

The New Faith: Strauss, Kierkegaard and the Theological Revolution

F. L. Jackson

The metamorphosis which is the 19th and 20th century transition to modernity is theologically to be defined as the passing over of Christian religion and its culture into a wholly secular humanism, in which form the older European tradition has expanded to become the dominant culture of contemporary civilization worldwide.¹ The wholly superficial view is that the older Christian vision of a spiritual life and kingdom was simply abandoned for one that was more "scientific", "down to earth" and "realistic". On the contrary, the ideals which move contemporary life spring from that very same vision, though resolved into new interpretations which, though they have indeed abandoned the language of the spirit, have done so only to reconstitute its principle in a secular terminology of human freedom. This theoretical and practical transformation of the Christian spiritual view of life into terms of worldly immediacy, the passage of western-religious into contemporary-humanistic culture, is the powerful central theme of the 19th and 20th centuries, underlying the great social, intellectual and moral upheavals for which this revolutionary era is chiefly remarkable.

The substitution of a spiritual by a humanistic consciousness and faith was pursued, however, along two contrary paths. Partly it took the form of a new faith in "humanity", not as a static taxonomic category, but as the objective totality of human activity, the material-historical process in which all individuals seek collectively to overcome the limitedness of their natural particularity through participation in a common technological, economic and cultural-scientific enterprise. This objective vision of human self-salvation through material progress, social reform, political revolution and personal fulfilment has become the surrogate for the spiritual destiny taught in Christian religion.

But the secularizing of Christianity also took shape along another, contrasting path, transposing the concept of the spiritual to refer to particular human subjectivity; to the immediate inward relation to self and this-worldly inwardness of the existing, self-

1. The present essay specifies and elaborates an argument contained in a more general account of 19th-20th century philosophy: F. L. Jackson, "The Revolutionary Origins of Contemporary Philosophy", *Dionysius*, 9 (1985) espec. pp. 157-8.

conscious individual. It is here, in his own natural subjectivity, in his preconscious reality and depth, that man's essential being is to be found.² This idea of the absolute as primordial inwardness was initially represented in the many theosophical principles spawned in the 19th century: Will, Life, the Unconscious, the Unknowable etc. But it finally became clear in later existentialism that these were nothing else but forms of the principle of finite human subjectivity raised to the absolute power.

The transition in which spiritual life has acquired a wholly worldly meaning has taken place no less in theology than in art, politics and all other regions of contemporary culture. A patent paradox here appears in that the aim of despiritualization would seem contradictory to the aim of all religion as traditionally understood, namely, to elevate ordinary consciousness and life into the discipline of a higher-than-human spiritual truth. The new theologians of the first half of the 19th century were indeed quite conscious of the inherent ambiguity of their claims,³ resolved as they were to effect a total overthrow of the religious perspective itself from within theology, a radical inversion of the Christian theme of God-become-Man into a secularist Man-become-God. They pursued these ambiguous goals with characteristic avidity nonetheless, laying the foundations thereby for views that have since become wholly conventional in contemporary theology.

The new theology had its beginnings in the radical criticism of traditional Christianity in and after Hegel's time. This attack upon Christianity's chief motifs, and in particular upon its notion of divinity, did not initially represent as its aim the outright overthrow of tradition. Rather it saw its purpose as purifying it, bringing out its true meaning, a meaning heretofore hidden or confounded. It was thought that to the religious consciousness of the day there had finally been revealed the very nature and essence of religion itself, an insight which demanded a radical once-for-all transformation of it, thus achieving its final fulfilment and completion.

2. "Natural" subjectivity is ambiguous, perhaps, applied to the existential standpoint which otherwise rests on the rejection of a "nature" distinct from self-consciousness. As Sartre's succinctly puts it: "man has no nature; man is his freedom". "Natural" here simply refers to the radical *immediacy* of the subjective: the typical existential notion of the irreducible "being-there" of its world for particular consciousness found in a host of existential formulations from the "absolute" of romanticism, to "will-to-power", "unconscious life", *Dasein*, *Existenz* and so forth.

3. It is Marx who brings this ambiguity fully into the open in *The German Ideology* and elsewhere, where he accuses his own predecessors, especially Feuerbach, of "overcoming theology only theologically". Nietzsche's tirade against "morality" involves the same ambiguity on its subjective side (Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 160.)

The insight took the form of declaring that the source of religion is not to be found in God's self-revelation in history or scripture, or in doctrines disclosed by theological reason, but simply in man's self-conscious nature; more precisely, in the individual's immediate awareness of his own here-and-now existence and its radical implications. Far from thinking such a view a modification of Christian belief, moreover, the claim was rather that it is precisely in that its images and doctrines spring from this formerly hidden human truth, that Christian religion deserves the right to claim to be the "absolute" religion.⁴ The theological revolution saw its mission as simply to bring out into the daylight a plain, worldly, human truth long obscured and concealed in the shadow-world of Christian doctrine and spiritualist imagery.

For the new theologians, the chief defect of traditional religion lay in a disparity between form and content in religious self-consciousness.⁵ So far as the absolute content and object of belief, God, is construed as the exclusively self-original, all-inclusive being, so the believer's relation to Him in consciousness must remain ambiguous. For a divinity absolute and all-comprehensive in itself must subsume also the relation of a finite subject to it; in which case the act of faith becomes inconsequential and even enigmatic. From the standpoint of the divine the relation would seem superfluous; from the standpoint of the believer, the act of faith would seem at once an act of alienation, since in the object of belief he can find nothing of himself; indeed he finds his own relation to God obliterated. For religion to be meaningful, the believer must stand in relation to the infinite such that his own subjectivity is fully recognized in it, and this would appear possible only where all the essential elements, including the divine itself, be somehow contained already within the religious relation itself. But now a new danger emerges of God becoming a mere moment in individual consciousness, which step would appear to destroy the sense of religion altogether, reducing it to mere expression of religious feeling or some other dimension of finite subjectivity. The prob-

4. For left-hegelian theology, Christianity was "absolute religion" because it contained as its objective content the "truth" alleged to be at the bottom of all religion, namely the divinity of man. For anti-hegelian fideists it is just the absurdity of Christianity's central claim that calls forth the purest act of subjective faith. Hegel, whose phrase it is, meant neither. The "absolute religion" is absolute because in the overt doctrine of the Trinity, God in himself is so defined as to include the relation of the believer to Him; hence in the revealed object of Christian belief the believer has also explicitly before him what religion itself is, which is not the case in earlier forms of religion. (Hegel, *Encyc.*, ss. 564-571 and *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Pt. III, Intro.)

5. See the fourth section below for further discussion of this point.

lem for the new theology was thus how religion could be wholly assimilated to the finite human relation of belief while yet retaining "absoluteness", religious truth, as a legitimate term in that relation; in plain terms, how one can be related in faith to a divinity one speaks of as beyond and prior to oneself, while yet retaining in that relation an explicit sense of one's own radical completeness.

The common end of revolutionary theologies has thus been to force both the form and content of traditional Christianity into consistency with the presupposed unlimited actuality and priority of the human — of "freedom" — this allegedly as the real truth already concealed, and now to be brought out, in the Christian figure of the God-man. But from the beginning a theological rift appears because it is not at all obvious how this immediate and literal identity of God and man is to be understood. On the one hand the identity of divinity and humanity is construed simply as an objective truth given immediately in any unalienated human self-consciousness; that God and the human should appear disparate is an illusion springing from the imperfect or corrupted self-awareness of particular individuals. But on the other side the opposite can be argued: what is immediately and primordially witnessed in self-consciousness is precisely that any objective identification of human and absolute is unthinkable, an absurdity which therefore must compel a radical turning inward, where that identity is revealed in its purely subjective significance as pertaining entirely to the particular individual.

The effect, however, is in either case the same; the human comes to be viewed as comprehensive of all the moments of the religious relation, which then define nothing more than what are considered the fundamental objective or existential dimensions of human freedom. The older language of divine and human, spirit and nature and so forth come to be seen only as symbolism for primary aspects of the human condition as such. The "God-man" of religion in particular becomes the chief symbol and model for what has thus been achieved; it is the ideal representation of an absolute human existence which has reduced both the concept of divinity as such, as well as the human consciousness of it, to mere aspects of itself.

