

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-67850-6 - Heinrich Heine: On the History of Religion and Philosophy in
Germany and Other Writings

Edited by Terry Pinkard and Translated by Howard Pollack-Milgate

Excerpt

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*On the history of religion and philosophy
in Germany*

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Preface to the first edition

I should note especially for the German reader that these pages were originally written for a French periodical, the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, in order to accomplish a specific purpose at the time. In particular, they belong to a survey of German cultural events, several parts of which I had earlier presented to the French public and which have also appeared in the German language as the series of articles “On the History of More Recent Fine Literature in Germany.” The demands of the periodical press, its fiscal problems, the lack of research resources, French inadequacies, a newly promulgated law in Germany about foreign printing which was applied only to me, and other such difficulties did not allow me to publish the various parts of that survey in chronological order and under a single collective title.¹ The present book, despite its internal unity and its external finish, is thus only a fragment of a greater whole.

I send the friendliest greetings to my homeland –

Written in Paris in December 1834.

Heinrich Heine

¹ Heine was a life-long victim of government censorship. Its height was reached in 1835 with a total ban on the publication or distribution of his past and future writings as well as those of the fellow members of the “Young Germany” literary movement.

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Preface to the second edition

When the first edition of this book left the presses and I picked up a copy of it I was much startled by the mutilations whose traces were everywhere.¹ Here there was an adjective missing, there a clause, whole passages were left out with no consideration paid to transitions so that not only the meaning but also sometimes the underlying point of view had vanished. It was more the fear of Caesar than the fear of God which guided the hand in these mutilations, and while it nervously eradicated everything which was politically suspect, it preserved even the most disturbing passages which made reference to religion. In this way, the original patriotic-democratic orientation of the book was lost; from its pages stared at me uncannily a completely foreign spirit which reminded me of scholastic-theological polemics and was deeply repugnant to my humanistic-tolerant temperament.

At first, I entertained the hope that with a second printing I could again fill in all the lacunae of this book; but no such restoration of the kind is possible now since the original manuscript was lost in the house of my publisher during the great fire in Hamburg. My memory is too weak to be of much use, and, in addition, a thorough examination of the book is impossible because of the condition of my eyes. I will make do with taking a few of the larger omitted passages from the French version, which was published earlier than the German one, and intercalating them. One of these passages, which has been reprinted and discussed in innumerable French papers, and which has even been taken up by one of the greatest French statesmen, Count Molé, can be found at the end of this new edition.

¹ I.e., censored passages.

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It might show the truth about the supposed belittling and disparagement of Germany abroad, of which, as certain honest people assure, I am guilty.² If, in my annoyance, I set forth my views about old, official Germany, that moldy land of philistines – which however has not brought forth a Goliath or any single great man –, what I said was made to appear as if I were speaking of the true Germany, that great, mysterious, as it were anonymous Germany of the German people and of the sleeping sovereign, with whose scepter and crown the meercats are playing.³ It was even easier for these honorable people to make these insinuations given that any expression of my true beliefs was completely impossible for a long period, especially at the time when the decrees of the Federal Parliament against “Young Germany” appeared, which were principally aimed at me and brought me into an exceptionally restrained position, without parallel in the history of press subservience. When later I could somewhat loosen the muzzle, the thoughts still remained gagged.

The following book is a fragment and should remain so. Honestly, I would have liked to have left it completely unpublished. Since the time of its publication, my views on several things, especially divine things, have changed considerably, and some of what I then claimed now contradicts my better convictions. But, as soon as it leaves the bowstring, the arrow no longer belongs to the archer, and the word no longer belongs to the speaker as soon as it has left his lips, especially when reproduced by the press. In addition, compelling objections based on other considerations would be raised against me if I left this book unpublished and removed it from my complete works. I could, as some writers do in these cases, take refuge in a moderation of expression, in disguise through euphemism; but I hate ambiguous words, those hypocritical flowers and cowardly fig-leaves, from the bottom of my soul. An honest man, however, retains under all circumstances the inalienable right to admit his error openly, and I do it here without hesitation. I therefore frankly confess that everything in this book which has to do with the great question of God is as wrong, as it is ill-considered. Equally ill-considered and false is the claim, which I took from the School,⁴ that deism has been destroyed in theory and leads a wretched existence only in the world of appearance. No, it is not true that God’s existence itself has been ended by the critique of reason

