

The Christian Paradox: Kierkegaard, Hegel and Religious Metaphor

Søren Kierkegaard's existential approach to religious faith is traditionally viewed as being in explicit opposition to the analysis of religion provided by Hegelian philosophy. However, it will be argued in this paper that the two philosophers differ in their apparent religious attitudes only because each one is operating on a completely distinct level of analysis: Kierkegaard is grappling with the subjective reality of personal religious faith, while Hegel is attempting to engage in a systematic study of religion's conceptual underpinnings. Although the philosophers are clearly engaged in different tasks, they need not be construed as incompatible or mutually exclusive ones. It will be demonstrated that not only do Kierkegaard and Hegel hold positions which retain significant overlap in crucial areas (most notably, the role of metaphor in the structure of religious language), but that they possess views which are coherently reconcilable in virtue of the fact that they are contextualized within separate spheres of inquiry. The paper will assume a three part structure in arguing for its point: first, it will make apparent the way Kierkegaard and Hegel similarly analyze the language of the spiritual; secondly, it will explain the philosopher's differing responses to the illogical nature of metaphor (Kierkegaard's embrace of the absurdity of faith versus Hegel's turn to speculative philosophy); and third, it will make clear the way in which the two philosophers' seemingly contradictory positions can be reconciled.

It's crucial to first understand that these philosophers both understand religious truth as *metaphorical*, not literal, truth. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard tells us that “[a]ll human speech, even the divine speech of Holy Scripture, about the spiritual is essentially metaphorical [*overført*,

carried over] speech.”¹ Hegel, likewise, in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* asserts that the content of religion is expressed by way of “picture-thoughts”—metaphorical images onto which abstract truths about the real are projected.² The idea in both cases is not that religion is “metaphorically but not literally true” in some sort of crude sense that reduces religion down to allegory, a mere myth expressing a useful tale. To these philosophers, religion expresses the truth about the deepest and most real layer of existence—the spiritual—but the nature of this truth is so abstract that literal words are not sufficient for its expression. As Kierkegaard puts it: “Just as the spirit is invisible, so also is its language a secret...the spirit’s manner is the metaphor’s quiet, whispering secret”, not the obvious and explicit language of the literal.³ To better understand what Kierkegaard and Hegel are driving at, it is useful to do away with the presupposition that literal truth is “more true” than metaphorical truth, which rests on the assumption that the content one is trying to express is *empirical* in nature, i.e. describing the sensuous physical world; only then can the literal be said to more closely approximate the truth. But, as Hegel notes, religion operates at a deeper level of reality than the empirical: its truth is not founded on “*particular historical evidences*”, but rather, on a “consciousness of absolute Being.”⁴ Religion is concerned with grand, abstract spiritual realities, not the contingent circumstances of the empirical world.

Thus, metaphor is the mode of spiritual communication only because the spiritual world is fundamentally distinct from the empirical world and thus cannot be made intelligible using the same methods; the spiritual cannot be articulated with a linguistic toolset equipped only to make

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 209.

² G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 120: “What is pictured or figuratively conceived...has, as such, the form of being something other than consciousness.”; p. 412: “So far as Spirit in religion *pictures* itself to itself to itself, it is indeed consciousness, and the reality enclosed within religion is the shape and the guise of its picture-thinking.”

³ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p. 209-210.

⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 338.

sense of sensuous material being. Instead of employing literal language, the spiritual—because it is so abstract and intangible—must *appropriate* literal language and use it as the basis of its own metaphorical expression. The metaphorical structure of spirituality lies in its using the exact same words as the literal but with a wholly different meaning. As Kierkegaard says:

“Therefore, in one sense the spiritual person and the sensate-psychical person say the same thing; yet there is an infinite difference since the latter has no intimation of the secret of the metaphorical words although he is using the same words, but not in their metaphorical sense. There is a world of difference between the two; the one has made the transition [*Overgang*] or let himself be *carried over* [*føre over*] to the other side, while the other remains on this side; yet they have the connection that both are using the same words”⁵

The dialectic in *Works of Love* which explains how all of this takes place smacks of a decidedly Hegelian flavor. According to Kierkegaard, the human being does not “become conscious of himself as spirit until” he has already “sensately-psychically acted out a certain part of his life”; once this has taken place and the human being is finally aware of himself as spirit, the sensate-psychical is not cast aside and discarded (as if the human being can simply abandon his existence within the physical world and become a ghostly apparition) but is instead “taken over by spirit” and used as “the basis” for “*the metaphorical*.”⁶ The spiritual person does not abandon the visible world, but instead imbues it with a wholly new meaning by seeing in it the

⁵ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p. 209.