There is no confusing this interest of the new theology in the God-man figure with that of ancient Christology. The early fathers struggled to express adequately the truth, taken to be revealed, that God had taken upon Himself finite human nature without either suffering corruption thereby or reducing the latter to mere appearance. The activity through which the human, in its radical alienation from the divine, is yet reconciled to it, they understood

as arising entirely from the side of the divine, the mystery being how both the moments of self-alienation and redemption can belong together in God. The modern interest assumes the opposite. Here the disparity and the reconciliation of it spring from the human side; the perplexity that arises rather concerns how such human existence which knows itself as finite, also can have, in the consciousness of freedom, infinite significance.

If the revolutionary theology is in this respect radically atheistic, it is no ordinary atheism. It does not, as the atheism of enlightenment, simply deny the existence of religion's indispensable object in the name of human reason but goes further to redefine divinity itself as a dimension of human being. The new theology is thus not strictly atheistic at all; rather, in its radical humanism, it sees itself as incorporating and superseding religion itself in a higher standpoint. The categories and distinctions of traditional theism are pressed into the service of a new doctrine in which what is affirmed absolutely is not God but human freedom. This is why contemporary theology can at one and the same time claim to be the sole legitimate successor and heir to the religious tradition, while yet rejecting outright or radically reinterpreting all that belongs to it.⁶

The twin traditions of liberal and existential theology form the main branches into which this new contemporary religion of man divides. Each interprets the meaning of the older God-centred tradition in its own way, as also the sense in which it is to be overcome. Liberal theology views traditional religious belief as wanting an adequate grasp of what is an essentially human truth, one since become plain to all, and which in fact forms the real essence of all religion. This imperfect vehicle we must now abandon or retain only in its aspect of liturgical poetry, "reformed" so as to make clear its real reference lies outside its spiritualistic figures, its God-talk, in this-worldly human concerns and contexts. Existential faith, on the other hand, tends to condemn the whole extant religious tradition as an objectifying corruption of the crucial, aboriginal human experience of subjective freedom which it takes to be the true source of religious expression. To this primitive, natural subjectivity it would return. The first is a revolutionary, ultra-Christianity devoted to a literal salvation through

6. What distinguishes contemporary from traditional (enlightenment) atheism is just this, that since it does not rest on an opposition between one absolute standpoint and another, "reason" vs "faith", but rather thinks it has overcome and set aside all absolutes, it not only can tolerate religion and philosophy but even continue to pursue, promote and practice them, so long as they are seen to serve some practical or inspirational purpose and so long as it is perfectly clear they no longer have to do with anything true.

revolutionary reform of objective human institutions and conditions — “politics” declared Feuerbach, “is our religion”. The second is a reactionary, proto-Christianity which radically rejects historical, institutional religion and the contemporary culture it has produced, which it takes to have concealed and mutilated the subjective, existential truth that lies at its core.

The writings of David Strauss and Soren Kierkegaard form the clearest and most forceful initial statements of these two sides of the new theology. Strauss is author, and in his personal career the living exemplar, of that humanistic outlook that has become part of the very tissue of contemporary religiosity; his original theological arguments may indeed now seem to us somewhat hyperbolic and superfluous in the light of convictions already formed. Kierkegaard is still regarded as the founding father of existentialism, a tradition which, like liberalism, is certainly also not restricted to the religious form which Kierkegaard gave it. Together with its more secular development at the hands of Nietzsche, Heidegger and a host of other 20th century authors, it too has sunk its roots deep into the contemporary mentality.

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In 1835 David Friedrich Strauss published the book which, like Darwin's *Origin of Species*, forms a major literary portal through which Christian-European spiritual culture passes over into the humanistic worldliness of the contemporary age. *Das Leben Jesu* provided liberal humanism with its new testament and was thought to herald the advent of a new Christendom, a new kingdom of man, the commencement of which was seen as no less epochal in world history than that which saw the original birth of Christianity. Indeed it was conceived as nothing less than the complete fulfilment, completion and elevation of that ancient tradition onto an entirely new plane.

As he was later to summarize its theme:

The illusion that Jesus could have been a man in the full sense and still as a single person stand above the whole of humanity, is the chain which still blocks the harbour of Christian theology against the open sea of rational science. To break that chain is [my] purpose. . .⁷

His object was to expound a completely transformed Christianity in which had been overcome and eliminated the one element which he thought restricted it to being nothing more than a mythical view of existence, in the sense of a mere fictional image of

7. D. F. Strauss, *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History*, tr. Keck, Phila. 1946, p. 130.

a truth, not the truth itself. To liberate it from this mythical element meant to translate the whole meaning of Christian consciousness and tradition into purely "scientific" terms, which meant for Strauss translation into an ultimate theory of human, as opposed to divine, reality.⁸ The first stage of such liberation requires the undermining of the belief that Jesus is God, a belief which, so far as it is taken as a matter of historical record, can readily be shown to be empirically unverifiable.

Strauss was by no means, of course, the first to distinguish the historical Jesus of the Gospels from the "Christ of faith", that is, the divine-human unity as a universal idea present for believing consciousness. Schleiermacher especially had already made this distinction and the resulting emphasis upon the purely spiritual (in the sense of subjective) meaning of the incarnation became a popular issue of the time. But Strauss was the first to take a firm stand on the side of the Christ of faith, to articulate it, and to carry out a critical destruction of the belief in the divinity of the historical Jesus, a critique he thought absolutely prerequisite to the radical humanising of Christian doctrine as a whole.

Nor was scepticism concerning the actual divinity of Jesus anything new, having long been the stock view of theological rationalists. Typical in Strauss's time was their acceptance of the "divinity" of Jesus so long as it meant that His teaching was rooted in a universal moral philosophy communicated through myth and parable, thus having no particular reference to empirical fact. Strauss went much further. He wished to maintain that not only were the doctrines and mysteries of Christianity expressive of a universal rational ideal, as distinguished from something merely known through experience; they furthermore really do constitute in an imperfect, unscientific form an actual disclosure of ultimate reality itself. What the Christian myth of the divinity of Christ crudely recognizes is that ultimate being is neither God nor Nature, but Man. This is far from saying with fundamentalism that the birth and resurrection of Christ and other miracles are to be viewed as literal facts; on the contrary they really are mere myths and should be viewed as such. But myths, while fictions, are not empty, he argued; what in fact they represent are fundamental truths about human self-consciousness itself, masquerading as

8. This proposition, already extant in Hegel's time (among Fichteans for example) became, once espoused by a number of Hegel's prominent students, the chief doctrine identified with what came to be known, and still is widely known, as "hegelianism". What is remarkable is that Hegel himself considered it sheer nonsense. His philosophy of religion is to a large degree a defense of Christian doctrine against just such ultra-rationalist interpretation.

tales about a particular cult-hero who represents, as it were, the individual-in-general.

Strauss's standpoint is thus something more than the atheism of enlightenment which equates faith with superstition. Theologians before Strauss who sought to accommodate Christian doctrine to enlightenment waffled over the obvious implication that, in the end, the literal divinity of Jesus had to be rejected; their orthodox opponents used this inevitability to justify a contrary fideistic absolutism which demanded radical assent without question to the whole of the content of literal belief.

In Strauss's perfect compromise, the content of faith was neither to be refuted nor to be literally accepted. The trick is to break into the mythical husk and extract its rational kernel without doing violence to it in the process. The error of enlightenment theology in his view is that, impatient to discard the mythical wrappings, it typically loses hold of the valuable core of Christian truth. Orthodoxy, on the other hand, in its resolve to cling to the wrappings, renders Christian truth hopelessly occult, reducing it to a belief in things that must remain in principle concealed, mysterious, in short senseless.

The real task is to transpose the Christian truth intact and entire, without mutilation or residue, from the one modality of mythical imagery to the other of plain human reason. His influential book was written precisely to lay the groundwork for this task. The point was not simply to debunk the gospels in the name of enlightenment's purge of the infamy of superstition, but rather indeed to establish their purely mythical character precisely so as to justify their reinterpretation in terms totally other than traditional ones of divinity and miracle; specifically in humanistic, "scientific" terms. The attempt to prove the straightforward humanity of Jesus thus has as its purpose to liberate the content of Christianity for such re-interpretation: "there presents itself at the conclusion this problem: to re-establish dogmatically that which has been destroyed critically".⁹

Strauss did not himself take this reconstruction very far; he simply sets the task which other humanists like Feuerbach, Marx and others took up more resolutely. But the main features of the new theology are clearly sketched out. Once we recognize the Jesus of history as a mere mortal, a particular individual, and one now quite dead and who therefore cannot be thought to "stand above the whole of humanity", we are finally free to reconsider the meaning of Christian doctrine in "scientific", non-mythical terms.

