THE NECESSITY AND NECESSARY OVERCOMING OF REVEALED RELIGION
IN HEGEL’S PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT

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This paper explores Hegel’s discussion of religion in the Phenomenology of Spirit in order to establish its critical role in both the work as a whole and for consciousness itself in its development toward absolute knowing. The specific problem, as raised by Hyppolite, is whether Hegel, by giving primacy to knowledge over faith and concept over religious representation, effectively reduces the significance of religion and “preserves religion only to negate its essential elements.” While religion is introduced to ultimately show its inadequacy from the standpoint of absolute knowing, it is established as necessary from the standpoint of morality. It is within morality that self-consciousness arrives at the universality of its truth, but it has yet to develop both the content of this truth for the self, and the appropriate mode of knowing this truth. This is what is offered by the faith in religion and its subsequent overcoming in self-knowledge. It is within revealed religion that the unity of the universal essence and the particular existence of humanity is first represented, but this content is not yet known to be an act of consciousness. Consequently, it is essential to demonstrate that although religious consciousness is necessarily overcome in the development of self-consciousness toward absolute knowing, religion is nevertheless necessary as the moment in which the truth of self-consciousness is first revealed. In order to account for the necessary role of the section on religion, a brief summary of the way in which the work would otherwise progress from the final stages of morality to absolute knowing is needed. In the conclusion to the section on morality what remains to be realized is the explicit self-conscious unity between the pure universal and the discrete individual. It must be learned that the antithesis between the two is itself the “continuity and identity” of the self. Therefore, what is attained by consciousness after its progression through the moral view of the world is the identity of the self, consisting in both the universality of duty and the particularity of the discrete individual.

What morality lacks is what religion is said to lack in the opening section of absolute knowing, that is, “[t]he Spirit of [morality] has not yet surmounted its consciousness as such … [I]ts actual self-consciousness is not the object of its consciousness…” Consciousness, in the culmination of its moral development, while having achieved certainty of self does not yet take this self-certainty as its object. Thus, absolute knowing is still needed to unite being with self, in order that, as Hyppolite puts it, “[b]eing thinks itself as self, and self thinks itself as being.” In the moral view of the world, the concept is still divided between the pure universal and the discrete individual though consciousness now knows these to be inherently in the same self. This unity of self has yet to

3 Ibid., 479.
4 Hyppolite, Genesis, 579.
become the object of consciousness and it is this step that must be taken in order for absolute knowing to be possible, where one knows one’s own knowledge outside of anything external and knows that what was previously external was made so by oneself. This stepping-stone between morality and absolute knowing is what the section on religion offers. What follows is the two-fold significance of the section. Firstly, what is required prior to absolute knowing is the external representation of the aforementioned unity. This representation is the way in which the truth of self-consciousness takes form in revealed religion. Secondly, prior to the section on religion there is no distinction between the truth attained in faith and the truth attained in knowledge. If one were to follow the Phenomenology to the point of absolute knowing without the section on religion, one may suppose that the end achieved by the development of consciousness is the explicit unity of being and self. However, the way in which this is ultimately attained might then be conceived as a matter of faith or a matter of knowledge, provided that the truth remains the same. The section on absolute knowing might be taken to speak of religion itself. As such, an analysis of revealed religion – where religious consciousness is most highly developed – is crucial to demonstrate both the truth of religious consciousness that is not yet explicit in morality, and the limitation of religious consciousness that can only be overcome by the truth of absolute knowing.

According to the section on religion, Spirit as consciousness “pictures itself to itself.” It uses representational thought to present an objective image of its own essence to itself. However, in this representation—what Miller translates as ‘picture-thinking’ [Vorstellung]—reality cannot be perfectly portrayed since it is presented within a specific shape. Accordingly, if Spirit is to be expressed itself, then the shape in which it is presented must be identical to Spirit itself. It must directly see itself in the shape in which it is manifest; the shape of its appearance must match what it truly is.

