

CHAPTER ONE

FROM THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION TO THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

SCHOLARS of religion have devoted little attention to the connections between their views of religious history and the philosophy of religion. Hayden White's comment that "there can be no 'proper history' which is not at the same time 'philosophy of history'"¹ can also be applied to religious history, but that is seldom considered today. On the contrary! Religious studies has taken pains to keep the philosophy of religion far away from its field. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of evidence for the assertion that the historiography of religion was also in fact an implicit philosophy of religion. A search for such qualifications soon yields results, coming up with metahistorical assumptions originating in the philosophy of religion. These sorts of connections have been conscientiously noted by Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, Eric J. Sharpe, Jan de Vries, Jan van Baal, Brian Morris, J. Samuel Preus, and Jacques Waardenburg in their histories of the field. Yet, to date, no one has made a serious attempt to apply Hayden White's comment systematically to research in the field of religious history. But there is every reason to do so. Evidence points to more than simply coincidental and peripheral connections between religious studies as a historical discipline and the philosophy of religion. Perhaps the idea of a history of religions with all its implications can be developed correctly only if we observe it from a broader and longer-term perspective of the philosophy of religion.

The Priority of the Public Good over Private Belief

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) directly experienced the English revolution that combined two strands: one was a middle-class revolution that demanded private property, the abolition of feudal despotism, and the sovereignty of Parliament; the second was a radical revolution supported by millenarianism and called for both common property and democracy.² During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, religious wars raged not only in England but also in other parts of Europe. Hobbes did not perceive them as some unique excess, but

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simply as a return of the state of nature that had prevailed before the formation of governments. In the state of nature, war prevailed—all-out war. Everyone had to fight for his survival. This disastrous condition was ended when men—purely out of fear for their own death—transferred their sovereignty to one single person, or one single assembly, and authorized that agency to act as their representative and end the state of war. This transfer was also rational in itself, even though they were compelled by the fear of violent death. The sole purpose and reason for the state was to force internal peace.

Hobbes saw the religious wars raging all over Europe in his time as the result of a dangerous error on the part of the clergy. It consisted of the assumption that the Church was identical with the Empire of God and that one man or one assembly could represent this empire. The state had to form a counterweight to that. Hobbes's analysis clearly reveals a royalist position. While serving as a tutor to the noble Cavendish family, he wrote the essay *Elements of Law Natural and Politic* (1640), in which he supported the unlimited sovereignty of the English king over the revolutionary Parliament.³ Eleven years later in his masterpiece *Leviathan, or the Matter, Forme, -&- Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civill* (1651), he essentially expanded and deepened his thoughts considerably. The remarkable title contained his basic idea that the state must be a mortal God in order to be able to hold anarchy and civil war in check.⁴ Ecclesiastical belief had become a source of horrible and excessive violence. Incidentally, recent historical studies agree with Hobbes's position on this issue. It would be too simple to see religion only as an ideology concealing class struggle, as Friedrich Engels maintained. The absolute nature of belief generates its own dynamic.⁵ Because the opponents are religious groups and so metaphysical values are involved, the state itself must become God in order to defend the internal peace of the community. Jacob Taubes posited this link between political experience and philosophical reflection: "The seventeenth century is the first period of modern history where we see land. In the constellation of this century, we recognize ourselves and our own problems. Hobbes was aware of this period and experienced it as a thinker."⁶

Latent and open civil war can be abolished only if the community has an absolute ruler to whom every citizen owes unquestioned obedience. The boldness of his observation was not lost on Hobbes. Promising unconditional obedience to men is illegitimate. If God's law conflicts with human law, the believer is commanded to obey God rather than man. Hobbes wanted to dispel this objection with a rigorous interpretation of Scripture. Paul's Epistle to the Romans

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(13:1–6) and other Scriptures considered it unlawful not to obey the authorities. There is only one single fundamental and absolutely necessary article of faith in Christianity: “Jesus is the Christ.” All other dogmas are irrelevant for salvation and hence can be stipulated by the state authority as obligatory in accordance with their goal and function of establishing internal peace.

Hobbes devoted a separate chapter to religion in *Leviathan*. The idea of God as a “Prime Mover” was a thoroughly reasonable assumption.⁷ Unlike animals, men observed events around them and tried to understand their causes. The acknowledgment of a single omnipotent God originates in the wish to know the causes of all unpredictable events and possibly to influence them. Religion derived from a natural seed: belief in spirits, ignorance of causes, adoration of what is feared, and belief in omens. Over time, this natural seed was developed in different ways by pagan statesmen and Jewish prophets—to produce a peaceful society. For the Jews, the civil regime was part of the Empire of God; for the heathen the cult of the gods was part of the state regime. In both cases, religion served the public welfare of the citizens. Both solutions managed to gain control over the latent conflict between religion and politics and thus successfully put an end to the state of nature. With this explanation, Hobbes moved completely into the context of ancient historiography, or rather ethnography, which considered religion a part of the political *nomos* of a people. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus had also described the particular nature of Judaism in light of Herodotus’s model.⁸

Early Christianity’s fundamental distinction between the Kingdom of God and state legislation contained another solution to the ever-lurking conflict between belief in the Kingdom of God and the need for social peace. Jesus Christ taught that His Kingdom was not of this world and required His followers to obey only the laws of the state.⁹ Thus, He made a fundamental distinction between the Kingdom of God of the next world and the kingdom of state law of this world. Unfortunately, in the course of history, this initial condition did not endure, because of the “unpleasing priests; and those not only amongst Catholiques, but even in that Church that hath presumed most of Reformation.”¹⁰ Misinterpretations of Scripture were the main cause of error.