9. D. F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, tr. M. Evans, New York, 1860, p. 867.

The intent is to lose nothing with regard to Christianity's essential meaning; indeed the liberation of doctrine from its attachments to mythical expression is just what is needed in order to make its truth fully available and applicable to all.

The primary myth to be "dogmatically reestablished", then, is the belief that Jesus in his literal existence embodies the unity of the divine and the human, the central New Testament claim that was firmly fixed in belief at Nicaea. But it is just this notion that God has existed as this particular individual that Strauss insists must first of all be put to rest. If the divine-human identity is to be seen, as he argues, as expressing the truth of what all human beings are in their common universal nature, then what primarily is to be rejected is that this identity could be realized exclusively in one particular individual at some particular time.

If reality is ascribed to the idea of the unity of the divine and the human nature, is this equivalent to the admission that the unity must actually have been once manifested, as it never had been, and never more will be, in one individual? Is not the idea . . . a real one in a far higher sense when I regard the whole race of mankind as its realization? Is not an incarnation of God from eternity a truer one than an incarnation limited to a particular point of time?¹⁰

Since what the divine is for Strauss is the "humanity" manifest in every individual, the relation of the believer to Jesus as the divine is nothing but a picturesque, prescientific representation of the universal relation of all individuals to their human essence. The relation to "divinity" becomes established in any particular individual so far as he awakens to the fact that it is his objective humanity, and not his subjective existence, that is true. This consciousness is what faith is, and in and through it the individual is saved from his "sin", that is, from his finite, existential particularity.

By faith in this Christ, especially in his death and resurrection, man is justified before God: that is, by the kindling within him of the idea of Humanity, the individual man participates in the divinely human life of the species. Now the main element of that idea is, that the negation of the merely natural and sensual life . . . is the sole way to true spiritual life.

[This] is the sinless existence for . . . pollution cleaves to the individual only, and does not touch the race or its history. It is humanity that dies, rises and ascends to heaven, for from the negation of its phenomenal life there ever proceeds a higher spiritual life; from the suppression of its mortality as a per-

10. *Ibid.*, p. 895.

sonal, national, and terrestrial spirit, arises its union with the infinite spirit of the heavens.¹¹

The critique of the divinity of Jesus has thus a deeper aim within the context of its purely humanistic assumptions, namely to represent the consciousness of personal individuality as valid only where subordinated to the "higher" consciousness of his essential identity with all human beings, which alone is the ultimate, objective, redeeming fact. Thus "to suppress the historical appearance of Christ is to rise nearer . . . to the idea of humanity in general".

The historical individual is that which appears of him, and no more; his internal nature is known by his words and actions, the conditions of his age and nation are a part of his individuality, and what lies beneath this phenomenal existence as the essence, is not the nature of this individual, but human nature in general, which in particular beings operates only under the limitations of their individuality, of time, and of circumstances.¹²

This Strauss declares to be the unalloyed essence of Christian truth once its mythical impurities have been distilled away. It is a view of things now hardly startling after the century and a half during which theological liberalism has established itself as a commonplace contemporary dogma. But in Strauss's time it was a daring, sensational revelation. It meant more than that religion had merely been set aside; it meant that man himself had come into entire possession of religion and its ancient truth. Religion itself, indeed, is but a function of human self-consciousness; man himself is its central theme and the real upshot of the divine history. Faith in man now replaces faith in God; humanism becomes at one leap, not just a surrogate for religion, but the truth of religion itself, its legitimate successor and sole heir to its authority and meaning.

Accordingly the whole Christian divine scheme is transposed into a human key. The relation of man to God reappears as the relation of naturally and socially conditioned individuals to their own ideal species-life. The world that Christ overcame is the human world so far as individuals stand in their particularity isolated from one another. The kingdom of God is the same human world self-liberated through material-technical and cultural-political activism. The individual's salvation is achieved so far as the idea of the wider interests of his race are "revealed" or become "incarnate" in him, that is, so far as this idea constitutes the centre and meaning of his life. To the extent that his particularity is

11. *Ibid.*, p. 896.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 885.

sacrificed, nailed to the cross, to that extent the individual is resurrected into the higher life of the human scientific, artistic and political community.

This "humanity" of which Strauss speaks is clearly something more, however, than the natural species. It has as its substance the absolute being-for-self of existing individuals, their freedom. "Humanity" is nothing else but this ideal freedom allegedly given immediately in consciousness as the individual's universal and objective essence. The human species-life is not simply the process of the outward natural species, which is indifferent to the inward essence of the individual. It is just that inward essence itself, freedom, realized as a wholly objective, historical universal. It is "human life" as the total collective enterprise that includes all human activities possible and actual, and within which context alone any particular purpose can be realized. The life of humanity is thus the individual's own life and *vice versa*, and this fusion of particular with universal in the liberal self-conscious is the relation which for Strauss is mythically represented in the God-man of Christian doctrine.

Strauss declares himself a theological monist, but again only with a view to advancing his humanist argument. In traditional terms, the mystery of the Trinity springs partly from its irreducibility to simple unity; thus in Christianity strict monotheism is a heresy. But the singular divinity Strauss speaks of is not in any case God Almighty, the wholly transcendent God of conventional monotheism. God as such, the Father-God, is for Strauss only an abstraction, the divinity of humanity seen apart from actual existing individuals — humanity "unincarnate". Nor is his focus, as might appear, on God-the-Son; for it is precisely the burden of his masterwork to reject outright the exclusive divinity of Jesus and to reinterpret the divine sonship as a mere mythic device to express a general principle, as strength might be represented by Hercules or wisdom by Athena. The Son means only this: the divinity of humanity.

The procession of the Spirit, finally, Strauss construes as the progressive liberation of humanity's self-understanding out of the primitive belief in the mythical God-Man, Jesus, into a rational grasp of divinity as applying to all individuals. This liberation is an entirely historical progress in which an inadequate religious awareness and culture is supplanted by a self-consciously human order sustaining itself through a rational science and morality. The idea of an indwelling holy spirit is simply a figure for the humanistic impulse so long as it remains only implicit in the individual. Once it becomes explicit, the idea of God as absolute spirit becomes a superfluity; for spirit can now only have the meaning

of the human spirit, that is, of the objective human enterprise in general.

In Strauss's scheme the fact of a division of persons in the Trinity betrays indeed an incompleteness in traditional Christian consciousness, one that is overcome in the simple insight that God and man are the same. This insight, Strauss believed, is the latent unifying thread in all religion and particularly in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity with its three correlative movements of divine love, incarnation and the procession of the spirit. These moments Strauss declared to be nothing more than stages in the development of a purely human self-awareness which, once become fully realized, as Strauss thought it had become in his time, relegated the belief in the triune God to the status of a superseded mythology, now superfluous and irrelevant. Strauss's monism means only to state this essentially ultra-atheistic position.

It is important again to distinguish the renewed interest in the principle of the God-man among Strauss's generation from the traditional Christology which it only superficially resembles. The idea of a divine humanity is not an extension of the paradigm of the Son in any case but a corruption of the concept of Spirit, its explicit secularization, in fact. Nor does this new humanity bear much resemblance to the Christian spiritual community, the church. It is indeed its inverse; it is the vision of a materially and culturally self-sufficing human order in which spirituality has only the meaning of a worldly human freedom through economic and technological organization. Strauss believed that in this inverted world the old disparity between spiritual and natural would no longer be meaningful: spirit and nature now appear as mere aspects of the human itself. The subject of Strauss's monism, the God-man, is thus simply the figure for spiritual life so far as it has been identified wholly with the everyday practical-material doings of ordinary human beings.

Accordingly the real purpose of the critical theology is to dispose of just those doctrines of traditional faith, chiefly the autonomy of God and the divinity of Christ, which stand as obstacles in the way of a radical naturalizing of the spirit through the divinizing of man. The first implies a participation of man in the divine scheme which is less than complete: God is represented as more than man. The second limits the divinity of man by fettering him with a fatal natural conditionedness: man is less than God. Strauss thus declares as equally repugnant both that God be conceived as anything less than fully incarnate in man, and that He should be thought incarnate only in some particular individual. When Strauss speaks of the incarnation as a central Christian truth he by no means has in mind the orthodox mystery in which

is affirmed at once the radical distinction as well as the radical co-presence of the divine and the human nature in Christ. On the contrary, he wishes to affirm the opposite: namely that it is in *man* that spirit and nature are one and the same, that there is nothing paradoxical about this unity, and that the notion of a separation between divine and human natures is only a confusion. Nothing could be more foreign to the earlier Christological thinking.