In order to clarify that the section on religion is not merely a summary of the stages of consciousness that have already been discussed, Hegel claims that the arrangement of the shapes of consciousness will now appear otherwise than they did within their own development. Within previous stages of consciousness, each stage formed a totality governed by its own particular principle. It was only within a particular comprehension of substance that substance existed at all. However, in religion this substance is manifested itself, which means that the now self-certain Spirit holds together all of these moments within itself and instills the “being-in-and-for-self which belongs to each moment,” rather than the principle of each moment imposing its own totality.

Hegel further differentiates between the way the stages are to be understood according to actual Spirit or according to religion: “[i]n actual Spirit, they are attributes of its substance, but in religion…they are only predicates of the Subject.” In other words, when the development of consciousness is understood from the perspective of Spirit as it moves toward self-knowledge, each moment of consciousness is an aspect of the truth of Spirit, for each moment reveals something essential to be preserved in the next stage. In religion, however, the Subject takes itself to be a particular manifestation of Spirit, and so each moment in consciousness is only understood as a truth for itself, rather than in itself. In accordance with this distinction, religion expresses Spirit only in a particular shape. Hence, the meaning of the development of Spirit changes if one is a philosopher who, qua absolute knowing, can know the unity of Spirit and its attributes, or if one is a religious believer

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5 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 412.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 414.
8 Ibid., 415.
who, qua picture-thinking, can know a particular manifestation of the essence of Spirit. However, it is peculiar that in the closing of this section prior to discussing particular manifestations of religion, Hegel states that it is in revealed religion that the unity of Substance and Subject is formed and conceived as such, that “[i]t has the shape of being-in-and-for-itself.” This claim appears unfounded when preceded by the statement that what religion knows is only predicates of subjectivity. Nevertheless, what follows is the assertion that Spirit does realize its “true shape” in religion, though the particular shape itself and the picture-thinking used to access it still must be overcome in order for the truth of the concept to come forth on its own, for it to be known absolutely without the mediation of representation, for actual Spirit to become equivalent to its concept.

We have now to explore the truth that is offered by revealed religion and in so doing reveal its limitation in contrast to absolute knowing. In the opening to “Revealed Religion” Hegel summarizes what was learned from the limitations of religion in the form of art, namely that Spirit is transformed from the Substance to Subject. That is, it is transformed into the subject perceiving its own essence by producing itself as an external shape. The result is the unity between concrete Spirit and its consciousness, between “consciousness of itself as its objective substance, and simple self-consciousness communing with itself.” Both sides are taken be equally essential and at the same time only moments, and therefore, the substantiality of the Subject does not reduce subjectivity to an inconsequential derivation of Substance, and the subjectivity of Substance does not reduce substantiality to a mere predicate of the Subject.

Hegel further summarizes the divide between self-consciousness and substance. Each encounters itself only through the other and it is in this way that “their true union has come into being.” However, at this point Spirit is only “imagined into existence” since it is not yet explicitly for self-consciousness. What results from Spirit’s being imagined into existence are the various subjective impositions on to Nature and history that we understand as the myths of early religions which do not advance consciousness any further until objective Spirit is known to have “intrinsic being” rather than existing as a product of “mere imagination.”

The way in which this development takes place is for self-consciousness to move from being reflected in the object it produces, to being given in the shape of self-consciousness itself. The object of art that had reflected self-consciousness is replaced by a self-conscious human being. There must arise the belief that “Spirit is immediately present as a self-conscious Being…” To the believer, this self-consciousness is not a matter of imagination because the form of being that the self-consciousness takes at this point is a physically present man. Consequently, the awareness of self-consciousness here occurs by the recognition of God within an existence. It is because this figure is present as the immediacy of a living being that one cannot understand it as imagined or produced by consciousness. Here, the embodiment of the divine has a direct shape as self-consciousness. As Hegel states, “Spirit is the knowledge of oneself in the externalization of oneself; the being that is the movement of retaining self-identity in its otherness.” It is because of the principle of self-identity that constitutes Spirit that an actual man can be taken as both human and divine, or conversely, it is because Spirit contains the human and the divine and their division, that it is self-identical.