⁶ Ibid: “And this is quite in order or in the order of things and of existence, since a human being, even if from the moment of birth he is spirit, still does not become conscious of himself as spirit until later and thus has sensate-psychically acted out a certain part of his life prior to this. But this first portion is not to be cast aside when the spirit awakens any more than the awakening of the spirit in contrast to the sensate-psychical announces itself in a sensate-psychical way. On the contrary, the first portion is taken over [*overtage*] by the spirit and, used in this way, is thus made the basis—it becomes *the metaphorical*.”

metaphorical expression of spiritual truth. To translate this into biblical terms: the spiritual person remains *in* the world without being *of* the world. Notice that in providing an interpretive framework for decoding the meaning of spiritual speech, Kierkegaard is sketching out a dialectical movement from physical existence to spiritual existence that necessarily implies the incorporation of images from the physical world in the production of meaningful understanding of the spiritual world. This is precisely the underlying logic which Hegel sees as being the operational model for the “picture-thinking” of religious consciousness, which he describes in *The Phenomenology* as “the synthetic combination of sensuous immediacy and...Thought.”⁷ According to Hegelian philosophy, “abstract truths” about reality, i.e., spiritual truths, can “be grasped in a simplified form by means of concrete examples and stories drawn from normal human experience.”⁸ Here again, we see the necessity of drawing from the sensate-psychically experienced material world in communicating truth that is abstract and immaterial, that does not directly correspond to objects within the physical real but nonetheless employs their sensuous imagery.

Spiritual speech uses the material world to communicate immaterial truth; it describes spiritual reality *in terms of* material reality. This sort of metaphorical structure is, in some sense, blatantly irrational. As literary critic Northrop Frye points out, the structure of religious

⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 463.

⁸ Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 475. Stewart gives an excellent summation of Hegel's philosophy of religion in his study on Kierkegaard's relations to Hegel: “There is then both a religious and a philosophical interpretation of the monistic unity of the world. The religious interpretation, which understands this truth in terms of picture-thinking, personifies the monistic unity of the universe in the Christian Trinity. For the common believer, these abstract truths can only be grasped in a simplified form by means of concrete examples and stories drawn from normal human experience. For example, God's externalizing of Himself into the world and the return to Himself are not grasped as a necessary movement of the Concept but instead as a story of the birth and life of Christ. The conceptual truth of God and Christ are understood via the metaphor of the Father and the Son.”

metaphors is “this-is-that” or “A-is-B”, which, in logical terms, is completely absurd; these metaphors are “profoundly illogical, if not anti-logical: they assert that two things are the same thing while remaining two different things.”⁹ Now, this is not so much an identification of a problem with religion’s communicative structure so much as an acknowledgement that traditional reason is wholly unsuited to decrypt the meaning of spiritual speech, which outright defies the rules of logic. Kierkegaard and Hegel admittedly differ in their responses to this realization. Kierkegaard wholeheartedly embraces the irrationality of religious faith, claiming that Christianity is *supposed* to be “absurd” to “the understanding.”¹⁰ As Kierkegaard notes in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the central thesis of the Christian faith, the “proposition that God has come into being in human form, was born, grew up, etc., is surely the paradox *sensu strictissimo*, the absolute paradox.”¹¹ Nothing about the Christian faith, even its doctrinal pillar, its ruling metaphor (that God was made flesh), admits of worldly, logical comprehension. Kierkegaard stresses that “the paradox-religious sphere, the sphere of faith,” requires that one believe “against the understanding,” since “it is the absurd that is” always “the object of faith.”¹²

Hegel, on the other hand, asserts that the content of religion can be rationally deciphered provided one is understanding it in philosophical, conceptual terms. The absurdity of Christianity stems from its metaphorical and pictorial language, not its conceptual content. He sees in religion a perfect rationality housed within an absurd, irrational medium:

⁹ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and English Literature* (San Diego: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1981), p. 54.