Strauss's parody on the spiritual life is the basis of that now quite conventional theological liberalism which thinks it has fully explained the great Christian mysteries in reducing them to nothing more than a counsel of simple fellow-feeling and humaneness. This conversion of Christianity into humanist activism, so far as it borrowed for its purpose the speculative vocabulary of Hegel, came to be known as "Young Hegelianism" — the term itself is Strauss's coinage. The movement had its more prominent, and perhaps more honest exponents in Feuerbach and Marx who gave humanism the political form in which it became the most influential ideology of the 20th century. But liberal theology had made it possible for the more tender-minded humanists of the new secular city to remain in some sense religious without the embarrassment of serious belief in God. Theology has accordingly ceased to exist as the speculative reflection on a covenant between God and man revealed and fixed in faith. It now reduces to a figurative language, one of many, in which the relation of individuals to their human world may be described. The city of God has been replaced by a society of wholly liberated individuals who no longer feel constrained by a discipline of the spiritual kingdom but have fixed their sights on the human paradise.

Humanistic theology feels no scepticism or distain with respect to religion for it thinks it has fully incorporated the religious mentality and subordinated it to itself. What theology becomes with Strauss is a discipline devoted to the overcoming of religion through religion, and this it achieves by first cultivating the view of religion as mythology and then translating its spiritual "symbols" into the ordinary language of finite human affairs. The changing contexts and values of contemporary life thus become the measure according to which the symbols are currently to be understood and theology generally becomes handmaid to humanistic ideology.¹³

13. The spirit of "liturgical reform", which has succeeded in undermining and confusing traditional doctrine in most contemporary Christian confessions, is an example. It can argue honestly it does not wish to refute traditional doctrine directly or replace it with some other; it only insists that doctrine should be subordinated to, indeed spring from, particular contexts of worship and the needs of particular worshippers, whatever they may be. This is nonetheless a profoundly humanistic position in that

It then becomes a matter of fundamental ambiguity, an ambiguity Strauss himself could never resolve,¹⁴ how to sustain a religion which has the overthrow of religion as its central theme. Strauss himself, true to his own assumptions, remained with the hypocritical position that in the new society religion will be a valuable tool for educating the masses into the humanist outlook, as when one says religion and churchgoing, though ultimately to be grown out of, are good for the young and the ignorant.

In this sense, Strauss's liberal Christianity is a temporizing humanism which will not go all the way to eradicate religion and its spirit-world outright. Strauss wrote off Bauer's radical atheism as so much extremist ranting, and disapproved too of Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* which, six years later, crystallized and extended his own views. Strauss refused to be associated with the overthrow of the church just as he rejected, as a member of the National Assembly, talk of the overthrow of the traditional state. He believed in a smooth transition from religion to "culture"; in the new humanist order religion was, like the monarchy, to be tamed, subordinated, but not abolished. He remained inconsistently committed to the preservation of traditional institutions and values within a new ethos devoted to human self-redemption through science, technology and political populism, an attitude constitutive of the new *Kultur* which became all the rage in Bismarckian Germany. Though his views are for the most part diametrically opposed to Hegel's, Strauss was considered popularly to be the most prominent "hegelian" of his time so that these same attitudes became the source of the long-standing but quite mistaken and anachronistic view which has associated Hegelian philosophy with Prussianism.

Strauss himself fell more and more into the role of public spokesman for this new humanist-technocratic culture as it spread and took root. In *The Old and the New Faith* written later in life he extols, with the satisfaction of one who felt his generation had successfully made the transition from one to the other, the superiority of the new secular German culture over the earlier Christian world-view.¹⁵ He marvels at how church life with its prayers

it subordinates the truth of religion itself to the contingencies of human preference and circumstance.

14. *Life of Jesus*, p. 152.

15. Nietzsche's essay "David Strauss" (*Thoughts out of Season*, Pt. I, tr. A. Ludovici, New York, 1964), which represents him as the most arch of arch-philistines at a time when Strauss's popularity as chief prophet of German *Kultur* was at its height, is one of the most vicious early examples of the kind of railing against "humanism" and its vulgarities which has become, in one form or another, the *sine qua non* of existential literature from Kierkegaard to Camus.

and sacrifices has been replaced with the new world of universities, opera houses, newspapers, museums and laboratories; how public lectures and newspaper discussions of political events, the newest scientific or technological marvel or the latest book, have replaced Christian education. The new heavenly kingdom which Strauss promoted was, in short, nothing other than the budding democratic technocracy which now, a hundred years later, has become the routine fact of contemporary life.

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For Kierkegaard no less than for humanist theologians, reality is self-consciousness and God is spoken of only by the way. His primary concern was again to redefine the form and content of religious experience in wholly human terms: specifically, as the experience in which individuals attain to absolute self-awareness. Strauss conceived this ultimate relation to self to be one in which particular individuals discover the true meaning of their existence to lie in the humanity each shares with all others, which insight demands the subordination of one's subjective interests to the one true, objective and universal Cause, namely, the welfare and progress of humanity. Redemption on these terms is liberation from one's natural-historic finiteness, accomplished when respect for and devotion to the cause of humanity and human rights becomes the ruling spirit working in every individual's heart and mind.

It is just this natural-historical conditionedness that Kierkegaard regards as the central fact of human self-consciousness. To seek to sublimate it, as would Strauss, is to deny the individual his very reality. The discipline of religion, understood as absolute self-consciousness, is precisely to keep before the individual this fact of the utter particularity of his existence, to force him to affirm it and nothing more as his authentic reality. For this is freedom: to oppose every temptation to universalize one's existence, thereby to absorb it into some abstract selfhood — "humanity", "human nature" or whatever. For Kierkegaard the whole thrust of theology should accordingly be to stress the sense of being just the particular individual one is, to hold fast to this radical subjectivity of existence. For only in so doing does the individual afford genuine testimony to what is given in the immediacy of self-consciousness. Failing to recognize his own concrete uniqueness as primary, the individual falls into an inauthentic self-consciousness, breaking through his proper limits and defining himself according to extraneous properties which belong, not to just this human being, but, as with Strauss, to some abstract human-being-in-general.

"The individual as particular" says Kierkegaard, "is higher than

the universal", and as such, "stands in an absolute relation to the absolute". That is, the individual's relation to divinity — absoluteness — is not mediated through anything independent of his own immediate self-consciousness; it is not mediated through the idea of humanity, for example. This "existential" relation to the absolute must therefore be direct, personal, particular; a relation which is one with the finite consciousness of existence itself. This subjective identity of finite existence and absolute being in self-consciousness is not rational, nor can it be, for rationality precisely implies mediation through something else. "This position cannot be mediated, for all mediation comes about precisely by virtue of the universal; it is and remains to all eternity a paradox inaccessible to thought".¹⁶

It is as a knowing spirit that a subject thinks and affirms universals; but the knowing spirit is, nonetheless, always and inevitably an existing individual. Hence while all objective truth, truth as "known" or rational, appeals to mediating universals posited as extraneous to the finite subject, these still have no status apart from the individual's conditioned self-relation. It is just this purely personal self-consciousness conditioned by time, place and circumstance that Strauss declares to be merely phenomenal; it has significance only within a higher consciousness of the objective human totality. But for Kierkegaard it is this conditionedness, not that totality, which is primordially given in self-consciousness. What individuality is, indeed, is just the negative reflection out of every objective, universal relation into the intensity of an absolute, unmediated self-relation — "subjectivity" in Kierkegaard's sense of the word. The authentic individual is one who refers everything whatever to his own determinate existence-for-self and holds fast to this radically conditioned subjectivity as the absolute truth. The religious relation to God is simply the paradigm of this self-relation: the finite as at once absolute subjectivity.

From this standpoint it follows that the notion of objective universal truth as such, must be viewed as in principle spurious. Systems of science, logic, theology and metaphysics must accordingly be treated as mere schemes, at best, proposed by particular authors. Where they are regarded as more than that, as having meaning independent of the finite perspective of some existing individual, they constitute the very perversion of truth. For where the subject is inevitably finite, there can never be any question of the independence or transcendence of what exists for him; everything is necessarily his own and relative to him. Whatever is

16. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Brell, Princeton 1946, p. 130.

judged objective, to be "really there", must accordingly be viewed ultimately as a function of the individual's own "being-there", his own immediate self-feeling. "Truth is subjectivity" and nothing else is truth. What distinguishes the absolute truth of the religious self-consciousness from other forms — say, aesthetic or intellectual — is only a matter of the explicitness or intensity of subjective self-feeling. Faith itself Kierkegaard thus described as the "feeling of the infinite in pure inwardness".

