion is human; it is the first elementary breakthrough of human reason; it has its origin not in God's love but in human passions.

The dreams of the heart, the movements of the mind, the longings of the soul contain the basic elements from which the Idea-inspired imagination has fashioned all the gods of faith, including the one Almighty. This is confirmed by insight into the essence both of monotheism and of polytheism. The mighty, wrathful, vengeful Jehovah of the Old Testament is, seen scientifically, an idealized reflection of the abstract, powerful spirit of the Jewish people, of Israel's strong, law-bound yet self-willed ego. Christ in the New Testament is not a real God-man, for a real God-man is a contradiction, but is nonetheless essentially a man-god, the reconciling God of the wounded heart and the troubled soul, a God for the suffering. For imagination and feeling the ideal presents itself immediately, and on that rests not only the wish itself but also its fulfillment. The human being, with his constraining natural limitation, wishes for power; if he had power as he has will, he would feel blessed and free; but he is powerless, and in his powerlessness he feels the need for divine assistance. Divine assistance is immediately determined as a God who has power over nature arbitrarily intervening in the course of things and helping by a miracle. In the miracle is intuited the unconstrained will, freed from natural compulsion, a will capable of annihilating all resistance, satisfying all wishes, and hearing all prayers. The miracle is the ground of faith, the way out of hope, the consolation of imagination and the pious temperament, the holy fairy-tale; when a God has grown so old and weak that he can no longer perform miracles, he does best to resign, to cease being God, and likewise a religion that cannot continually produce miracles must cease to be religion. Here is the turning-point where the conflict between religion and philosophy culminates. Religion holds to the miracle, philosophy to reason. The miracle is in contradiction with reason; when reason awakes to the cognition of the laws of actuality, the miracle disappears, and with the miracle religion too.

Thus philosophy, as negative critique, has according to its own assurance completed

the dissolution of religion.

By the negative path, however, a positive result has been reached. The result is that religion, repudiated and scorned by “science”, is referred back to its own principle and thereby invited to rely on its own resources and assert its independence vis-à-vis science. The decisive rupture between religion and science can on these terms benefit religion just as much as science. The absolute heterogeneity of religion from all objective knowledge and science has been demonstrated with penetrating acuity and triumphant superiority by S. Kierkegaard.

The fundamental question from which S. Kierkegaard sets out is this: to what extent can truth be taught? Here one encounters what Socrates in the *Meno* calls a contentious proposition: that a human being cannot possibly seek what he knows, and just as little can seek what he does not know—for what he knows, he cannot seek, since he knows it; and what he does not know, he cannot seek, since he does not even know what it is he is to seek. Socrates resolves the difficulty by holding that all learning and seeking is only a recollecting, so that the ignorant person needs merely to be reminded in order, through himself, to call to mind what he knows. Truth is thus not brought into him but was already in him. This is what we might call the humanist explanation. From this standpoint “the moment”—the entry of the divine into time, the miracle—receives no significance. “For the Socratic view, every human being is himself the center, and the whole world centers only upon him, because his self-knowledge is a knowledge of God.” The one who learns the truth learns it through himself; the teacher is only the occasion; the moment at which the truth becomes evident is, relative to the truth that is and that inheres in the essence of the human being, a vanishing and to that extent an indifferent point in time. “The point of departure is a nothing; for in the very moment I discover that I have known the truth from eternity without knowing it, in that same instant that moment is hidden in the eternal, absorbed into it in such a way that I cannot even find it, so to speak, even if I were to seek it, because here there is no here and there, but only an *ubique et nusquam*.”

From the exclusively religious standpoint it is otherwise. Here the human being is presupposed to be, not in truth, but in untruth. If the one who has lost the truth through the guilt of the race and through his own guilt is to arrive at the cognition of truth—namely, that cognition of truth which leads to blessedness—then it becomes necessary that God not only enlighten the one in darkness about the untruth, but also, by himself entering into time and existing as a human being, give the human being who exists in untruth the condition for attaining truth. Through God’s self-communication

in time, the moment—the determinate point in time—and therewith the miracle, receives absolutely decisive significance. The miracle is the paradox of the understanding. By holding fast to the miracle and positing the paradox, S. Kierkegaard has secured religion against the encroachments of science and erected a bulwark against the incursion of negative critique; but he has then also, with decisive aim at his “introductory problem, not to Christianity but to becoming a Christian,” come to rest at the determination that Christianity is not a doctrine but an existential communication—an existential communication expressed in the problem: “that the individual’s eternal blessedness is decided in time through the relation to something historical, which is further of such a kind that its composition includes something that, according to its essence, cannot become historical and thus must become so by virtue of the absurd.”