¹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 179: “Christianity has proclaimed itself as the eternal, essential truth that has come about in time; it has proclaimed itself as *the paradox* and has demanded the inwardness of faith in respect of what is a stumbling-block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, and to the understanding the absurd.”

¹¹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 182-183.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 177, 486.

“This *form of picture thinking* constitutes the specific mode in which Spirit, in this community, becomes aware of itself. This form is not yet Spirit’s self-consciousness that has advanced to its [Notion] *qua* [Notion]: the mediation is still incomplete. This combination of Being and Thought is, therefore, defective in that spiritual Being is burdened with an unreconciled split... The *content* is the true content, but all its moments, when placed in the medium of picture-thinking, have the character of being uncomprehended [in terms of the Notion]....”¹³

Religion, in Hegel’s view, consists of the projection of conceptual truth onto an external object of representation (Notion, here, means Concept); *this* is the metaphorical structure inherent in the articulation of spiritual truth. But this structure ends up preventing a philosophically adequate comprehension of the conceptual truth therein. The illogical structure is, here, a roadblock to fully grasping the conceptual dimension of religious truth. Consequently, adherents of Christianity are at risk of misunderstanding the conceptual basis of religion, of only grasping its external appearance and pictorial representation—its *form*—without attaining a philosophical understanding of the *content* the form is trying to communicate. To remedy this, “all that now remains is to supersede this mere form”, that is, to translate religious metaphors into philosophical concepts, thereby freeing the truth from its pictorial representation and allowing for its complete and total conceptual comprehension.¹⁴ Philosophy, which understands being abstractly in terms of the Concept (instead of in terms of picture-thoughts), is the tool by which we make religious truth conceptually intelligible.

Considering the turn to speculative philosophy on the part of Hegel, it's not hard to see why the dominant scholarly view has tended towards casting Kierkegaard and Hegel as

¹³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 463.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 479.

diametrically opposed thinkers. As philosopher and scholar Merold Westphall points out in his book *Becoming a Self*, the Hegelian system of philosophical science—which seeks to dissect religion on a rational, conceptual basis—puts forth the “strongest claims” to be objective “knowledge”; but this is, of course, in stark contrast to Kierkegaardian Christianity, which always essentially involves an “inescapable subjectivity.”¹⁵ As Kierkegaard himself states in the *Postscript*, Hegelian “speculative science...wants to teach that the way...is to become objective, while Christianity teaches that the way...is to become subjective.”¹⁶ According to scholars like Westphall, these two systems seem to be offering “competing claims” about what the “highest human task is.”¹⁷ In the case of Hegelian philosophy, the objective orientation is the way to truth; Christianity, however, prioritizes becoming a subject over becoming an objective observer. The emphasis in Christianity is on the subject itself, not any object of knowledge; it is personal and subjective, not scholarly and objective. This is where Kierkegaard and Hegel are said to most substantially differ in their religious thought.

This reading is certainly a plausible one, but there are good reasons to doubt that it's the full story. Some important points are worth noting in order to elaborate on the more acute details being worked out by these philosophers. First, it should be noted that, as Kierkegaard scholar Jon Stewart points out, in drawing a sharp distinction between the objectivity of “speculative

¹⁵ Merold Westphall, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1996), p. 101: “Climacus understands Christianity as wanting ‘to give the single individual an eternal happiness, a good that is not distributed in bulk but only to one, and to one at a time’ (130). Because acceptance or appropriation of this gift necessarily involves decision, there is an inescapable subjectivity involved in becoming Christian.”; p. 103: “...as philosophy, as the system of philosophical sciences, Hegel’s thought puts forth the strongest claims to be *Wissenschaft*. Just as he concludes the *Phenomenology* with a claim to absolute knowledge, so he concludes the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* by assimilating the result to the divine thought that thinks itself.”