All Kierkegaard's discussions have to do with forms and stages of this "inwardness" of self-feeling which is for him truth. The ancient mystery as to how a finite subject could ever know anything independent of himself, an objective truth, he addresses initially as the problem of "Socratic uncertainty". This uncertainty is, in his view, the driving motive behind the speculative mentality. Confronted by the uncertainty that clings to things so far as they are given in naive experience, "the subjective reflection . . . turns inwardly to the subject and desires in this intensification of inwardness to realize the truth".¹⁷ In this Socratic turning within, says Kierkegaard, there is at least the tacit recognition that subjectivity is truth, in the negative sense that the conditionedness of individual consciousness limits in principle the access to, if not the theoretical possibility of, objective truth. The typical response of speculative consciousness to this sceptical barrier, however, is to seek to overcome it in the ideal of a trans-empirical truth, access to which is mediated by the methodical intellectual purgation of doubt concerning the "sensible world". This appeal to a second-order, conceptual truth — "metaphysics" — must thus incorporate in it a formula for sublimating the world of naive experience: "the conceptual determination of the truth must include an expression for the antithesis to [empirical] objectivity".¹⁸

"Rational" self-consciousness thus represents a half-way house between naive, aesthetical objectivism and authentic, or "religious" self-consciousness. Its impetus is the "objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation process of inwardness", and implicit in it is the recognition that "when subjectivity, inwardness is the truth, truth becomes objectively a paradox; and the fact that truth is objectively a paradox shows in its turn that subjectivity is truth".¹⁹ This standpoint is incomplete, however, in that it simply replaces the ideal of objective truth with a new ideal: universal or "eternal" truth. Such truth is again affirmed to be independent of subjectivity in a more subtle sense in that it is mediated by logical

17. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, tr. Swenson/Lowrie, Princeton, 1968, p. 175.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

and moral categories which, in the process of sublimating scepticism, appear to sublimate the subjective too. But this step, it turns out, achieves not an alleviation of the original Socratic uncertainty but its transmutation into a deeper, more radical paradox.

The notion of eternal truth presupposes both the suspension of uncertainty and the positing of a supra-objective truth which exists for, not an aesthetic, but an abstract subjectivity — “pure thought”. As Kant says of the noumenon, there is no contradiction in thinking the idea of eternal truth; it is the representation of it as real, as a metaphysical system of essences underlying the contingencies of the objective fact-world, that is contradictory. Affirmed by some actually existing individual as “true”, any such mere thought-system becomes patently paradoxical. For to affirm something to be “eternally true” is to arrive at a claim through an “appropriation process”, a reflective mediation, and then straightway to deny that mediation and declare this claim to be “true in itself”. The Socratic thinker invents his universal categories and then directly disowns any part in the process, insisting their truth to be necessary and a priori.

This is the crux of Kierkegaard’s argument: “The paradox emerges when eternal truths and existence are placed in juxtaposition with one another. If it was paradoxical to posit eternal truths in relation to an existing individual”, that is, in general, “it is now absolutely paradoxical to posit it in relation to such an individual. . . .”, that is, to one who, knowing himself as their finite author, finds himself now in radical self-contradiction.²⁰ If objective uncertainty impels the Socratic individual to become a subject-in-general, a thinker, the encounter with the paradox of the eternal must impel the existential individual to become radically subjective; in Kierkegaard’s terms, “religious”. For the paradox represented by the presence for a finite consciousness of an infinite truth which must yet totally escape it — the paradox developed to its highest form in theology and speculative philosophy — is an unbearable one. The source of an inconsolable grief and anxiety, it expresses the ultimate absurdity which human existence is. Much of life is nothing else but the flight from this paradox: the voluptuary from the eternal into life, the ascetic from life into the eternal.

But the absurdity of self-conscious life is not so readily set aside. There is in fact no saving mediation, no escape through thought, no return to simple satisfactions: “the backdoor of recollection is forever closed”.²¹ Once the paradox of an absolute freedom imprisoned in a conditioned existence has become explicit there is

20. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

nothing for the individual but to take hold of the paradox; to appropriate it himself in a deeper and more radical turning within, an existential leap that must be without motive or necessity: a pure "choice". In this leap of faith the individual subordinates the relation to the eternal to himself, thus affirming subjectively an identity which is, in objective terms, recognized as absurd. This is the great "task" which Christianity has always set before the individual in Kierkegaard's view: to respond to the absolute paradox of existence, not by seeking aesthetically to avoid or intellectually to sublimate it, but by "becoming subjective" in the most radical way, taking the cross of the absolute paradox upon himself.

As flight from the paradox of existence corrupts human psychology in a thousand subterranean ways, it is the role of religion to challenge the individual to authentic existence by confronting him with that paradox in a most compelling way, thus closing every door of escape and requiring of him the sole option of the inward leap of faith. This religion achieves by positing absurdity in God himself, by representing the infinite and eternal as itself the extremest contradiction, namely in the proposition: "the eternal is comprehended in the temporal". The Christian account presents this absolute paradox in the most exquisite way: "the absurd is that the eternal truth has come into being in time, that God has come into being, has been born, has grown up . . . quite indistinguishable from other individuals."²²

Christianity has declared itself to be the eternal essential truth which has come into being in time. It has proclaimed itself as the paradox, and has required of the individual the inwardness of faith in relation to that which stamps itself as an offense to the Jews and a folly to the Greeks — and an absurdity to the understanding. It is impossible more strongly to express the fact that subjectivity is truth and that objectivity is repellent, repellent even by virtue of its absurdity.²³

What is significant for Kierkegaard is thus not the content of this great Christian mystery as such, but simply its efficacy in representing the objective as repellent and driving the individual into himself; for "truth is subjectivity", it is not divinity itself. It is not God, but the God-relation that matters, the "how" of faith, not the "what"; for "the mode of apprehension of the truth is precisely the truth"²⁴ and "the subjective acceptance is precisely the decisive factor; and an objective acceptance of Christianity is paganism or thoughtlessness". Indeed,

22. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

Christianity protests every form of objectivity; it desires that the subject should be infinitely concerned about himself. It is subjectivity that Christianity is concerned with and it is only in subjectivity that its truth exists, if it exists at all; objectively Christianity has no existence.²⁵

There is no question here of the identity of man with God or of God as immanent in human self-consciousness. Kierkegaard's view of the Christian God-man is not that it expresses a unity at all, but on the contrary an absolute absurdity without any possibility of making objective or logical sense. That God and man are juxtaposed in the Christ-idea is not intended to declare the opposition surmounted, rather the reverse; it endows the juxtaposition of human and divine with the character of an infinitely "repellent" paradox which cannot in principle be objectively mediated. That God was born, grew up, etc. is a proposition that can possess no meaning whatsoever, and that is just its point: its significance lies precisely in its utter unintelligibility,²⁶ the effect of which is to discipline the believer into refusing all universal explanations and leave him no option but to "hold fast" absolutely, in "infinite passion", within the limits of his finite particularity. The significance of the Christian revelation is thus said to lie entirely in its negative meaning; it renders impossible any transgression beyond the bounds of the individual's finite self-consciousness, disallowing credence to any reality beyond that. Kierkegaard's theology is thus both atheistic and not atheistic, in the sense it is a religion which goes beyond God in assimilating divinity to a moment of individual subjectivity.

The God-man figure is not only the ultimate objective absurdity which impels the radical turning within; it is also the paradigm of the religious relation itself. The image of God which Christianity holds before the believer is an individual who exists as the purest negation of his identity with divinity. Jesus Christ is for Kierkegaard no less than for Strauss a mere archetype; in this case the archetype of "the individual as particular" who is "higher than the universal"; who holds fast in inwardness against the universal and in so doing stands in "absolute relation to the absolute". That Jesus is God in time is for him the *sine qua non* of Christianity: "The object of faith is the reality of the God-man in the

25. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

26. This existential notion of the content of faith as "absurd" has no relation to the grounds upon which traditional theology maintained that revealed Christian truth must be regarded as "mystery". Its intent was to defend the sublimity of divine truth against the assimilation to categories of a finite human reason. But if anything, the existential paradox is meant to suggest the reverse: that it is the finite human self-consciousness itself that is divine.

sense of his existence; but his existence involves first and foremost particularity. . . ." God does not remain God in his incarnation; He does not exist *in* a particular being; he *is* this particular being in whom pure Godhood is annihilated. Without that emphasis Kierkegaard's paradox is not an existential paradox. In Jesus there is posited something quite other than the identification of man with the divine; on the contrary, he is the living, breathing absurdity, the paradox that God is actually this finite human person. The eternal-infinite has thus no positive meaning at all in itself: it has meaning only in relation to the existing individual's finite consciousness of self; it is the moment of negativity or "freedom" paradoxically juxtaposed with his finite subjectivity.