According to the negative critique it is science that declares religion an absurdity and thereby means to dissolve it; according to Kierkegaard’s settlement it is religion that, despite objective knowledge, declares itself an absurdity and thereby once and for all excludes science. From this it is seen that religion and philosophy are not merely heterogeneous but absolutely heterogeneous. With this presupposition, is a philosophy of religion possible?

c) The philosophy of religion as inverted science.

The exclusive relation to God, determined by the miracle, which is religion’s own inescapable presupposition, science cannot appropriate. This presupposition is the incomprehensible, the unfathomable, and can only be acknowledged on the condition that human knowledge acknowledges a barrier, an absolute boundary, at which it must stop. What in other domains of cognition shows itself to be contradictory and unreasonable is always something lower, over which science can freely raise itself; it can examine this lower, dissolve it, and by its dissolution continually advance further. But religion—what is contradictory for knowledge—is not something lower but something higher, for religion is the highest ideal power of life; where this power, in virtue of its original essence, meets one with “an absurdity,” the way is objectively impassable, reason finds the passage blocked, and science must turn aside.

But what is absurd for scientific thinking—“the paradox”—nonetheless falls within the thinking consciousness, insofar as it falls within religion; from which it again follows that what is unthinkable for science can be thinkable in religion. There is an essential difference between: overstepping the boundary of knowledge and overstepping the boundary of thought; between: falling outside knowledge and falling outside thought. The distinction between the thinkable and the unthinkable is here to be determined by

the principle from which thinking proceeds. That the paradox falls outside knowledge is certain; but does it therefore fall outside thought? For thought to be able to encounter the paradox, thinking must itself bring the paradox forward; the paradox is only unthinkable insofar as it is thought; its dialectical knot is an entanglement of absolutely heterogeneous threads of thought. Existentially the knot is insoluble; but it by no means follows from this that it must also be so intellectually. The intellectual resolution is conditioned on the heterogeneous threads being unraveled and separated from one another. Science would not be able to apprehend and determine its own principle of knowledge if it were not able, by means of the opposition between what can be known and what cannot be known, at least negatively to characterize the principle of faith that is impenetrable to knowledge. But if it is possible for science to separate the absolutely heterogeneous principles, then it is also possible for it to separate the thoughts proceeding from these principles—possible, that is, to distinguish between thoughts of knowledge and thoughts of faith, between concepts of knowledge and concepts of faith.

With the peculiar task of clarifying the relation of tension between the heterogeneous thoughts, the philosophy of religion is most precisely to be determined as a *boundary-science*.

The philosophy of religion does not, however, remain standing at general boundary-determinations for faith and knowledge; it cannot possibly let religion develop its content without letting an entire system of concepts of faith come to development. But the religious content of faith is, according to the principle, a supra-scientific content; here then enters the contradiction that a supra-scientific content is taken up into science. If scientific form were now truly conflated with the content's true form and introduced and maintained in its place, the contradiction would certainly be insoluble. But this is by no means the case. Scientific reflection has precisely the flexibility that it can bring the form of knowledge to reflect another and opposite form. For just as bright daylight can bring the eye to forget the glare and see the objects, so too reflection can bring thought to see, in knowledge, toward faith and to forget knowledge. The philosophy of religion is so far from imposing a foreign form on the religious content that its formal development consists on the contrary in liberating the content from the additions of immediately individual representations, images, feelings, expressions of will, and so forth, with which it is always intertwined in the life of faith itself. Insofar as reflection—with regard both to form and to content—sublates knowledge through knowledge, by aiming to clarify not a scientific but a supra-scientific truth, the relation between truth and science is essentially inverted, and the philosophy of religion becomes in this respect to be characterized as

an *inverted science*.

What is decisive for every science is the grounding. A thorough development of content can of course be regarded as a peculiar development of the matter itself—that is, as a development in which the matter unfolds its moments and grounds itself. But in all direct sciences, the principle of the matter's grounding is at bottom one with the general principle of knowledge, so that the matter's grounding coincides point for point with that science's own self-grounding. In the inverted science, by contrast, the grounding is itself inverted. The ground-principle here is so far from being absorbed into the principle of knowledge that the two absolutely heterogeneous principles— those of the miracle and of reason—everywhere repel one another and in their negative relation determine each other negatively. About this negative relation, with the reciprocal determinations corresponding to it, a clear knowledge can certainly be given; but the general knowledge hovering above the opposing principles is at the present stage no longer able to take sides with its own principle. The inverted science has precisely the task of empowering faith and bringing knowledge itself to bow before it. As it goes with the grounding principle, so it must go with the grounding. The inverted science is to neither suppress nor deny the universally valid grounds of knowledge, but it is to bring to clear insight how religion's self-confirmation takes place precisely by the grounds of knowledge consistently dissolving themselves and giving way to the absolutely self-validating grounds of faith. By grounding the conversion and dissolution of the grounds of knowledge into grounds of faith, the philosophy of religion grounds its own scientific dissolution, and receives on these terms significance as a science that sacrifices itself to religion and sublates itself into doctrine of faith.