² Louis-Matieu, Comte Molé (1781–1855).³ A reference to the witches’ kitchen scene in Goethe’s *Faust*. ⁴ I.e., the Hegelians.

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which destroyed all of the arguments for it which have been known since Anselm of Canterbury. Deism lives, it is most alive, it is not dead, and was hardly likely to be killed by the new German philosophy. No dog would even sniff at the spider web of Berlin dialectics, no cat could be harmed by it, how could it kill a God? I myself have personal experience of how little fear is due its attempts to kill. It kills again and again, and its victims remain alive. The porter of the Hegelian school, the grim Ruge, once swore roundly or, rather, roared soundly, that he had killed me with his porter's cane in the *Halle Yearbooks*; yet, at the very same time, I was walking around the boulevards of Paris, fresh, healthy, and more immortal than ever.⁵ Alas, poor, honest Ruge! Later, he could not keep back honest laughter when I confessed to him here in Paris that I never even saw those terrible death-dealing pages, those *Halle Yearbooks*; and both my full red cheeks and my hearty appetite for oysters convinced him that I little deserved to be called a corpse. Indeed, at the time, I was healthy and fat; I was at the zenith of my weight and was as overconfident as King Nebuchadnezzar before his fall.

Alas! A few years later, I have undergone changes in body and in spirit. How often I have thought since then of the story of this Babylonian king, who considered himself to be God in heaven, but fell wretchedly from the heights of his pride, crawled like an animal on the ground and ate grass – (although it was probably lettuce). This legend is in the splendidly grandiose book of Daniel, which I recommend for edification not only to the good Ruge, but also to my even more stubborn friend Marx, indeed even the Messieurs Feuerbach, Daumer, Bruno Bauer, Hengstenberg and whatever else their names are, these godless self-worshippers.⁶ There are, by the way, many more beautiful and remarkable stories in the Bible which are worthy of their notice; for example, right in the beginning, the story of the forbidden tree in paradise and the snake, that small university lecturer, who, six thousand years before his birth, presented Hegel's entire philosophy. This legless bluestocking shows, quite astutely, how the absolute consists of the identity of being and knowledge, how man can become god through knowledge or, what is the same, how God in man

⁵ Arnold Ruge (1803–1880), Young Hegelian.

⁶ The figures mentioned are: Karl Marx (1818–1883); Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872), philosopher, explained theism as an illusory human projection; Georg Friedrich Daumer (1800–1875), critic of Christianity; Bruno Bauer (1809–1882), prominent atheist; Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg (1802–1869), mentioned ironically, editor of the official newspaper of the Protestant Church.

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achieves consciousness of himself. – This phrase is not quite as clear as the original words, “If you eat from the tree of knowledge, you shall be as Gods!” Eve understood only one part of the entire demonstration, that the fruit was forbidden; and because it was forbidden she ate it, the good woman. But hardly had she eaten the tempting apple when she lost her innocence, her naïve immediacy. She found that she was far too naked for a person of her class, the ancestral mother of so many future emperors and kings, and she demanded a dress. To be sure, it was only a dress made of fig-leaves, because at the time no Lyonnaise silk-factory owners had been born yet, and because in paradise there were no fashion designers and sellers.⁷ – Oh, paradise! Strange, as soon as woman arrives at a level of thinking self-consciousness, her first thought is of a new dress! This biblical story, too, stays in my mind, especially the speech of the snake, and I would like to set it as the motto of this book in the same way as you often see a sign in front of princely gardens with the warning: Beware of animal traps and automatic firing devices!