What is meant by Christian faith, according to Kierkegaard, is the subjective appropriation of this absurdity. The priority of faith over reason here means more than simply that we are unable to grasp the mystery of the God-made-man: it means we do indeed comprehend it, but as a truth incomprehensible in itself. In this existential principle of the absolute as in itself absurd there is preempted any possibility of even speculating about a truth beyond the paradox of finite human existence. Christianity is just the religion, for Kierkegaard, which explicitly denies all appeal to its own rationality. "Christianity is not a doctrine, but the fact that God existed. . . . Every misunderstanding of Christianity may be recognized by its transforming it into a doctrine, transferring it to the sphere of the intellectual."²⁷ Clearly this is a view completely at odds with Strauss's argument that it is precisely the error of treating the incarnation as a fact, rather than as an idea, that has always vitiated Christianity's saving truth. But in Kierkegaard's view, one's ephemeral personal existence is the basic fact of self-consciousness and the whole point is to accord the Christian revelation to this human fact, and not the other way about. What is most significant in the Christ of religious belief for Kierkegaard is precisely the fact of his finite human existence, not his divinity, or more exactly that the latter is incorporated in the former. Jesus as God in time is thus the figure for an absolute freedom that is to belong nonetheless to the finitely existing, particular individual.

Thus the object of true religion is not the worship of God but the attainment to "the religious": a mode of self-consciousness itself in which one exists absolutely for oneself even in one's finite individuality. The individual exists authentically in affirming this contradictory status and such affirmation is simply "faith". In existential faith the individual knows there can be nothing alien to his pure relation to self; for "objectivity" — other-being utterly

27. *Postscript*, p. 290.

independent of subjectivity — is now taken up into an otherness that belongs to self-consciousness itself. All conditionedness thus becomes a function of a conditionedness that is the finite subject's own; the subject takes personal responsibility, as it were, for finiteness itself, an absolute responsibility borne in absolute freedom. All independent objectivity — "the world" as such — is then present for him as in principle annihilated; it can have no meaning independent of his own inner freedom which sustains itself negatively as against it. The world can pose no alien or extraneous limit for the reason it comes to be seen as nothing more than a "worldliness" that belongs to self-consciousness itself, its own inherent moment of "otherness".

Christianity, as the task or discipline of "becoming subjective", enables the suspension of the extreme opposition of freedom and finitude and the affirmation of a selfhood that in some sense has everything in it. For Kierkegaard, the subjective "choice" of identity-in-paradox is the sole authentic mode of human being and it is what the traditional figure of Christ the God-man symbolizes: God as a particular individuality, the eternal as personal existence. The existential self-consciousness, like Strauss's humanity, is thus a kind of parody on the Christian idea of the spirit. With Kierkegaard spirituality means consciousness of one's literal individuality concentrated in the form of radical self-feeling; the "passion of inwardness". The more intense the passion, the more "spiritual", the more "religious". Absolute spirit becomes simply absolute self-feeling. Existential religiosity evokes the sense of the utter idiosyncrasy of personal existence, declares this to be the sole authentic consciousness, and confers upon this feeling the title of spirituality.

That the infinite is self-feeling is, of course, the theme of romanticism, the identification of reality with selfhood generally. To be "filled with passionate intensity", in Yeats' phrase, becomes a commonplace surrogate for spirituality in 19th century life, as evidenced in the pages of those who captured the temperament of the age in fictional characterization: Dickens, Balzac, Dostoyevsky. With regard to romanticist theology of his own time, Hegel refers to the "subjective feelings and virtuosities" to which that science had fallen victim. The objective substance of Christianity had already begun to dissolve, he said, into an impulsive and contentless religiosity wherein inward feeling as such and its expression, irrespective of objective meaning, assumed the role of faith. The same mood persists in contemporary culture in the great emphasis that still is laid upon the sanctity of feeling and emotion and in the demand imposed on religion that it first of all demonstrate its ability to satisfy the needs of subjectivity.

Kierkegaard's essays and tracts are for the most part satires on the humanist folly of supposing there could be found in subjective self-consciousness any grounds for an objectively absolute perspective on existence. Through endless caricature he represents the whole of the theological-philosophical tradition as founded upon such an impossible task, and brings it into ridicule. He is among the first to attempt a reduction of theology to psychology, a tradition brilliantly continued by Nietzsche and generalized thereafter in psychoanalytical and related theories which replaced the spiritual interpretation of life with explanations based upon some quasi-natural dialectic within the human psyche. A consequence of this substitution has been the now commonplace judgement, which Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were again among the first to make, that even religion itself, so far as it is a serious belief in transcendent divinity, is a spurious consciousness, even a form of "sickness".

Kierkegaard's form of the argument might appear superficially to belong to the long tradition of theological irrationalism that stretches from Tertullian to pietistic protestantism. But in its radical alteration of the meaning of religion itself, it rather steps outside the Christian tradition as such. For, like Strauss, Kierkegaard's existential position exploits one of Christianity's central doctrines, God-made-man, not with a view to developing its content on its own terms, but merely as a device to represent a radical individual freedom which in principle thrusts the whole traditional belief in God from it. If Strauss's theology is in fact thinly veiled anthropolatry — a veil Feuerbach will tear away — so Kierkegaard's is an apotheosis of the subjective individual in which the older Christian terminology of God, faith, redemption and the rest are brought into play only as a kind of allegory. Later existentialism indeed, like later humanism, will largely judge such an appeal to theological language not only superfluous but inconsistent.

Kierkegaard's extreme individualism is akin to the romantic worship of everything idiosyncratic, arcane and exceptional. It is related to the popular theosophical tendency, common in the art and poetry of the 19th century and still today, which seeks the spiritual in the recesses of the individual's subconscious nature-life and which came to prefer the dictatorship of the political genius to liberalism's rule of the people. The principle of the state, as of culture, it finds rooted in some particularity: in some national, racial, or traditional distinctiveness which in the end comes down to the unconditional right of the individual to whatever is uniquely "his own", as Stirner put it. Kierkegaard provided the spirit of radical, atheistic individualism, which had its birth in his time, with its ap-

propriate theological expression. But his ultra-protestant pseudo-theological language is in fact the vehicle of a claim that goes quite beyond religion and theology altogether, for the subject of his famous discourses is not, as might appear, divinity at all, but the self-feeling absolute individual who excludes from his own the possibility of all other being and who would stand, in this radical subjectivity, "in absolute relation to the absolute".

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The arguments of Strauss and Kierkegaard clearly display the ambiguity inherent in revolutionary theology. Their accounts of the truth allegedly concealed in traditional Christian doctrine, and in the speculative philosophy springing from it, are not merely various; they are contradictory. Strauss says the secret of Christianity is that objectively God and the human are identical, as becomes clear to the liberated self-consciousness; Kierkegaard says faith is rooted in the sense of the utter intractable exclusivity of these. Strauss sees salvation through the conquest of the unique individual through what is universal in him; Kierkegaard the reverse. The new humanism rather presses Christian terminology into the service of a wholly secular vision of a practical-material order of human life attained and sustained through collective political, economic, scientific and technological activity. The new existentialism exploits the same language to effect a return to an anti-worldly immediacy of individual conscience which annihilates in itself the possibility of any objective mediation of the human condition, whether pragmatic or intellectual.