According to Scripture, the Church had no right to demand obedience from citizens. “I have shewn already (in the last Chapter) that the kingdome of Christ is not of this world: therefore neither can his Ministers (unlesse they be Kings,) require obedience in his name.”¹¹ Hobbes’s argumentation amounts to a rigorous separation of public religion from private religion:

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There is a *Publique*, and a *Private* Worship. *Publique*, is the Worship that a Common-wealth performeth, as one Person. *Private*, is that which a *Private* person exhibiteth. *Publique*, in respect of the whole Commonwealth, is Free; but in respect of Particular men it is not. *Private*, is in secret Free; but in the sight of the Multitude, it is never without some Restraint, either from the Lawes, or from the Opinion of men; which is contrary to the nature of Liberty.¹²

Hobbes's private religion lacks all independence. As leader of the public religion, the political sovereign decides all questions disputed in the religious wars: what books are canonic, which prophets proclaim the word of God, what is heresy, and so on.¹³ Only what has been sanctioned publicly by him can claim to be holy and thus binding on all citizens. Hence, the citizen is to practice his private religion only in seclusion. Even conscience did not give him the duty to make a conviction public or to oppose the demands of the ruler.¹⁴ Even when a believer is unfairly persecuted by a godless ruler, he is obligated to pay lip service and to dissimulate instead of mounting an open opposition.¹⁵ Death for only one article of faith, "Jesus is the Christ," can qualify as martyrdom.¹⁶ Thus Hobbes reached a hypothesis he considered established in the Bible, but which is really in an old heretical tradition:¹⁷ only a strictly internal esoteric piety, which values disguise and concealment higher than courageous resistance, is genuinely Christian. The experience of the horrible religious wars had led him to the radical conclusion that making private belief public endangers the political public good.

Hobbes supported this argument with more categorical distinctions between an internal belief, *fides*, and an external one, *confessio*, between *veritas* and *auctoritas*, between morality and politics. It was important to him to depoliticize religion, which made him the progenitor of a corresponding philosophical tradition.¹⁸ For him, "Private worship" is not an authority a citizen can appeal to. Rather it is to make belief politically neutral, and has no independent authority in moral judgments. The historian Reinhart Koselleck has gone into the political context of these observations. In the social and political milieu of absolutism, acts of state and moral sensibilities were separated: *auctoritas, non veritas facit legem*. The laws governing acts of state could and should be independent from morality. Paradoxically, this separation enabled the development of a civil morality independent from practical political constraints. Among other things, this happened in civil organizations, which had multiplied rapidly in the eighteenth century.¹⁹ Yet during the eighteenth century, the cultivation of civil morality in a state run by "Realpolitik" gained public influ-

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ence. In the debate with absolutism, citizens began to appeal publicly to their conscience and to their own religion of the heart. They even required acts of state to conform to private civil morality. We shall see in Jean-Jacques Rousseau how the private thus became an independent realm of religious sensibilities and moral judgments. But first we must discuss David Hume. Hobbes knew from his own experience that an irrational religion had firm control of men and their history. Hume went further: the history of mankind is a natural history of religion.

The Pendulum of Religious History

Like Hobbes, David Hume (1711–76) knew a proof of God's existence. Yet this belief based on reason seemed to imply little for the history of religions. To understand that history, the place of religion in human nature had to be determined. In this context, he wanted to rely solely on experience and observation. "As the teaching of man is the only solid basis for other sciences, so the only certain basis we can give this science is inherent in experience and observation."²⁰ Nevertheless, these are not final authorities either, but are dependent on the laws of cognition; and here, Hume distinguished two categories: impressions that come from objects to the subject ("impressions;" "matters of fact") and are processed into simple ideas; and secondly, "relations of ideas," including laws of geometry, algebra, and arithmetic. They are based on assumptions that precede all experience and can be seen as correct only on the basis of intuition. Compared with them, the facts of experience are more precarious. When people link cause and effect, they are really connecting two different impressions. For example, Hume used the connection of heating water with steam to explain that the assumption of a *necessary* connection between the two does not result from observation itself, but ensues from it: "Necessity is something that exists in the mind, not in the objects."²¹

The title of Hume's *The Natural History of Religion* (1757) adopts a key concept of his time. Natural history was a program to catch the diversities of facts within chronological parameters.²² In the very first sentence, Hume presents a distinction that was to give the philosophy of religion a special direction and thus marks a watershed: "As every enquiry, which regards religion, is of the utmost importance, there are two questions in particular, which challenge our attention, to wit, that concerning its foundation in reason, and that concerning its origin in human nature."²³ Separating the truth of religion, on the one hand,

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and its origin in human nature, on the other, posed the problem in a brand new form.²⁴

In *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), Hume had previously answered the first question concerning the rationality of religion: “The entire structure of the world reveals an intelligent Author.” Hume considered a proof of God’s existence quite possible: the order of the universe proves the existence of an omnipotent Spirit. In the later *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779) he revealed the same view: the functionalism of the world, analogous to a crafted product—proves the existence of a Deity. His *Natural History* also alluded to this teleological proof of the existence of God.²⁵

The second question was the subject of the *Natural History*. The history of religion follows from a law other than that of reason. Actual belief in God could hardly derive from knowledge of the order of the universe, as Deism thought. One of the spokesman of Deism, Herbert of Cherbury (1581–1648), maintained that people came to the view shared by everyone on the basis of rational knowledge: that God exists, that He deserves adoration, that virtuous behavior was a duty, sins were to be avoided, and man was an object of reward and punishment.²⁶ For Hume, on the other hand, “the first ideas of religion arose not from a contemplation of the works of nature, but from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind.”²⁷ The disturbances of nature, but not her amazing regularity, filled men with the strongest religious feelings. Hence, the resemblance between a belief of reason and historical theism was only external. In fact, they had absolutely nothing in common and had different roots. An earlier letter by Hume, in 1743, indicates why he ruled out the idea that the Deity could be an object of human feelings. Invisible and intangible, the Deity excludes passions and feelings as adequate means for knowing God. All “enthusiasts” are wrong. Even the idea that a prayer could be effective in any way seemed blasphemous to him.²⁸ The actual history of religion is not advanced by rational thoughts, but by irrational fears.