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9 Ibid., 416.
10 Ibid., 453.
11 Ibid., 454.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 457.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 458.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 459.
18 Ibid.
Furthermore, this relation entails that the divine is revealed, as “what it is, is known.”

What is known here is that Spirit is a self-conscious Being, which means that the truth that Spirit is also the human being is no longer concealed. This is made possible because Spirit is also the object of consciousness. The object is now another Self, which is no longer alien. Spirit comes to know that another human being, like it, is divine. All other shapes that recognition of the divine take, such as “[t]he Good, the Righteous, the Holy, Creator of Heaven and Earth” are “predicates of the Subject” and therefore belong to a previous moment of consciousness where it is “withdraw[n] into thought.”

If it is these shapes that are taken as divine, then the Subject itself fails to be revealed since its own being is not connected to the divine. What occurs in revelation is the connection in the Self between the Subject and the pure universal of the divine.

Spirit is known as self-consciousness…

The divine nature is the same as the human, and it is this unity that is beheld.

This unity entails that the shape of consciousness is the same as self-consciousness itself; it consecrates the “unity of Being and Thought.” As a result of this unity of Being and Thought, God is the same in both speculative knowledge and revealed religion, namely, God is the thought or pure universality that is also simple Being, both of which are united in the Self. Hegel points to how critical this moment is for self-consciousness by stating that “[t]he hopes and expectations of the world up till now had pressed forward solely to this revelation, to behold what absolute Being is, and in it to find itself.”

Given the decisiveness of this moment, the question becomes, as posed by Hyppolite, “[i]f spirit has become self-knowledge as spirit, haven’t we reached the end point of the phenomenological development?”

Or another way of posing the problem, again borrowing Hyppolite’s phrasing, is why this “portrait of self … [is not] perfectly adequate and equivalent to what it claims to express.”

What has been established in the section on revealed religion is a way of understanding the unity of being and thought through the incarnation of the divine in an actual man. What this adds to the development of consciousness is its own objectification witnessed within its own concrete experience. This differs from the conclusion to the section on morality where what was attained was the unity between the manifestation of God as the pure universality of Spirit and discrete individuality within the self. However, this unity and certainty of self was not here externalized as an object of consciousness. This externalization is what is offered by revealed religion. It is Spirit’s final act of self-alienation before it returns to its truth. Therefore, it is not that one has an inadequate portrait of self that does not match what it claims to express, which, as Hyppolite puts it, “is susceptible to being transformed into religion.”

Rather, this self-portrait is finally adequate, and consequently, what is represented by revealed religion is the truth of self-consciousness and this truth is now an object of consciousness. With this in mind, the question then becomes, can revealed religion itself give rise to the unity between finite being and the infinite in each knower, or does it stop at the representation of this essence in another being?

In the first revelation of Spirit truly knowing itself, the locus of the unity of being and knowledge of Spirit is a single sensuous individual, and as such, this unity remains other to everyone else. As Hegel puts it, if Spirit is an individual self it cannot yet be the Self of

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 460.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 461.
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
everyone.28 Consequently, the truth of this particular shape has not yet arisen: its truth as the universality of the unifying concept that holds for all individuals. When the unity is known as a sensuous living individual, one remains an immediate consciousness rather than Spirit. This single living individual must die in order for the truth of the unity to apply to everyone, for all to recognize the essence within themselves in their recognition of the one individual. It is when this sensuous being passes out of existence that the “universal self-consciousness of the (religious) community”29 raises one’s immediate consciousness to that of Spirit. What follows is the gradual overcoming of the remaining limitations to this mode of relation.