These twin arguments emerge as the principal motifs of 19th and 20th century European intellectual culture and are anything but indifferent to one another; indeed they are thoroughly symbiotic. The whole force of each relies entirely on its capacity to refute its opposite number; they possess an essential mutual contrariety which they conceal by the common prejudice that their argument is really with "tradition" and not with each other. Initially this attack upon tradition (Strauss: "orthodoxy"; Kierkegaard: "Christendom") was defined in relation to Hegelian philosophy. Strauss spoke of himself as having perfected a truth imperfectly realized in the speculative philosophy; Kierkegaard as preserving an aboriginal truth thoroughly corrupted by it. But in reality it is not to Hegel, but to each other, that each of these new dogmatisms stand opposed and indeed both humanism and existentialism may be equally described as Hegelian heresies each of which attempts to justify as against the other its own one-sided distortions of what

the principle of Hegelian philosophy is.²⁸

This debate in some sense carries forward and renews the earlier one between enlightenment humanism and Christian faith which in turn is taken up among German protestant theologians in the form of a debate between "rationalism" and "orthodoxy". Enlightenment humanism had the weakness that its central concepts of man and freedom, as abstract universals of pure reason, could not comprehend or tolerate the element of particular individuality. Politically this abstractness expressed itself in the murderous fanaticism of the French Revolution.²⁹ Enlightenment thus soon found itself opposed by a reactionary fideism which reaffirmed the subjective side in the name of particular self-consciousness, laying claim to a new kind of revelation in the absolute inwardness of individual moral conscience and sentiment. The impact of Hegel — though Hegel's lectures are full of references to his own wish to be dissociated from it — was to reinforce this whole argument and inspire the attempt to reconstruct both one-sided arguments from a "higher standpoint". For Hegel himself what really is indicated is a need altogether to get beyond the standpoint that is really common to both and from which their mutually contradictory positions stem, namely the notion absolute truth is directly revealed in and to human consciousness and self-consciousness as such. This he accomplishes in the *Phenomenology* which abrogates the "human" standpoint altogether and awakens to the absolute spirit and its idea. But for mainstream thought, as is still the case, the individual remains the focus of religious and speculative thinking and the fresh attempts to attain to a higher, more comprehensive standpoint after Hegel is still carried on within the limits of the category of the human. For the enlightenment tradition, from which comes Strauss and his like, the attempt was to rework the concept of universal humanity in a way that could claim to comprehend subjective individuality within it; for the orthodoxy which bred Kierkegaard the aim was rather so to radicalize partic-

28. A vast literature exists, but almost all of it views the Hegelian philosophy from within one or other of these "heresies". The majority write from a Marxian perspective, though many, such as Heidegger, Löwith etc. from a Nietzschean. Both hold in common the mistaken notion that their own argument is chiefly with Hegel, and through him with the philosophical tradition, thereby concealing the extremely one-sided and dogmatic nature of their own positions, positions which in fact arise and continued to be sustained only through the energy of their mutual opposition; as was the case with the epicureanism and stoicism of old. To get at the real dialectical dimensions of post-Hegelian thought, it is first necessary to become free of both the existential and the socialist ideologies.

29. The reference is to Hegel's remarkable analysis in "Absolute Freedom and Terror", *Phenomenology of Spirit*, VI.B.iii.

ular self-feeling as to claim that all possible reference to objectivity was somehow contained and negated in it.

This is how the theological stand-off appeared to Schleiermacher's progeny. It was Strauss's view that the Jesus of history was the Jewish stumbling-block that orthodoxy had set in the way of reconciling the human and the divine; this obstacle a new Christian humanism would surmount. So far as individuals could learn to deny in themselves any distinction between their own personal interest and the cause of humanity in general, so far the division between faith and reason, God and man, would finally become irrelevant. Kierkegaard's ultra-fideism, on the other hand, raises the opposite banner. Christian faith must appear as nonsense to Greeks, as to all rationalism, because it reveals the absurdity of any idea of an objective human redemption, affirming instead the exclusive requirement of a radical subjective commitment as sole means of salvation. The finiteness of subjective life is an ineradicable limit to which the relation to the divine must nonetheless be joined.

The point of both accounts is that they co-opt Christian language in defense of opposing interpretations of the revolutionary principle; they alike hold that religion and all its various moments, including even the moment of divinity itself, has its meaning and origin nowhere else than in the witness individuals bear to their own immediate, this-worldly existence. Any and all reference to other sources of revelation (including, significantly, Scripture or history themselves) or to a truth transcendent to the immediacy of individual consciousness, is to be abandoned once and for all. For some, Hegel is thought to be the discoverer and prophet of this new principle; for others he is thought to be its arch-enemy. Bauer, Hegel's student and editor of his lectures on religion, was the first to insist that the real secret of Hegel lay in his unconfessed atheism; that what his doctrine of absolute spirit meant to show is that individual self-consciousness is the absolute itself. Religion, he surmised, but imperfectly represents what the radically liberated self-consciousness will know as a simple brute fact: that in his pure being-for-self, in his absolute self-consciousness, he *is* the divine, the universal, infinite being.

Strauss more or less follows Bauer's point of view; it is only necessary to liberate this implicit truth from Hegel's philosophy. Indeed what comes subsequently to be meant by "hegelianism" is generally this humanist-atheistic interpretation of it. It is just this position also which Kierkegaard specifically attacks, for, from the standpoint of consciousness and self-consciousness it must just as readily be insisted that what the individual directly and vividly knows is the radical finiteness of his existence and the gulf which

separates him objectively from infinitude. From this perspective, therefore, the task rather appears to be one of rescuing the kernel of a religious truth, the absolute transcendence of the divine to the human, from the temptation to rationalize it.

It must be said that Hegel himself held neither position. Though their content is in a sense the same — the Christian Trinity is the Idea of speculative philosophy — religion and philosophy nonetheless differ in form, a difference which is irreducible. Strauss early declared his insight regarding Hegel to be that what the latter says about content also applies to the form; religion is simply philosophy in mythic guise, as God, its content, is simply the symbol for idea of humanity. Therefore also form and content are identical: the God-consciousness of man is simply man's self-consciousness as divine.³⁰ It is against just these positions that Kierkegaard energetically wages war; religion and philosophy must be radically distinguished both in form and in content. To the abyss separating man from God there corresponds a fundamental incapacity of reason to comprehend existence, thus of philosophy to grasp religious truth. By no means does this suggest a return on Kierkegaard's part to the traditional belief in the real transcendence of God to man; his concern is not with God as such, but as much as Strauss with the "God-consciousness" of the individual. He simply wants to put it to a very different use, namely to defend the radical uniqueness and contingency of the existential self-consciousness against the systemizing objectifications of philosophy.³¹

The assumption in both cases is that the question of content, the relation of human to divine, is the same as the question of form, the relation of philosophy to religion. The burden of Strauss's "improvement" on Hegel is that if the philosophical consciousness (*Vernunft*) is higher than the religious (*Vorstellung*), as it appears Hegel would imply, then the content too must be elevated to its standpoint: be "demythologized". In the para-religion of

30. Strauss's reputation as an "hegelian" was largely self-advertised. He never encountered Hegel's teachings directly, largely ignored his systematic philosophy proper, and is author of the familiar left-hegelian prejudice which takes the argument of the *Phenomenology* to represent Hegel's whole position. See W. J. Brazill, *The Young Hegelians*, New Haven, 1970, c. 1-3.

31. Kierkegaard's actual acquaintance with Hegel's philosophy was also negligible, as has been clearly made out (N. Thulstrup, *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel*, Princeton, 1980). His attacks, so far as they were not aimed at mere caricatures of his own devising, were directed against the outlook of Danish theological hegelianism, in short, against Straussian bishops. Virtually nowhere is there evidence he understood what *Hegel* meant by "system".

the new humanism, the reconciliation of reason with faith is one piece with the vision of a completed humanity no longer in need of divinities. The religious life as such implies a separation of man from this his divine completeness — his “freedom”; it must thus be “*aufgehoben*”, overcome, and liberal theology is just this revolution. Contrariwise, as existential theology rather insists that it is the impassable gulf separating human and divine that is the primitive testimony of objective consciousness, so there can be no conceivable accommodation of faith to reason and thus also no revolutionary human paradise. What is rather necessary to freedom is the complete negation of all objective ideals and rational viewpoints as such, as only in doing so can the particular individual appropriate his radically subjective reality and stand “in absolute relation to the absolute”. In the reactionary ultra-religiosity of existential theology, God and faith have the meaning only of affirming the nothingness of the possibility of an objective spiritual order, seen as fundamentally compromising a radical subjective freedom.

For Hegel’s part, religion and philosophy are both the same and different. When he says they, as art also, share a common content but a different form, he does not, however, mean this literally, as if the content expressed in the one form could just as well be expressed in the other. To be sure it is the one spiritual life animating all, and the same spiritual actuality which forms their common content. In art it is this actuality which is clothed in natural sensibilities of sound, colour and shape; the same in religion revealing itself objectively as the supremely self-given substance; in philosophy the same is appropriated by thinking subjectivity in the form of truth, the absolute idea.