From this vantage point, Hume interpreted what was then known of the ancient history of religions. Fear of the unpredictability of life led people to assume personal powers behind the forces of nature, and they hoped to influence these powers through cults. In fact, the gods are only representations of *unknown causes*. The initial polytheism soon gave way to a theism that used the fear of believers to concentrate their worship increasingly on a single omnipotent Deity. The resulting theism of the masses shows only “an accidental correspondence” with the philosophical theism of the educated. In truth,

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it was constructed on irrational principles and was merely superstition. That also explains why theism soon lapsed back to polytheism. That is, the *one* God of the people had become too remote, and so they worshipped intervening intermediaries. Thus, in the natural history of religions, polytheism and theism alternate in an ebb and flow. Hume's metaphors of "tides," "pendulum," or "oscillation" indicate the conformity to psychological laws that have historically propelled an anxiety-obsessed belief in God.²⁹ The history of belief in God inevitably oscillates back and forth between polytheism and monotheism.

In the second part of his *Natural History* (Sections 9–14), Hume compared polytheism and theism, particularly examining their moral regulations. Both forms of religion clearly differed regarding persecution or tolerance, courage or obsequiousness, reason or absurdity, doubt or conviction. And here theism came off badly. If believers directed all efforts at gaining the pleasure of their god, they would start persecuting the followers of other gods. Thus, theism entailed intolerance, while polytheism brought tolerance.³⁰ Tolerance among the Dutch and the English was not to be attributed to their beliefs, but to the determination of their governments. Once again, we recognize Hobbes's old problem. But it finds another solution. Only as an alternative does Hume allow the state to play a role in forcing internal peace. The major argument is historical. The dynamic of the history of religion produces divergent political norms. The internal peace of a community is dependent on the pendulum stroke of religious history. Reason was no longer to be found only in the rational proof of God's existence. It was also available in a weakened form in the religious history.

The Civilizing of Religion

In France at the same time, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) was working on a purely moral definition of rational religion. He saw religion not as the expression of fear, but as an intuitive recognition of human obligations. Proud of being from Geneva, the stronghold of Calvinism and a citizen (*citoyen*) of that community, Rousseau was still imbued with Protestantism even after he converted to Catholicism at the age of sixteen. In 1742, he went to Paris, where he hoped to make his fortune with a musical notation he had invented. An opera made him famous and gave him entry to the circle of the Baron d'Holbach. One day in 1749, on his way to visit Diderot, who was held prisoner in Vincennes, he read in the newspaper a contest question announced by the academy of Dijon: "Has the revival of arts and

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sciences contributed to the improvement of customs?"³¹ Even as he read the contest question, he was overcome by a vision that he captured in words twelve years later in a letter:

If ever anything was like a sudden inspiration, it was the emotion that began in me with this reading: suddenly I see my mind blinded by a thousand insights, a plenitude of thoughts surfaced, with such strength and at the same time, in such a muddle that I was thrown into indescribable confusion. . . . O my lord, if I could only write a quarter of what I felt and saw under that tree, with what clarity I revealed all the contradictions of our social system, with what force I demonstrated the abuse of our institutions, with what simplicity did I prove that man is good by nature and it is only the institutions that make men evil.³²

In 1750 Rousseau submitted to the Academy the work that emerged from this vision, entitled *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*. Science and courtesy, the jury members read, are ruling men and producing a despicable uniformity: "One incessantly follows customs, never one's own genius."³³ There was a connection between the revival of the arts and sciences on the one hand and morality on the other, but it worked in reverse: advances in the arts and sciences led to a loss of morality. Yet Rousseau combined this critical answer to the contest question with a hopeful perspective. Man was still thoroughly capable of liberating himself from his institutional deformities. He only had to learn to distinguish his innate abilities from those acquired later. This criticism of culture affected Rousseau's concept of religion. He consistently distinguished two kinds of religion: one of man and one of the citizen. The religion of man knows no temple, no altar, no rituals, and is limited to the purely internal cult of the Highest God and to the eternal obligations of morality. The religion of the citizen, on the other hand, applies only to one country and prescribes its special gods to him. It has its own dogmas, rituals, and cults.

La profession de foi du Vicaire Savoyard is a magnificent plea for the religion of man. Rousseau included this text, which had already been written in 1758, in *Émile*. Here he argued against both the "natural religion" of the philosophers and the "revealed religion" of the theologians. With his well-known candor, he denounced the nonsense that true religion could be represented by anyone. Imagine that God really revealed Himself through prophets and had His revelation recorded in books. "Who wrote these books?" asked Rousseau. And answered: "'Men.' And who saw these miracles? 'Men who attest to them.' What! Always human testimony? Always men who report to me what other men have reported! So many men between God and me!"³⁴ Such a religion was a matter of geography. The force of the arguments depends on the country in which they are presented.

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"In order to judge a religion well, it is necessary not to study it in the books of its sectarians."³⁵ If you want to make the right choice among the three major religions of Europe (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), you should simply close the Holy Scriptures. History cannot establish any eternal truths. "I regard all the particular religions as so many salutary institutions which prescribe in each country a uniform manner of honoring God by public worship." But the obligation to obey them did not apply to the dogma of intolerance. "The essential worship is that of the heart."³⁶ To recognize the true religion, a person needs neither philosophy nor theology. The best teacher is not the judgments of his intellect, but the sensibilities of his heart. "The true duties of religion are independent of the institutions of men."³⁷ Rousseau saw religion as the strongest social bond connecting people. If Hobbes had political reasons for his great doubt about conscience, for Rousseau, it became an infallible authority that reliably and definitely prescribes the rules of social behavior. "I have only to consult myself about what I want to do. Everything I sense to be good is good; everything I sense to be bad is bad. The best of all casuists is the conscience."³⁸ There can be no debate about the demands of conscience, for it is an innate principle of justice and virtue, and expresses not judgments but sensibilities. "The forgetting of all religion leads to the forgetting of the duties of man," says the *Profession de Foi*.³⁹ Atheists cannot conceivably be good citizens.⁴⁰

From this concept of a religion of men, in the well-known Chapter Eight of the *Contrat Social*, "Civil Religion,"⁴¹ Rousseau drew the logical conclusion that all political communities must have been legitimated by religion right from the start. Every state had its own gods. The wars it waged were fought on behalf of its gods. This situation changed with Christianity, which put an end to wars between nations and toppled polytheism. But since it separated political from religious loyalties and Church and State posed competing claims for the loyalties of the citizens, the result was an endless chain of civil wars, as Hobbes had correctly seen. In Rousseau's view, European religious history exists in a permanent dilemma. National religions triggered wars between nations; the universal religion of Christianity incited wars between citizens.