The central limitation lies in the mode of thought that accesses the truth of the religious community, which is ‘picture-thinking’, an incomplete mediation.30 The truth of the representation is still mediated by the representation, though for the first time the “content is the true content.”31 The content of the representation is the truth of Spirit, its own self-knowledge as the unity between its knowledge of itself and its being. However, its truth is not yet comprehended for self-consciousness. In requiring the representation in order to know its own truth, self-consciousness is not yet independent, and thus not yet absolute. As Hyppolite puts it, “the community is indeed truth that knows itself, but it is not conscious of producing this truth.”32 What follows is the development of consciousness toward an actuality that is more unified with its concept so that it may become aware of its own generation of its truth. Until then the religious community is faced with the possibility of idolizing the individual representational figure and losing the truth of itself that the figure represents.

Within religion, picture-thinking remains the middle term that allows for the passage from pure substance or pure thought to its existence in individuality.33 If Spirit were to remain within its essence as pure thought it would only have the form of an abstraction, of “empty words.”34 It must become other than itself by positing itself in an individuality which can then know itself as both individual and universal. This process is what is represented by picture-thinking, but this kind of thinking produces its own contradictions because its content is informed by immediate consciousness and so it still relates to itself through something external.35 Additionally, because consciousness takes this pictorial representation to be an isolated entity rather than a passing moment in the movement of Spirit, it is capable of misunderstanding the truth of the representation and transforming the origin of the thought into something given by tradition rather than something produced out of its own essence.36 What remains is “only the purely external element in belief that is retained and as something therefore that is dead and cannot be known.”37 Thus, the belief is in something external to its own self-creation, in what is given by tradition rather than emerging from consciousness itself.

It is the inability to conceive of self-creation that gives rise to the story of creation as something external to self-consciousness. Picture-thinking portrays the emergence of Spirit as an insertion into existence; “[t]his ’creating’ is picture-thinking’s word for the Notion itself in its absolute movement…”38 Picture-thinking conceives of creation as the creation of a world since in the positing of essence in immediate being, essence appears to become immediacy and is therefore taken as

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29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 463.
31 Ibid.
32 Hyppolite, *Genesis*, 569.
34 Ibid., 465.
35 Ibid., 466.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 467.
passive, as what exists without Self.\textsuperscript{39} However, the actualization of the essence of Spirit does not only take this passively objective form. It is also the presence of Self in the world, for it is the Self that distinguishes between its own being and that of the world. In terms of the Biblical story of Genesis, Adam is at first understood as innocent only because he is “immediately posited,”\textsuperscript{40} and as such does not yet exist for himself. In order to overcome this innocence and become for himself, he must “become an ‘other’ to [his] own self.”\textsuperscript{41} This process is also the process of the withdrawal into self which first constitutes knowing, but this knowing that arises out of immediacy is not yet self-knowledge. As such, it contains the simple opposition of Good and Evil, between simple being and the being-for-self of the individuated being, without any comprehension of the role of its own authorship in this dualism. In the pictorial representation of the emergence of this knowledge, the explanation of this occurrence is limited to the story of the eating of the apple from the tree of knowledge which breaks the prior state of immediacy and innocence. As Hegel states, what this story offers is simply that this “once happened, without any necessity…..”\textsuperscript{42}