But that the same is given in these differing forms is not, however, an indifferent matter, as if philosophy were only another form of literature or religion just “philosophy in pictures”. Nor are the differences exclusive for Hegel, as if only one or the other, philosophy or religion, represented spiritual freedom fully and authentically, the other somehow concealing it.³² It is not to be supposed that spiritual consciousness in its logical form, philosophy, can arise and live a life of its own independent of religious witness, as the extremity of enlightenment would have it. Without a presupposed *Vorstellung*; without the vision of truth as in some sense already there, “revealed”, and thus already completely sub-

32. The debate over this issue whether art, religion or philosophy provided the primary access to “truth” evoked the strongest passions in the 19th century. In these times when “absolute spirit” has been put completely to rout by the revolution, it evokes at best a patient academic smile.

stantial, thought lapses into an endlessness of reflexivity which can begin or end nowhere — Kierkegaard is certainly right in his vivid criticisms of rationalism on this score. But neither does religious faith owe nothing to the discipline of reason, nor can it successfully eschew it without falling into superstitious irrationalism. For where, as in extreme fideism, the divine mysteries are represented as in principle irrational and unintelligible, God in Himself cannot be known to be wise, just and providential, and faith becomes nothing more than an assent to the unspeakable, the capricious and the absurd.

What his critics represent as a fundamental want in his account of the relation between religion to thought — their unity-in-difference which Strauss sees as an imperfect identification and Kierkegaard as an imperfect separation — is for Hegel himself the very essence of that relation: that the same truth is apprehended differently is essential as much to content as to form. For in Hegel's much stricter Christian view, God is neither absolute identity nor absolute difference, but a Trinity which, as such, reconciles unity and duality in Himself. The forms in which the divine is known must and do, accordingly, also reflect this reconciliation.³³ For Hegel, art, religion and philosophy may indeed represent distinctive modes in which the spirit exists for itself, but these distinctions themselves and the relation between them express nothing else but precisely the same moments which constitute the essence of the spiritual actuality itself, which forms their common object. It is thus inconceivable, in terms of the logic of Hegelian philosophy itself, that art, religion and thought could be interchangeable or reducible to one another. There are indeed few symptoms of a fundamental blindness to Hegel's meaning more telling than the failure to appreciate this its complete commitment to the Christian trinitarian *logos*.

Yet the standpoint of the revolutionary theology in its reduction of the meaning of spiritual life to finite terms does quite abandon this trinitarian principle upon which Hegel's account of religion wholly rests. For now the absolute content is not an infinite but a finite life, a human, not a spiritual existence. In this finite life the moments of identity and alienation, unity and difference, fall inevitably and irretrievably apart. The claim to completeness, to

33. That is, to the three persons of the Trinity correspond the three chief forms of the Hegelian idea, the idea as such (logic), nature, and spirit. The forms of "absolute knowledge", art, religion and philosophy, reflect this same division, i.e. a knowledge first in the medium of immediate sensuous nature, second in the form of objective, transcendent divinity and third as self-knowledge in the idea. These last are irreducible just as are the moments of the Trinity in Christian theology.

human freedom, is thus obliged to affirm one form at the expense of the other; to affirm dogmatically a blank humanistic identity which discounts as inessential the finite, divided character which also belongs to human life, or else to affirm this divided condition as essentially what human existence is, a condition in which one is nonetheless declared to be free.

Both the liberal and the existential co-option of Christian theology used the Hegelian philosophy as their primary foil. What it meant to supercede or to refute Hegel was to deny the whole category of the divine or spiritual life as such — what Hegel calls “absolute spirit” — and thus also those traditional disciplines, philosophy and religion, in which that life comes to light, is affirmed and is known. These disciplines were to be subordinated to the “higher standpoint” of the real or existential self-consciousness. The critique of Hegelian speculative theology, in both forms into which it immediately divided, thus really intended to be the overthrow also of the Christian religion itself, and through that in turn to repudiate the spiritual standpoint of religion and philosophy themselves, supplanting them with the new doctrines which were rather to declare and celebrate the absoluteness of the human. Strauss would effect this by radically misrepresenting the content of the Hegelian philosophy, Kierkegaard by misrepresenting its form and alleged intent.

In some ways, of course, Hegel’s language does somewhat lend itself to both existential and humanistic interpretations, for in it he quite explicitly stresses and develops, more than any before him, the meaning of the Christian spiritual idea in explicit relation to human freedom and history. Indeed Hegel speaks of human psychological and practical life itself as the realm of “finite spirit”. His psychology, or philosophy of “subjective spirit”, shows how the human species-nature, understood in terms of the spiritual form of freedom already latent in it, resolves itself into autonomous personality, the free individual. His ethics, or philosophy of “objective spirit”, makes this same principle of free personality the underlying principle of all human practical and ethical life. Yet in the manifold forms of psychological and practical life as such, according to Hegel, the principle of spiritual freedom, though everywhere manifest and presupposed, remains inexplicit and hypothetical, and it is only in art, religion and philosophy that the reality of freedom, the absolute priority of the spiritual life, is made an explicit theme and held secure as the infinite, universal truth.

For Strauss, Kierkegaard and their contemporaries, however, the spiritual world of art, religion and philosophy has collapsed; they would reconstitute it in purely human terms of a new and all-comprehensive theory of human nature, culture and history. The

world of finite spirit to which Hegel refers thus becomes for them absolute, the real world, the only reality there is. This is how the principle that man as such is free is now to be understood. The problem then becomes how one is to state and comprehend this principle of finite human freedom in absolute terms; what form this "new faith" is to take, given that the spiritual standpoint itself, and hence religion and philosophy as such — "absolute spirit" —, are known as repudiated in it. This requirement liberal theology seeks to satisfy by putting its finite-infinite of human history and practical culture in place of the traditional spiritual kingdom; the spirit thus becomes exclusively the human spirit, specifically human practical activity generally. The existential theology answers with a radical account of human subjectivity which wedges together in the individual self-consciousness both absolute freedom and natural psychological conditionedness, in spite of the obvious paradox entailed; freedom becomes a subjective immediacy, passing over easily into instinct.³⁴

The historical oddity that "hegelianism" became associated with the tradition stemming from Strauss in particular, and "anti-hegelianism" with the tradition inaugurated by Kierkegaard, obscures the all-important fact that Hegel himself already knew and had gone on record as thoroughly opposed to either of these distortions of Christian doctrine. Where Strauss says that "we place as the subject of the proposition that the Church assigns to Christ, instead of an individual, an idea"³⁵ Hegel declares that for Christian truth to have the certainty that distinguishes it from a mere abstract principle "the unity of divine and human nature must appear in a single man". And contrary to the view that this "single man" may simply be a figure for the individual-in-general, Hegel rather says: "This [unity] cannot remain simply the characteristic of an individual in general, for singularity in general is again something universal. . . . The unity in question must appear for others as a single, exclusive man."³⁶ Though this position would seem somewhat existential, his many critical remarks concerning Schleiermacher and the "theology of feeling" provide, on the other hand, ample testimony to Hegel's low opinion of religious subjectivism.

Hegel, in short, already knew something of the emerging tendencies — "the feet that are already at the door" — which would wish to reduce theology to mythology and revelation to feeling so

34. "Will-to power; which is what I call the instinct to freedom", says Nietzsche.

35. *Life of Jesus*, p. 895.

36. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Pt. III, tr. as *The Christian Religion*, ed. P. C. Hodgson, Scholars Press, 1979, p. 181.

as to make possible the supplanting of religion by the dogma of radical individual freedom. The notes for his lectures on the philosophy of religion conclude with a description of the very turn Strauss will take as also of the kind of reactionary faith which Kierkegaard will oppose to it. They are described as constituting the "decay" of the religious mode itself, the "passing away" of the spiritual community: a most telling prophesy, as it turns out, of the trends that have dominated theology over the next century and a half:

When one treats religious truth as historic, that spells an end to it. The speculative truth is no longer heard according to which the Gospel is preached to the poor . . . and according to which the teaching of love in infinite anguish, of a substantial bond to the world, is proclaimed. Instead of this, what is sought by the natural means of moralistic representation, with its claim for its "rights" and its ever-ready option, are enjoyment, love without anguish. . . . When everything has been thus satisfied in its finitude . . . and man inwardly empty of . . . the content of objective truth and its method, then only one thing remains certain: finitude turned in upon itself, arrogant barrenness and lack of content, the extremity of self-satisfied enlightenment. What the connection of this decay with the mode of religion itself is, at the point where the doctrines of religion have become images, mere factual data, has been shown. It is thinking as reflective activity, the impulse of understanding to . . . dissolve everything dialectically and lead it back to the subject, whether it be the empty abstraction of the universal [radical humanism] or the content reduced to feeling [radical fideism], that it makes the foundation.³⁷

Thus Hegel on the tendencies of his time.

Memorial University of Newfoundland

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 295-6.