He saw the solution to this problem in a social contract the citizens had to make if they wanted to form a reasonable political community. This contract could be based neither on the religion of men nor on the religion of citizens. The former separates the citizen's heart from the state; the latter demands war with other nations. The task of the necessary civil religion was to reconcile two different things: to see all men as brothers, and at the same time, to love the fatherland. The sovereign must stipulate a civil religion for the citizens and thus make

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“sentiments of sociability” obligatory for everyone. The positive propositions of this religion were to be the existence of a Deity; a future life; reward for the righteous; punishment for evildoers; the sanctity of the social contract and the laws. “Its negative dogmas I confine to one, intolerance, which is a part of the cults we have rejected.”⁴²

Hobbes’s trust in the powerful state as a safeguard of the internal peace of a society was no longer available in Rousseau. On the contrary: this price seemed too high for him. The wars waged by the states of Europe against one another indicated that religion urgently needed revision. Only if the political religion was balanced with the universal religion that every man is given in his conscience could it provide the foundation of a genuine civil society.

Rousseau’s argumentation was to give an important impetus to the philosophy of religion because it shaped a discourse of religion that enabled the public acknowledgment of a religion that was identical neither with that of men nor of the state. Civil society had taken a place in the philosophy of religion, as civil religion.

The Public Examination of Private Historic Belief

The thought of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) continued the approaches of Hume and Rousseau.⁴³ His epistemology worked on the problems Hume posed, and his moral philosophy on those raised by Rousseau. As shown by *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant combined the two. The concept of God epistemologically is a transcendental idea that exceeds every possible experience, and therefore on principle cannot be proved. But that does not lead Kant to conclude that metaphysical ideas are superfluous and dispensable as illusions. That is, what he had expelled from the kingdom of certain knowledge, he allowed to come back in as postulates of ethics in *Critique of Practical Reason* (1778) and in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793). Practical reason could also demand acknowledgment from unprovable assertions. Kant listed three such postulates: that God exists, that the soul is immortal, and that we have free will. Even if these assumptions could not be proved, there are convincing reasons for them. In this reasoning, Kant used an important distinction in his *Critique of Pure Reason*: between terms that constitute objects and those that have only a regulating function.⁴⁴ For this purpose, Kant put religion completely within the realm of the Should, which is fundamentally different from Being: “Religion is (subjectively regarded) the recognition of all duties as divine commands.”⁴⁵

An institutionalized religion is only partly required for attaining

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moral knowledge. It is reason that decides what is timeless in the historical religion, what is universal in the particular belief, what is common in established teaching, what is unchanging in the ephemeral. Despite all limitations, Kant recognized that a particular religion can achieve a certain preliminary work for the religion of reason. Their relationship is like two concentric circles.⁴⁶ The historical revelation can include the religion of reason, but the religion of reason cannot include the historical revelation. Although a historical belief has only a particular validity, that does not make it any less useful. It can be a means to the end of the belief of reason. In this respect, Kant talked of “vanguard,” “vehicle,” or “organum.” The layman must only be liberated from all ecclesiastical dictates and obey his own reason. The apron strings of the holy tradition then become increasingly unnecessary.⁴⁷ Where that happens, the particular belief can become the source of a publicly binding morality. Looking at the practical effects of Kant’s postulates, it is clearly no accident that they replicate Christian dogmas. Kant acknowledged Christianity as a sensual vehicle of pure religious belief. However, the vehicle needed the canons of reason to be generally obligatory.⁴⁸ Ascribing such obligation to it meant succumbing to superstition.

Kant described the procedure of this transformation as a process in the university that was also described as *The Conflict of the Faculties*. Three departments of the university— theology, law, and medicine— draw their theories from texts prescribed by the government: theology from the Holy Scriptures, jurisprudence from statutory laws, medicine from the medical system. It is up to the philosophy department to examine the particular writings in terms of the basic reason of their truth. It was important to Kant to locate this examination in the university because that was the only way to assure that it took place in public. The quarrel with theology accompanying this examination was inevitable since it was the only means to turn ecclesiastical belief into a reasonable belief and to shape the foundations of a civil morality.

Kant’s argumentation reversed the usual pattern of establishing ethics through religion. Particular religions had to justify themselves in the court of practical reason occupied by philosophers. Since Kant entrusted the examination to philosophy, he gave it competence in public acknowledgment of religion. The examination was to be free of government interests as well. Kant provided nineteenth-century religious discourse with a crucial model, not only with the reversal of religion and ethics. The concept of a philosophical examination of religion was equally effective. It is not surprising that not only Christianity but other religions, too, were also soon subjected to this procedure.

Historical Religions as Educational Powers

Kant had taken the tension between the history and reason of religion so far that it is no accident that an opposite view was developed, whose leading exponent was Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). Herder marks the start of a reevaluation of historical religions, which had received extremely bad grades from Hobbes, Hume, Rousseau, and Kant. Herder was the first of a series of thinkers who displayed good, even brilliant evidence for them. Herder was born in the East Prussian town of Mohrungen and was sent to study medicine in Königsberg in 1762. There, however, he changed his major, enrolled in theology, and attended Kant's lectures. Kant took a liking to the eighteen-year-old student and allowed him to attend his lectures free of charge. At this time, Herder also became friendly with Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88), the "Magus of the North." After graduation, he was first a preacher in Riga, then went to France. In 1770, he traveled to Strassburg, where he met Goethe.