What follows in picture-thinking is the conflict between Good and Evil and attempts at their comprehension. Each is understood as part of the essence of thought, and, as a result, the self is degraded to the locus of their existence and conflict. This precludes the recognition that these are aspects of the self, yet the conflict gives rise to a resolution that pertains to the understanding of the self. The assertion that the divine Being, conceived here as the Good, always already externalizes itself implies that the existence of this externalization, conceived here as Evil, is not alien to the divine Being which is absolute, having nothing truly other to it. This is represented within picture-thinking at first as “an incomprehensible happening,”\textsuperscript{43} since the divine Being’s externalization in the sensuous individual is not known universally, but only as a particular individual. As previously stated, only when this individual is sacrificed does he become divine Being again and is therefore understood as Spirit by the religious community. It is here that picture-thought conceives of the reconciliation of the divine Being with its ‘other’, Evil.\textsuperscript{44} It is important, however, to avoid making Good and Evil simply equivalent. As Hegel asserts, the way the two must then be understood is in terms of “suspended moments.”\textsuperscript{45} In general, each is what it is: Good is “simple and without a self,” while Evil is “self-centred being-for-self.”\textsuperscript{46} However, if these terms are to be understood conceptually, the result is their unity since simple being and its individuation are one and the same. Yet, to define them as the same in these terms is to say that they are the same insofar as they are not what they were individually, that is, what they were generally defined as in the first place. Thus, in order to preserve the identity of each their difference must arise again. Consequently, the two definitions must both be upheld. The result is greatly significant for picture-thinking because this conceptual realization moves beyond its scope; “since this unity is the universality of self-consciousness, self-consciousness has ceased to think in pictures…..”\textsuperscript{47}

It is the recognition that Good and Evil have the same source, and that this source is self-consciousness, that Spirit becomes explicitly self-consciousness and, as such, it is universal, “it is its community.”\textsuperscript{48} It is in the explicit connection between the divine and the human that the truth of Spirit becomes “for this self-consciousness.”\textsuperscript{49} In other words, what was in

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 468.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 471.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 472.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 473.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
picture-thought the representation of the essence of Spirit is here raised to being the nature of Spirit itself, which is known to be present in the self. Within this movement into existence, the self is first conceived as Evil since Evil is nothing but the self-centred individuation of existence. However, rather than remaining in this moment of Evil, the moment is understood as a “suspended moment” within the self which is now a knowing consciousness. As a knowing consciousness, Spirit witnesses the becoming of being rather than remaining caught in the contradictions of being. Spirit is comprehended as what contains “unity in otherness,” that is, the fact that it becomes other than itself in its instantiation into existence does not negate its unity, but creates its unity as “spiritual relationship.” Hegel demonstrates how this transformation is implicit within the initial fall into Evil. Within picture-thinking the withdrawal of being into itself out of nature is characterized as Evil; however, what appears to be the immediate movement of withdrawal is actually mediated by its ground, the nature from which it withdrew. It follows that “Nature has already withdrawn into itself.” Therefore, the movement is not a contingent choice to be Evil, but arises out of the necessary movement of Nature itself which is differentiated and then known as Spirit.

This movement demonstrates the necessity of picture-thought to mediate the coming into existence of Spirit through the self-differentiation of Nature. It is picture-thought that first conceives of this movement, but it does so in its own limited terms. Within these terms the movement can only be thought as something contingent, relying on the single divine individual whose life and death revealed the truth. Yet, this is what allows for the preservation of universal self-consciousness so that what was a particular existence is transformed into the knowledge that is preserved in its otherness. Thus, the shift from picture-thought to self-conscious knowledge marks the possibility for the continuity of thought within existence that does not dissolve under its own divisions. The representations of picture-thought dissipate as their truth is now known to be the essence of the Self, “what was in the former merely in the element of being has become a Subject.”

Therefore, what was previously a “beyond” to picture-thought is now grasped by the knowing that can know itself through all of these moments without becoming disintegrated. The “death of the Mediator” ends both the existence of the Mediator as a particular individual existence and the abstract conception of divine Being. However, Hegel notes that the death itself does not complete the reconciliation because the death of picture-thought also does away with the one-sidedness of thought that opposed actuality. In doing away with this side, it is not yet conceived as an element of the newfounded Subject and so the Self, at first, experiences a loss. However, this apparent loss is nothing other than the “innermost simple self-knowledge,” the return of consciousness to self-identity where it cannot know anything other to it. Thus, though at first this appears to constitute a division between substance and consciousness, this is what constitutes the “subjectivity of substance,” and is therefore a necessary moment in the development of self-consciousness.

This Knowing is the inbreathing of the Spirit, whereby Substance becomes Subject, by which its abstraction and lifelessness have died, and Substance therefore has become actual and simple and universal Self-consciousness.