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 109.

¹⁷ Westphall, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 103.

thought” and the subjectivity of Christian faith, Kierkegaard’s purpose is to assert that “the truth upon which one bases one’s faith cannot be that of a speculative interpretation of Christianity”, not to contest “Hegel’s philosophy” of religion.¹⁸ In claiming that speculative philosophy’s objectively oriented interpretation of Christianity is *not* the foundational kernel of real religious faith on the part of the individual believer, Kierkegaard is in no way directly objecting to the details of the conceptual analysis of Christianity offered by Hegel. Kierkegaard’s point is merely that such analyses cannot serve as the basis of the Christian believer’s personal faith:

“If the speculative philosopher is at the same time a believer...he must have perceived long ago that speculative philosophy can never acquire the same meaning for him as faith. It is precisely as a believer that he is infinitely interested in his eternal happiness, and it is in faith that he is assured of it...And he bases no eternal happiness upon his philosophical speculations.”¹⁹

Notice that Kierkegaard states that speculative philosophers can authentically be Christian so long as they recognize the limits of speculative philosophy and refrain from trying to use it to ground one’s faith. To Kierkegaard, the inwardness of faith in the believer is not a matter up for philosophical dispute; it is a profoundly personal, and intrinsically subjective affair that cannot hope to be resolved by objective inquiry. Still, it must be strongly emphasized that, as Jon Stewart draws attention to, Kierkegaard “makes no attempt to criticize Hegel’s interpretation

¹⁸ Stewart, *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, p. 471-472: “The problem is once again the attempt to base one’s faith on a philosophical or conceptual understanding of Christianity...the criticism here ultimately reduces to a point about one’s relation to faith and not about Hegel’s philosophy.”; p. 477: “ ‘Speculative thought,’ Climacus writes, ‘is objective, and objectively there is no truth for an existing individual but only an approximation, since by existing he is prevented from becoming entirely objective. Christianity, on the other hand, is subjective; the inwardness of faith in the believer is the truth’s eternal decision.’ The speculative philosopher’s interpretation cannot in principle be the truth of Christianity for the individual believer. Thus, the truth upon which one bases one’s faith cannot be that of a speculative interpretation of Christianity.”

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 48.

of...Christianity” whatsoever in forwarding this point.²⁰ Moreover, Kierkegaard himself reminds us in the *Postscript* that just “because an individual in faith gives up understanding and believes against the understanding, he should not for that reason think meanly of the understanding.”²¹ Kierkegaard is not disparaging objective knowing and scholarly understanding itself, only its application in the sphere of faith. It can thus be appropriately said that Kierkegaard’s “main criticism is not of Hegel”, nor of the objective orientation of speculative philosophy, but rather “of treating an academic account of Christianity as the basis for private belief.”²²

The second important point to grasp is that the Hegelian study of Christianity, which concludes in the attempt to make the religion conceptually legible (i.e, objective), takes place within the context of a *philosophical enterprise*. As Jon Stewart observes, the project of philosophy, according to a Hegelian understanding, is “an examination of the Concept.”²³ Therefore, any *philosophical* explanation of religion will necessarily take place on a conceptual basis: it will “examine the Concept in various forms of religion.”²⁴ The important thing to be understood here is that Hegel’s “account of Christianity does not purport to be anything more” than a philosophical, and hence, a conceptual, explanation of religion.²⁵ Hegel’s project “has nothing to do with the faith of the individual believer”; it is only “concerned with philosophy of religion as a branch of philosophy”, not as a matter of personal faith.²⁶ The realm of faith, which

²⁰ Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, p. 483.

²¹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 473.

²² Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, p. 470.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 472.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁶ *Ibid*; p. 480: “There is...no claim made about private emotions of particular individuals. Indeed, Hegel himself claimed that such things cannot be grasped philosophically; they belong to...particularity and have nothing to do with philosophy. Moreover, Hegel’s conceptual account of Christianity in his philosophy of religion has nothing to do with the faith of the individual believer. His hierarchy of forms of knowledge, which places religion under philosophy, is to be understood only in the context of his system; and in this context ‘religion’ means ‘philosophy of religion’ and not personal faith.”

lies in the inwardness of the individual, is distinct from the realm of objective reason. Like Kierkegaard, Hegel emphasizes that these shouldn't be confused:

“Faith, in its certainty, is an unsophisticated relationship to its absolute object, a pure knowing of it which does not mix up letters, paper, and copyists in its consciousness of absolute Being, and does not bring itself into relation with it by means of things of that kind. On the contrary, this consciousness is the self-mediating ground of its knowledge; it is Spirit itself which bears witness to itself, both in the *inwardness* of the *individual* consciousness and through the *universal presence* in everyone of faith in it.”²⁷

Thus, when Hegel advocates for the supersession of religious picture-thinking by the philosophical Concept, he is not advocating for the rejection of faith in favor of objective scholarship; he is, instead, noting the impossibility of *philosophically* grasping religious truth when it is caged within a medium other than conceptual thought. Hegel only ends up rejecting picture-thinking in the first place because he is after a “philosophical understanding of the Christian religion,” which necessitates the translation of religious metaphors into conceptual terms; still, Hegel clearly recognizes that this is separable from matters of faith.

With these important points in mind, it's not hard to see that Kierkegaard and Hegel are engaging with two radically different topics: Hegel is concerned with *philosophy of religion*, whereas Kierkegaard is concerned with *religious faith*. This divergence in concern and study on the part of Kierkegaard and Hegel, as was made clear earlier, is attributable to the philosophers sharing an essentially concordant understanding of the metaphorical (and thus, anti-logical) character of religious language—a shared realization which results in the drawing out of separate implications. But the implications identified by the two philosophers differ only because the

²⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 338.

initial inclinations of the philosophers themselves do: the dissimilarity is due to them being attuned to *different aspects of the same truth*. Kierkegaard latches onto the subjective element of Christianity because what most concerns him in religion is questions of private faith - for instance, how does the individual believer, *the subject*, grapple with the irrationality of religious language? What can the particular Christian person, in his direct relationship with God, do but be receptive to the absurdity of spiritual speech? Hegel, however, with his eye on the philosophical development of the Concept, concerns himself with questions that probe at objective knowledge. He is interested in formulating an academic account of religion that accurately reports the way in which the Concept instantiates itself in Christianity. His purposes are academic because his concerns are.

But these two discussions, despite being very different, do not mutually exclude one another. In fact, seeing as these analyses are restricted to completely separate spheres, there need not be any explicit conflict between them; as Jon Stewart points out, it “could well be that although philosophy interprets the necessity of the Concept of religion at the level of the speculative thinking, there is nevertheless a paradox and mystery at the level of individual subjectivity and private faith.”²⁸ The Kierkegaardian analysis of Christianity as an absurdity to the understanding only applies at the level of first person faith based belief, and the Hegelian analysis of Christianity as a development of the Concept only applies at the level of academic philosophy. But there is no need for academic concerns about religion’s conceptual basis to seep into one’s private faith; there is nothing preventing someone from grasping the nature of Christianity according to the Concept and then “putting this understanding aside when they turn to the inwardness of their own conscience and to their personal faith.”²⁹ As mentioned earlier,

²⁸ Stewart, *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, p. 471.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 483.

Kierkegaard accepts that speculative philosophers can be true Christians provided they make a clear separation between their speculative understanding of Christianity and their subjective relation to it in faith. Both Hegel and Kierkegaard clearly distinguish between “science and scholarship, on the one hand, and...private religious faith, on the other.”³⁰ Moreover, they both make it abundantly clear which side of the issue they are operating on in their commentary on Christianity. Seeing as this is the case, the assertion that Hegel and Kierkegaard differ in their religious thinking should be qualified with an acknowledgement that they differ most primarily in their scope of analysis.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 482.