Like Rousseau, it was a contest question that led him to organize and write his ideas. In 1769, the Berlin Academy of Science announced the contest question: "Could human beings invent language for themselves, left to their natural abilities?" Anyone with a hypothesis on this could submit it by January 1, 1771. Herder did and won first prize with *Essay on the Origin of Languages*.⁴⁹ Ever since the mid-eighteenth century, feelings had run high about the question of where language comes from, whether it was a human invention or a gift of God.⁵⁰ Christian theologians, led by Johann Peter Süssmilch, opposed the view that language originated in nature (from a humanlike animal).⁵¹ According to Süssmilch, the logical perfection of grammar argues unambiguously in favor of its divine origin. Moreover, in human language, there are several symbols that could not have been invented by the human mind. God gave man language to stir and develop his reason.

Like Süssmilch, Herder rejected a rational theory of language, in which words were regarded only as signs of objects and thoughts. Herder noted that the emotional dimension was missing. "The older and the more original languages are, the more the feelings intertwine in the roots of the words."⁵² Human speech and thought would not indicate things without also giving them meanings at the same time. But how is "the interweaving of the roots of the words with ideas" to be explained? Unlike Süssmilch, Herder thought that the spirit of metaphor appeared not only in the so-called divine language, Hebrew, but was available in all languages and must there-

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fore come from human inner life. Metaphors originated in the nature of human speech and hearing: not of individuals, but of “the nation” and the “peculiarity of its way of thinking.” With these considerations, Herder granted the sense of hearing a privileged position. In comparison with the cold sense of sight, the perceptions of the ear were distinguished by a special intimacy: words resounded inside the soul.⁵³ However, such words could also degenerate completely and become a mere instrument of signs, thus forfeiting their spirit of metaphor. Only history teaches the full meaning. “The more original a language, the fewer its abstractions and the more numerous its feelings.”⁵⁴

This suggests conclusions that refute current views of reason. Genuine education cannot be an internal, timeless, universal matter. It was necessarily external, temporary, particular. Herder took on this subject in his *Philosophy on the History of Mankind* (1774). Languages inscribed a spirit in human views. This appreciation of languages, which led ten years later to a forthright plea for the philosophical comparison of languages,⁵⁵ followed the rehabilitation of particular religions. That is, they have preserved something that has gotten lost in the cold culture of Europe. From this point of view, Herder devoted himself to the differences between East and West. Didn’t they show something of the impoverishment of European education? “The human mind received the first forms of wisdom and virtue with a simplicity, strength, and majesty that—put bluntly—is absolutely unparalleled in our cold philosophical, European world. And just because we are so incapable of understanding it, feeling it, not to mention enjoying it anymore—we mock, deny and misinterpret! . . . No doubt religion is also part of this, or rather, religion was ‘the element in which all of that lives’ and wove.”⁵⁶

In *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* (1784–85), Herder attacked the current assumption that man had become all that he was by himself. This was a delusion. “Not one of us became a man all by himself.” Reason is not a pure power, independent of senses and organs. Even in terms of his spiritual capacities, man was not autonomous.⁵⁷ While Rousseau heaped scorn on “tradition,” Herder made it the prerequisite of true education. If an idea is to be conveyed to someone else, it must have the word as a visible sign. This is the only way the invisible can be made visible and past history remain preserved for posterity. This is the true mission of philosophy. “The philosophy of history . . . which follows the chain of tradition is, to speak properly, the true history of mankind, without which all the outward occurrences of this world are but clouds or revolting deformities. . . . The chain of improvement alone forms a whole of these

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ruins, in which human figures indeed vanish, but the spirit of mankind lives and acts immortally.”⁵⁸

In this “chain of improvement” religion occupies a place of honor, even the religion of savages at the edge of the earth. “Whence is the religion of these people derived? Can these poor creatures have invented their religious worship as a sort of natural theology? Certainly not; for absorbed in labor, they invent nothing, but in all things follow the traditions of their forefathers. . . . Here, therefore, tradition has been the propagator of their religion and sacred rites, as of their language and slight degree of civilization.”⁵⁹

Herder had a critical intention in bringing tradition and religion into it. He considered religion as something other than an intellectual exercise, but as an exercise of the human heart and a development of the soul. Since past and foreign religions had preserved human sensibilities intense, Herder ascribed a high status to them. While Herder regarded the history of religion in terms of the education of the subject, he adopted Kant’s idea of a public examination of religion, but gave it a different twist. He saw the contempt for tradition in his time as a result of a seizure of power by the intellect, which was to blame for the mechanization of life and for spiritual impoverishment.⁶⁰ Awareness of the history of religions could contribute fundamentally to a human culture.

Speeches of Religion as an Individual View of the Universal

Friedrich Schleiermacher’s avowed goal was a reevaluation of positive religion. He was born in Breslau in 1768 and died in Berlin in 1834. Pietism and romanticism, the intensity of emotion and natural experience, clashed and combined in him. Schleiermacher was educated by the Moravian Brethren, but left them and went to Halle to study theology (and philosophy). From 1796 to 1802, he served as the Reformed pastor of the Charité hospital in Berlin. He formed a warm friendship with Henriette Herz, and in her salon he was thrilled and inspired by the intellectual debates that were going on in Berlin at that time. The prevailing thought in those salons was not influenced very much by political hierarchies and social conventions,⁶¹ but the transition from the Enlightenment to Romanticism was discussed intensely. Schleiermacher’s work on his book, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, was accompanied by an animated exchange of ideas with Henriette Herz. The following year, he published the *Speeches* anonymously; it was an enormous success. Although Schleiermacher later rewrote it several times,⁶² its first version remained the freshest.

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Schleiermacher left Berlin in 1802 but returned in 1807, married in 1809, and accepted a professorship at the new university in 1810. When he died in 1834, nearly 30,000 people attended his funeral, which gives some indication of his outstanding importance for his fellow citizens.