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50 Ibid., 474.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 475.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 476.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
Accordingly, it is in this moment that Spirit as “self-knowing Spirit” emerges. What was an object of knowledge is now also known to have existence. Within the consciousness of revealed religion, this unity is “intuitively apprehended,” which is why religious consciousness represents this unity to itself in the form of picture-thinking rather than explicit self-knowledge. The religious consciousness does not directly make its own Self into an object, but instead posits itself in one individual object, though this one object is implicitly like its own Self. The Self takes the externalization of Substance to be “an action implicit in the nature of substance,” and therefore, does not grasp this action as its own. The result is that even the apparent unity between substance and Self is still conscious of a beyond. Reconciliation remains implicit while consciousness remains divided.

In summary, this is a way in which the significance of religion in the phenomenological development of consciousness is demonstrated, namely, that the truth of this reconciliation becomes so strongly implicit. The content of religion, which is finally a true content, does “exist for it” and as such religion is the movement of Spirit’s self-externalization that is necessary for the content to become for it. Religious consciousness, for the first time in the development of consciousness, represents this content correctly as what it is and what it is for itself, but it lacks the essential realization that this truth is also an action on its part, that it is both the subject and object of this truth. It is only within absolute knowing where “what in religion was content or a form for presenting an other, is here the Self’s own act.” It is within absolute knowing that the unity between the concept and existence is achieved. This is known by the Self that finally experiences this unity as its own act. Hegel calls this the “last shape of Spirit,” where what Spirit knows to be itself is also what has its own shape. The certainty of what is goes hand in hand with self-certainty.

While absolute knowing marks the end of religion, the section on religion still proves to be essential to the work as a whole. It provides the representation of the self-externalization of Nature. Self-consciousness can then comprehend this movement in terms of its progression toward self-knowledge. While the conclusion to morality achieves the basic unity between the universal essence of humanity and its particular individuality, it does not yet externalize and represent this unity, and, as such, it cannot yet be known. This externalization is what is provided by religious consciousness. However, the limitation of this consciousness has also been demonstrated; the truth it represents can only be implicit because the act that constitutes its truth, the spiritual relationship between universal essence and particular existence, is not yet understood as its own act. As a result, religious consciousness frequently becomes caught in the various external representations that it conceives as alien to its own self. For this reason, it remains possible for religion to stray from its essential truth. The limited mediation of picture-thought and the faith in the truth of the images and stories it produces maintain the alienation of self-consciousness. Because the connection to the truth is implicit rather than an explicitly known creation of self-consciousness, it is achieved through a faith in the presence of this truth. If, to the contrary, this truth were known as it is in absolute knowing, as the truth of self-consciousness itself, it would not be possible to stray from this truth because it is the truth of itself and, as such, is a matter of absolute knowing rather than faith.

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60 Ibid.
61 Ibid., 477.
62 Ibid., 477-478.
63 Ibid., 478.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 477.
66 Ibid., 485.
67 Ibid.
In conclusion, although religious consciousness remains within the scope of picture-thought and does not recognize itself in its content, it is nevertheless a fundamentally necessary moment in the development of consciousness. The elimination of this initial representation of the self-externalization of Spirit would preclude the possibility of the absolute knowing of Spirit.

In other words, the inadequacy of religious representation from the standpoint of absolute knowing does not negate its indispensable role in the development of consciousness. The transition from morality to absolute knowing would not be possible without passing through the representations of religion which present the truth of self-consciousness as an object to be known. When Hyppolite asks if Hegel has “preserve[d] religion only to negate its essential elements,” he is correct in pointing to the eventual negation of the mediating element of representation that is central to religion. However, Hegel establishes that the essential element of religion is the truth that the representation reveals, and so it is of the utmost importance that this is not negated, but rather preserved and raised to an act of Self in absolute knowing.

Bibliography


68 Hyppolite, *Genesis*, 532.