Religion and Mythology

§ 2

The scientific understanding of the opposition between true and false religion—between religion and mythology—depends on the relation in which philosophy places itself to religion. Speculative reason turns mythology into religion; the critical understanding turns religion into mythology; only in inverted knowledge can the principled distinction between religion and mythology be carried through. We shall consider these standpoints more closely.

a) Mythology is essentially religion: the speculative view.

With the presupposition that the truth in religion and the truth in science are not

two mutually heterogeneous truths but one and the same absolute truth, speculative philosophy of religion must consistently acknowledge religion in every mythology, and regard the mythical clothing as a husk that can easily be removed. Religion is spirit, and for spirit as spirit the finite representations are indifferent. To fathom the essence of spirit is to fathom the essence of religion; in order to fathom the essence of religion, philosophy develops religion's concept. Religion's concept is in its generality a genus-concept, but according to its particular modes of appearance a species-concept. The Idea of religion has differentiated its content and laid out its moments in a plurality of more and less one-sided religions, in order through these to gather itself out of dispersal and arrive at completion in the perfect, one, true religion. "It has," says Hegel, "been the work of spirit through millennia to execute the concept of religion and to make it an object of consciousness." The task is to show how the spirit of humanity, beginning in full naturalness, has been able step by step to raise itself above the nature-bound condition to ever greater freedom and finally to reach the turning-point at which spirit comprehended itself as spirit and expressed the concept in the exemplary existence that is, in the form of society, to be appropriated and actualized by all.

Hegel's philosophical-religious systematics is in this respect characteristic. From nature-religion—the stage at which consciousness, in a fermenting unity of nature and spirit, intuits the divine—through the religions of spiritual individuality or free subjectivity—those of sublimity, beauty, and purposiveness—the development advances to the apprehension and determination of the religion that is clear within itself, the revealed religion corresponding to the concept of revelation: the absolute religion, Christianity.

According to this view all religions are related, all sprung from one root, all branches on one trunk. The old distinction between the nature-religions and revealed religion is in Hegel overlooked, even to the degree that the "religion of sublimity" in Judaism is, for the sake of the concept, placed lower than the "religion of beauty" among the Greeks and the "religion of purposiveness" among the Romans. What follows from this? That the Jewish religion is mythology just as much as the Greek and Roman! But if Judaism is mythology, then Christianity is also mythology: the absolute religion has the same origin as the relative ones. With the absolute religion, then, the mythical has not disappeared; on the contrary, it has become transparent to spirit as belonging to religion's distinctive form. Only when the concept represented in religion is comprehended in knowledge—that is, when religion is transformed into philosophy—does the mythical disappear.

"The absolute religion," says Hegel, "is the revealed. Religion is the revealed only

when religion's concept is for itself—that is, when its concept has become objective to itself, not in a restricted, finite objectivity, but such that it is according to its concept objective to itself. We thus have two: consciousness and the object; but in the religion filled with itself, the revealed religion that has grasped itself, the content is itself the object, and this object, the self-knowing being, is spirit.”¹

When religion's content in this manner coincides with philosophy's Idea, when religious cognition is made one with speculation's absolute knowledge, who fails to see, even at first glance, the consequence? Religion demands faith in its supernatural facts, holds fast to existential immediacy, and will not let itself be transformed into philosophy; philosophy, which has transformed the sacred facts into mythical representations, is confident in knowledge, declares all positive religion to be mythology, and gives up faith.

b) Religion is mythology: the critical view.