Schleiermacher began writing at a time when positive religions were scorned and hated by many. The horrible persecutions and bloody wars that had taken place in its name were still fresh in people's memory. Schleiermacher blamed that on those who, as he put it, had "pulled" religion from deep in the heart into the civic world.⁶³ He himself belonged to a generation that had welcomed criticism of absolutism and clericalism, but that had also experienced the outcome of the political transformation of the new civic morality in the disaster of the French Revolution.⁶⁴ One who thinks that religions should be taken seriously philosophically, contrary to prevailing opinion, must first correct prejudices about religion. Schleiermacher had also developed a theory of understanding that regarded misunderstanding, and not understanding, as normal. In his hermeneutics, he distinguished two different practices of interpretation: "There is a less rigorous practice of this art which is based on the assumption that understanding occurs as a matter of course. The aim of this practice may be expressed in negative form as: 'Misunderstanding should be avoided.' . . . There is a more rigorous practice of the art of interpretation that is based on the assumption that misunderstanding occurs as a matter of course, and so understanding must be willed and sought at every point."⁶⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer considered Schleiermacher's distinction a unique achievement. For only hermeneutics as the art of avoiding misunderstanding can rise above a pedagogical exercise and turn into a separate method. "Hermeneutics is the art of dealing with the power of misunderstanding."⁶⁶

Something of this hermeneutics can also be seen in Schleiermacher's *Speeches*. The nature of religion is not given in a naïve way, but must be found behind misunderstood rationalizations. The opinion that religion had its place in metaphysics (transcendental philosophy) and morality was predominant. Schleiermacher demanded from his audience to begin with the clear-cut distinction between our piety and what you call morality.⁶⁷ Religion, correctly understood, stands beside the realms of thought and behavior as a separate third field. Thus it is also independent of theories and stipulations. Even when God and immortality are doubted, religion does not disappear.⁶⁸ It must only be sought.

The *Speeches* present a religion whose center is "the sense and taste for the infinite." Their source is not God, but the universe. Anyone

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who wants to have the infinite outside of the finite is deceiving himself, for it is the universe that reveals itself to the person who is completely passive and receptive to it. The universe forms its own beholder and admirer. This revelation happens constantly, and hence there is no hope of pinning it down in myths or theories. Schleiermacher was consistent in recognizing no obligatory representation of religion, which gives his view of "history" its specific meaning. Since there can be no final and obligatory revelation of the infinite, it necessarily manifests itself only in individual variations. This multiplicity of religions is quite different from the multiplicity of churches, for, in principle, experienced religion is remote from and opposed to organized and systematic religion. History documents this endless multiplicity of revelations of the universe and is therefore the highest subject of religion.

Anyone who sets out to study the history of religion experiences a wonderful transformation in himself. "From these wanderings through the whole territory of humanity, pious feeling returns, quickened and educated, into its own Ego, and there finds all the influences that had streamed upon it from the most distant regions. . . . You are a compendium of humanity. In a certain sense your single nature embraces all human nature. Your Ego, being multiplied and more clearly outlined, is in all its smallest and swiftest changes immortalized in the manifestations of human nature."⁶⁹

The *Speeches* not only present such a religion, they also represent it. If anything can still represent "religion" today, it is the *Speeches*. In the last part, Schleiermacher gets into the "Social in religion." Here he has to explain how a religion can be represented and conveyed, if it cannot be fixed in myth or doctrine, and is present only in strictly individual views of the universe. His own *Speeches* tacitly had to assume something of that sort.⁷⁰ Thus Schleiermacher was consistent in developing a theory of the literary form of the "speech," using a comparison with the competing forms of "book" and "conversation." In the form of the book, religious communication is robbed of its original life. And a conversation does not suit such a serious subject. Only in the form of the "speech" can religion be communicated. And it wants to be communicated. Because everyone who has experienced the effect of the universe does not want to keep this experience to himself but wants to be a witness for others. To communicate it, he uses the arts: "Hence a person whose heart is full of religion only opens his mouth before an assembly where speech so richly equipped might have manifold working."⁷¹

If we consider Schleiermacher's concluding reflection on the social aspect of religion, we recognize that he shared the view of his prede-

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cessors, Rousseau, Kant, and Herder, that religions are objects of public discussion and examination. Speech will create a common bond of all those who feel moved by the universe. Religion remains both subject and object of public discourse when the individual is considered the implacable final authority of religion.

Different Religions, Different Subjectivities

Schleiermacher's definition of religion encountered the sharp opposition of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), who allowed himself the following nasty comment: If religion were based only on the feeling of dependence, the dog would be the best believer.⁷² The immediacy of a relation was merely a naturalness that still lacked an awareness. From here, Hegel aimed his darts against all Romantics. The unity of nature and mind they glorified was really only the primitive starting point of human history; it was somewhat bestial. Naturally, religion should and must be a matter of feeling. Yet feelings first had to prove their legitimacy. Hegel included this objection in 1822 in a foreword to Hinrich's *Philosophy of Religion*:

Religion, like duty and law, shall become and even should become a matter of feeling, and lodge in the heart, as freedom also generally lowers itself into feeling and becomes in man a feeling of freedom. But it is entirely something else whether such content, created out of feeling, as God, truth, and freedom, whether such objects should have feeling for their justification; or whether, conversely, such objective content, valid in and for itself, comes to lodge in the heart and in feeling, and feelings, rather, come to receive their content as well as their determination, rectification, and justification from this objective content.⁷³

Hegel's rejection of feeling as the basis of religion had serious consequences for his philosophical examination of religions. In natural religions, the spiritual and the natural coincide. But this does not apply to all religions. Thus, Hegel could see positive religions as a potential object of rational cognition, as he showed in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, which are based on the assumption that immediacy is natural, but awareness is exaltation above nature. Such an exaltation is characteristic of religions—aside from natural religions. Religions documented a discord of awareness, since they themselves distinguished the true from the natural, and spirit from nature—even if, as Hegel rigorously noted, they were not always consistent. Thus Hegel made the exaltation of the spirit over the natural into a point of

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view that can produce rational cognition from the study of the history of religion.⁷⁴

Hegel combined awareness with mediation. Thus he both continued Kant's thought and turned against him at the same time. Kant had determined that the pure categories of thought were independent of the things in themselves. Hegel found this claim weak and barren. Doesn't the external always bear the stamp of the internal, and vice-versa? The way of mediating reality by notions is itself historically determined. Thus he was especially interested in the question: Where and how in human history does consciousness of a difference between subject and object, between spirit and nature emerge? In natural religions, it is not yet available. But what about the religions of Asia?