I have already discussed the changes which have occurred in my opinion of divine matters in my latest book, *Romanzero*.⁸ Many requests have reached me in the meantime with Christian importunity to explain how this great illumination came over me. Pious souls seem to thirst for a story of some sort of miracle, and they would really like to know if, like Saul, I did not happen to see a light on the way to Damascus, or if, like Balaam, the son of Beor, I rode a stubborn ass who suddenly opened his mouth and began to speak like a person. No, you faithful souls, I never went to Damascus. I know nothing of Damascus other than the fact that the Jews there were recently accused of having eaten old Capuchins,⁹ and the name of the city would be completely unknown to me if I had never read the “Song of Songs,” in which King Solomon compares the nose of his lover with a tower which faces towards Damascus. I have also never seen an ass, at least a four-footed one, who spoke like a man, although I have seen enough people who spoke like asses whenever they opened their mouths. Indeed, neither a vision nor a seraphic rapture nor a voice from heaven nor a remarkable dream or other such wondrous manifestation brought me to the path of salvation. I owe my enlightenment simply to reading a book. – A book? Yes, and it is an old, simple book, modest like

⁷ Lyon, a French city prominent in the silk trade.⁸ See below the selection from the Afterword.⁹ In 1840, after the disappearance of an Italian monk, the Jews of Damascus were accused of ritual murder.

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nature, also just as natural; a book that looks everyday and unpretentious, like the sun which warms us and the bread which nourishes us; a book, which looks at us with a kindness so intimate and blessed, like an old grandmother who also reads daily in the book with her dear trembling lips and with her spectacles on her nose – and this book is called quite simply “The Book,” the Bible. One rightly calls it also the Holy Scripture; whoever has lost his God can find him again in this book, and whoever never knew him finds here the breath of the divine Word gently blowing over him. The Jews, who know a thing or two about valuable things, knew very well what they were doing when, during the burning of the Second Temple, they left the gold and silver sacrificial vessels, the lamps and the candelabras, even the breastplate of the High Priest with its large gems, and saved only the Bible. This was the real treasure of the temple, and it was, God be praised, not a victim of the flames or of Titus Vespasianus, the evildoer, who came to an awful end, as the rabbis relate.¹⁰ A Jewish priest, who lived in Jerusalem two hundred years before the destruction of the Second Temple during the Golden Age of Ptolemy Philadelphus, named Yeshua ben Sira ben Eleazar, expressed in his collection of gnomic sayings, *Meshalim*, the thought of his time and I will quote his beautiful words here. They are priestly and ceremonial, yet at the same time as exhilaratingly fresh as if they welled forth yesterday from a living human breast, and they are as follows:¹¹

This all is simply the Book of the Covenant made with the highest God, that is, the Law which Moses entrusted, as a treasure, to the house of Jacob. Wisdom has flowed from it like the waters of the Pison when it is large, and like the waters of the Tigris when it floods in spring. Understanding has flowed from it, like the Euphrates when it is large, and like the Jordan during harvest time. From the same source, virtue has poured like light, and like the waters of the Nile in the fall. No one has ever learned all there is to learn from it; and no one will ever fully sound its depths. For its meaning is richer than any ocean, and its word deeper than any abyss.

Written in Paris in May 1852.

Heinrich Heine

¹⁰ The Roman Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasianus destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70.

¹¹ Yeshua ben Sira ben Eleazar wrote the *Meshalim* around the year 190 BC, otherwise known as the *Book of Sirach* or *Ecclesiasticus*. Some faiths consider this book apocryphal. The quotation is taken from 24:32–39.

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[More information](#)*Book One*

Book One

The French have believed of late that they could come to understand Germany by acquainting themselves with our literary productions.¹² But in this they have merely elevated themselves from a state of complete ignorance to one of superficial knowledge. Indeed, as long as they do not know the meaning of religion and philosophy in Germany, these literary productions will be flowers which remain silent to them, and the entirety of German thought will remain to them a barren mystery.