The conflict between religion and philosophy began among the Greeks very early, and as for the Romans, two augurs in Cicero's time could not look at one another without laughing. To be sure, religion furnished the original basis for spiritual life among the Greeks as well as the Romans; but in both it is also shown that the form of religious representations satisfies spirit only at the first, childlike stage of popular life: the developmental law is that consciousness, with increasing reflection and advancing culture, outgrows religion. When Socrates had discovered the dialectic of subjectivity, set self-knowledge as the goal of philosophy, and to that extent introduced “new gods,” popular religion could no longer withstand the attacks of the philosophers. Even if the concept of myth was not in antiquity developed with the clarity and depth achieved in modern times, it nonetheless became, as regards the lives of the gods and the deeds of the heroes, soon sufficiently evident that—to use an expression of Strauss—“the divine could not have happened in such a way that what thus happened could not be divine.” This dissolution, which explains the myths but annihilates the gods, is not a spiritual regression but, in the name of thought, reason, and self-consciousness, an essential progress. The mythological is the unconsciously illusory; but this openly illusory element religion cannot shed without exposing its innate weakness and surrendering itself. The supernatural phenomena in the New Testament are just as contrary to reason as the events in the Greek war of the gods. Religion and mythology are synonymous concepts, and the difference between lower and higher, more imperfect and more perfect religions only a difference between lower and higher, more imperfect and more perfect mythologies.

The higher a mythology stands, the more filled it is with substance and spirit, the

¹Hegel, *Religionsphilosophie* II. Berlin 1840, pp. 192–93.

longer it will naturally hold out against the consciousness of culture; but precisely the circumstance that the most spirit-filled of all myths—the myth of the Risen One—has been able to carry culture through eighteen centuries and hold out against the spirit of humanity, until consciousness at last got the better of all obscure presuppositions and came to itself, becoming “transparent to itself as the free, self-subsistent universal”—this shows what it is that in the “revealed” religion becomes the revealed. It is not a fundamental difference between myth and revelation that comes to light; no, what comes to light now is something entirely different: it is the great objective truth that the spirit of humanity—not the spirit of the individual human being, but the spirit of humanity in its principle—is its own divinity, is in the religious self-doubling both subject and object, as finite spirit subject, as spirit in inner infinity object. This is no blasphemous self-deification; it is the discovery of the Absolute, of the Idea as Idea, of the divine-human unity of the subjective and the objective.

By carrying through the principle of knowledge, philosophical critique has consistently dissolved religion as religion—for to want to preserve what is religious when religion’s principle has been dissolved is of course nonsense—and has thereby at the same time reached the boundary at which the powers of life react: what is religious asserts its right, faith stands up against knowledge, and the heterogeneous principles measure themselves against one another.

c) Religion is absolutely heterogeneous from mythology: the anti-rationalist view.

There is in both the critical and the speculative philosophy’s stance toward religion an ambiguity that must from first to last blind the observer and confuse his apprehension. This ambiguity lies in the use of the word *truth*. That the eternal, absolute truth is only one, and that the one divine truth cannot have become at odds with itself or have divided itself into two mutually conflicting truths, is certainly as unambiguous as it is incontestable a presupposition. But when one then simply overlooks the difference between a divine and a human knowledge of truth—overlooks that what is absolute in God’s knowledge must be relative in the human being’s, overlooks the principled difference between religious and scientific cognition—the ambiguity arises. It looks as though philosophy were truly entering into religion’s own presuppositions, letting these presuppositions develop their religious consequences, and thereby arriving at conflicting, mutually canceling results. Yes, if things truly proceeded in that way, it could truthfully be said that philosophical critique let religion itself complete its own dissolution. But things do not proceed in that way. Instead of beginning with the religious principle, science begins on the contrary with the principle of knowledge. When applied to religion,

the principle of knowledge becomes consistently a religion-negating principle. When it then looks as though critique proves religion's self-dissolution, this is only an appearance. The truth is that critique gets out what it has itself put in; it begins by putting in the negation of religion and ends by getting the negation of religion out: the dissolving critique moves in a circle. For what is it that science sets up in principle as the mythical? It is precisely the relation to God distinctive of religion. To clarify and determine the relation to God is to clarify and determine the fundamental conditions decisive for spiritual life. Now science ought to know, however, that these fundamental conditions present themselves differently in the domain of faith than in the domain of knowledge. If it is truly science's serious intent to get spiritual life itself clarified and understood from the ground up, then it must, at least for the time being, be capable of showing the self-denial of seeing past its own principle and letting religion have a hearing.

That the principle of religion is absolutely heterogeneous from the principle of science can be seen from the grounding. All grounds of knowledge are in the deepest sense grounds of necessity; the grounds of religion, by contrast, are grounds of will. God's will is the Absolute of religion. If it were a contradiction—as the thoughtless assert—that science should come to know a principle absolutely heterogeneous from knowledge, then it would have to be precisely the negative critique that has deluded itself into the contradiction. What does this critique want? To dissolve positive religion by means of knowledge. Why does it want to dissolve positive religion? Because its original presuppositions are absolutely heterogeneous from science.