Hegel's picture of India was initially determined by his rejection of Romanticism. The unity of spirit and nature that Schlegel saw as the highest stage of development as exemplified in India, Hegel considered the lowest rung. In 1824, when Hegel acquired more precise knowledge about Indian philosophy, he revised and refined his judgment.⁷⁵ In 1823, Henry Thomas Colebrooke had delivered lectures entitled *On the Philosophy of the Hindus* to the Royal Asiatic Society of London, which were published a year later. After reading them, Hegel promptly expanded his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* with a chapter on "Oriental Philosophy,"⁷⁶ correcting the opinion that the Orientals lived in unity with nature, as a superficial and distorted impression. For, as Hegel substantiated his charge, this genuine unity essentially contains the element of the negation of nature, as it is immediate. The spiritual is one with nature only when being in itself, and at the same time posing the natural as negative.⁷⁷ Indian philosophy was very familiar with the difference between spirit and nature, since only on this assumption could the spiritual negate the natural. According to the Indian view, the individual gains his freedom from the natural only by losing himself in contemplation in the general substance, from which the universe emerged. The highest thing in religion as in philosophy is that man as consciousness makes himself identical with substance: through devotion, sacrifice, strict atonement—and through philosophy, through occupation with pure thought.⁷⁸ Because of Colebrooke's lectures, Hegel realized that Indian thought knew the difference between subject and object, spirit and nature, and consequently deserved its own chapter in the history of philosophy. But this difference had other practical results than in the Greek-Christian religion: the individual obtained his value not by confronting nature as subject, but by vanishing into substance. That was its defect.⁷⁹

As soon as Hegel had carried out this revision, another opportunity

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appeared for refining his philosophical reconstruction of Indian religion. In 1825 and 1826, Wilhelm von Humboldt had delivered two lectures on the much admired *Bhagavad Gita* at the Royal Academy of Science in Berlin. In 1827, Hegel published a comprehensive review, focusing on a contradiction. The *Bhagavad Gita* inculcates something that was ruled out: that is, it calls for both the performance of dutiful works and the renunciation of works. The demand for action appears repeatedly in Krishna's words on Ardshuna alongside the opposite demand for contemplation without action. Hegel's interpretation fixed on this contradiction. It could not be solved in Indian thinking, he judged. "The solution is impossible because the most sublime in Indian mentality, the absolute Being, Brahman, is as such without qualities. . . . In this separation of the universal and the concrete both are spiritless—that as empty Oneness, this as unfree manifold; man as bound to this is only subject to life's law of nature; elevating himself to that extreme, he is on the escape and in a state of negating all concrete, spiritual activity."⁸⁰

As a philosopher, Hegel indicated one essential feature of Indian religion with special emphasis: the divine substance knows no internal differentiation. Accordingly, the released individual loses himself in contemplation and becomes one with the metaphysical substance. This substance does not emerge as a denial of the world and does not constitute a new autonomous subject—as in Christian religion. Thus, the possibility of a tension with the world is not realized. Renunciation only affects acts conditioned by desire, and not obligatory acts. Nor does this encroach on the existing caste system. The individual released from the world is outside the world, not in it, as in Christianity.

Developing two countermodels of denial of the world by comparing Indian religion with Christianity, Hegel created an unprecedented description of religions. For Hegel, God, ethics, and salvation remained immutable ideas. A glance at the Romantics shows clearly what was new in his view. While they found Indian "worship" a confirmation that man is in unity with nature, Hegel regarded "worship" as a "conception" that creates a form of awareness in which man knows himself as one with the divine substance. The facts of the case are the same. But Hegel perceived "idea" where the Romantics saw only "feeling." Therefore, he viewed religion as the area of development of the subject and the epitome of his experience.

Such a philosophical consideration also required the kind of elements that were remote from Kant's examination of the regulative function of religions. Hegel reconstructed philosophical religion from the history of religions: from the ideas of God, the conception of the

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soul, religious practice, and so on. These are the independent conceptions of truth Hegel observed. For from these concepts, the position of the individual in the division between spirit and nature can be perceived. Philosophy can think religion, but not replace it.⁸¹ The history of religion documents the process of developing consciousness of the subject.

The Option of Renouncing the World

With Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), philosophy turned even more decisively to the history of religions than Hegel had done. Schopenhauer was an outsider, who received no recognition for quite some time. He was not appointed to a university professorship, even though he received his doctorate in 1813 in Jena and qualified as a university professor in Berlin in 1820. In Dresden, he wrote his major work, *The World As Will and Representation* in 1818, which he expanded to a second volume in 1844. Since no one wanted to read his books, they were pulped. Only at the age of sixty-six did he achieve recognition.⁸²

From the start, Schopenhauer placed an extraordinary emphasis on the sources of the history of religion. In the preface to the first volume of his magnum opus, in 1818, he acknowledged: “Kant’s philosophy . . . is the only one with which a thorough acquaintance is positively assumed in what is to be here discussed. But if in addition to this the reader has dwelt for a while in the school of the divine Plato, he will be the better prepared to hear me, and the more susceptible to what I say. But if he has shared in the benefits of the *Vedas* . . . if, I say, the reader has also already received and assimilated the divine inspiration of ancient Indian wisdom, then he is best of all prepared to hear what I have to say to him.” The new century had a special advantage: the Upanishads gave access to the Vedas. Schopenhauer expected “that the influence of Sanskrit literature will penetrate no less deeply than did the revival of Greek literature in the fifteenth century.”⁸³

In a debate with Kant, Schopenhauer delineated his basic position. Kant’s “logical I,” which gives our views and thoughts unity and is the permanent bearer of all our ideas, cannot itself be conditioned by awareness. Something else must assume it. “This, I say, is the *will*.”⁸⁴ Thereupon, Schopenhauer took a first step: from thinking to willing. The will to live as a practical relationship to the world presupposes the subject-object differentiation. The possibility of knowing the world is formed and conditioned by the will to live. This origin does not ennoble the world; it owes its existence ultimately to a blind, insatiable urge of will. Thus, it is wrong to call it the best of all possible