Thus, I consider myself to be performing a useful service by providing some explanatory information about these two topics. This is no easy task for me. To start, I have to avoid using scholastic expressions which are fully unknown to the French. On the other hand, I have fathomed neither the subtleties of theology nor those of metaphysics to sufficient depth to be able to formulate them simply and shortly enough to meet the needs of a French audience. For these reasons, I will consider only the larger questions which have been discussed in German theology and philosophy, and I will illustrate only their social importance, always keeping in mind the limitations of my own means of clarification and the capacity of the French reader to understand.

If any great German philosophers happen to cast a glance at these pages, they will shrug their noble shoulders at the meager scale of everything I present here. But I hope they may bear in mind that the little I say here is expressed quite clearly and distinctly, while their own works – while very thorough, immeasurably thorough, very profound, stupendously profound – are to the same extent incomprehensible. What use to the people are these locked-up granaries, if they have no keys? The people are hungry for knowledge and will thank me for the crumbs of philosophical bread which I honestly share with them.

It is not a lack of talent, I believe, which keeps most German scholars from expressing themselves about religion and philosophy in a popularly understandable manner. Rather, I think that they fear the results of their own thinking, which they thus do not dare to communicate to the people. I myself do not have this fear, for I am no scholar myself but one of the people. Yes, I am no scholar; I am not one of the seven hundred wise men of Germany. I wait with the great crowd in front of the gates of

¹² A reference to the work *De L'Allemagne* (*About Germany*, 1813), in which Germaine de Staël (1766–1817) introduced France to contemporary German culture.

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their wisdom. If some truth or other happens to slip out, and if this truth manages to get to me, it has gotten far enough: I write it down on paper in neat letters and give it to the type-setter; he sets it in lead and gives it to the printer; the printer prints it, and then it belongs to the whole world.

The religion which we enjoy in Germany is Christianity. I will thus have to explain what Christianity is, how it became Roman Catholicism, how from that Protestantism emerged, and, from Protestantism, German philosophy.

Though I begin with a discussion of religion, I beg in advance of all pious souls not to be anxious on any account. Fear nothing, pious souls! No blasphemous jests will disturb your ears. Such jests are, in any case, still useful in Germany, where it is important for the moment to neutralize the power of religion. For we in Germany are in the same position as you before the Revolution, when Christianity stood in an inseparable alliance with the old regime, which itself could not be destroyed as long as Christianity still maintained its influence over the multitude. Voltaire had to bring forth his sharp laughter before Sanson could let his guillotine blade fall.¹³ Of course, neither the laughter nor the guillotine really proved anything, although they both had consequences. Voltaire was only able to harm the body of Christianity. All of his jokes drawn from church history, all of his jokes about dogma and cult, about the Bible, this holiest book of humanity, about the Virgin Mary, this most beautiful flower of poetry, the great dictionary of philosophical arrows he shot loose against clerics and priests – all these wounded only the mortal body of Christianity, not its inner essence, not its deeper spirit, not its eternal soul.

For Christianity is an idea and, as such, is indestructible and immortal like any idea. What is this idea, though?

Since this idea has never been clearly understood, and superficial points have always been mistaken for its essence, a true history of Christianity does not yet exist. Two opposing factions write church history and continually contradict each other; but neither the one nor the other ever definitively states the idea which lies at the center of Christianity, which

¹³ Voltaire, the pen-name of François-Marie Arouet (1694–1778), was one of the foremost proponents of the Enlightenment in France. He excelled in sarcastic criticism, especially of the traditional Church, and advocated a form of deism. Among his works is the *Dictionnaire philosophique* (*Philosophical Dictionary*, 1764). Charles-Henri Sanson (1740–1793) was the executioner of Paris. In 1793, he beheaded King Louis XVI.