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worlds, as Leibniz did. It is "the *worst* of all possible worlds."⁸⁵ Yet, there is an escape from this world: the renunciation of will. The pivot and crux of this operation is the process of individuation. The *principium individuationis* is the source of all hatred and grief. When the person sees through these, he can lift the veil of Maya, the hocus-pocus of illusion, all by himself. Thus the egotistical difference between one's own self and the Other fades. Then, discovery of the whole, of the nature of the Things-in-Itself becomes the *Quietiv*.⁸⁶ Schopenhauer calls this possibility "asceticism." It is to be found not only in reports of Indian religiosity, but also in German mysticism. Ultimately, it is also encountered in acts. Thus, the lives of saints can be more instructive for philosophers than philosophical treatises. But the ethics of religions can also contribute to closer knowledge. Christianity knows asceticism when it demands self-denial, although this demand is obscured by the Jewish part of Christianity. If that is eliminated, the same thing that is portrayed more fully and vividly in the ancient Sanskrit works is found. The Hindu ethic shows a willingness for voluntary death which is quite foreign to us, as for example when Hindus throw themselves under the wheels of the juggernaut. What has survived as a practice for so long among so many millions of peoples, while imposing the most difficult sacrifice, cannot be an arbitrary whim, but rather must have its basis in the nature of mankind.⁸⁷ Moreover, there is also the experience of horror that is triggered by conversion. The story of the conversion of Raimund Lullius is relevant here. He expected the fulfillment of all his wishes when a beautiful woman he had been courting for a long time summoned him to her room, at which time she opened her blouse and showed him her horrible bosom eaten by cancer. From this moment on, as if he had seen hell, he converted.⁸⁸ But that was only the second best way.

In the complementary second volume of 1844, Schopenhauer raised the status of the history of religion even more with regard to the denial of the will to live. In accordance with the origin of cognition from the will, which was demonstrated in the first volume, all religions at the peak of mysticism and mystery end in darkness and veils. If the Jewish Bible is taken out of Christianity and the true Christianity of the Gnostics is followed, then Christianity belongs to the ancient, true, and sublime faith of mankind. This faith stands in contrast to the false, shallow, and pernicious optimism that manifests itself in Greek paganism, Judaism, and Islam.⁸⁹ There is Indian blood in the body of Christianity that supports its constant tendency to get rid of Judaism. Even Protestantism knows the ascetic spirit of genuine Christianity. For Schopenhauer, the concurrence of this renunciation of the world despite extreme differences in times, countries, and reli-

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gions was no coincidence. If contemporaries saw it as a stumbling block, he, on the other hand, saw it as a proof of its sole accuracy and truth.⁹⁰

The proximity to and distance from Hegel cannot be ignored. Schopenhauer condemned the miserable Hegelism, that school of dullness, that center of stupidity and ignorance, that mind-destroying, spurious wisdom.⁹¹ Honesty, however, prompted him to say that he interpreted the Indian sources from the same point of view as his opponent Hegel. But what Hegel considered their defect, Schopenhauer saw as their superiority. Thus he turned a principle of subjectivity, which was correct for Hegel only in terms of universal history, into a relevant option: the denial of individuation. But in the process, the history of religions obtained a declarative value that was more existential than in the thought of previous philosophers. *“What the faculty of reason is to the individual, history is to the human race. By virtue of this faculty, man is not like the animal, restricted to the narrow present of perception, but knows also the incomparably more extended past with which it is connected, and out of which it has emerged. But only in this way does he have a proper understanding of the present itself, and can he draw conclusions as to the future.”*⁹²

From the History of Religion to Rational Religion and Back

A survey of the positions on the history of religions adopted in philosophy from Hobbes to Schopenhauer allows us to talk of a reversal of the starting position. At first there was a rigorous separation of historical religions from rational religion. At the end, the history of religion serves as a source of a reason superior to enlightened thought. Hobbes's own experience was clear proof to him that the more private and apolitical religions were, the more rational they were. Making private beliefs public endangered the social welfare of everyone. Thus, his measure of its rationality was whether it vanquished civil war, especially the horrible wars of religion. For Hume, on the other hand, private religion per se was no longer suspicious, and the state-prescribed religion per se was not rational. The history of religions was subject to a psychological law that made men vacillate back and forth in their history between polytheism and monotheism, tolerance and intolerance. Different types of religions generated divergent public norms. The internal peace of a community depended on whether the pendulum of the history of religion went toward polytheism. Hume assigned the state only the role of a stand-in to compel internal peace.

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Separating a rational religion from historical religions posed new difficulties. How could the menacing political function of the church be compatible with the equally obvious social and moral function of a "religion of the heart"? How could the middle class throw off their subordination to historical dogmas and institutions without destroying the morality of the community? Rousseau and Kant worked on this problem and developed a model of behavior of rational religion that was different from that of existing religion. Both thinkers saw the possibility of reforming private religious convictions by means of a public examination and government regulation, thus making them the basis of public morality. Private belief must become public; public requirement of reason must become private. Georg Simmel's phrase is well suited to Kant's and Rousseau's philosophy of religion.

Even before the collapse of the political enlightenment in the French Revolution, there was opposition to such a primarily social and moral view of religion. Religions were much more comprehensive worldviews that molded the thought, behavior, and emotions of human beings. They were a compendium of human culture, either of nations (Herder) or individuals (Schleiermacher). But there was a price for this reevaluation of religions: the Romantic idealization of a unity of spirit and nature. For Hegel, that price was too high. Besides, closer study of Indian religiosity revealed that India had been incorrectly cited as a model for such a unity. Hegel saw the process of a split between spirit and nature, subject and object at work in the great religions. Hence philosophy can identify different structures of subjectivity in the history of religion. While India wanted to overcome the tension between spirit and nature through contemplation, the West cultivated it. What Hegel described as historically universal, Schopenhauer made into individual options, and turned it upside down. India is a good example of how we too can rid ourselves of the false claim to subjectivity.