Introduction: the impact of Idealism on religion

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There are three headings under which we might consider the impact of Idealism on religion. The first concerns those areas of intellectual enquiry where the impact of Idealism is well understood in general, even if the particularities are not often in view. The second concerns those areas where the patterns of thinking are familiar, but their debts to Idealism are less often noticed. The third concerns those developments that display the impact of Idealism but are much less familiar.

The first strand, where the impact of Idealism is familiar, includes the doctrines of Christology and of the Trinity, in particular, and the transmission of idealist thought through various major theological figures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The second strand, where the patterns of thinking are familiar but the debts to Idealism are less often noticed, includes developments in hermeneutics, in the relation between unity and plurality, in radical orthodoxy and non-realist theology, and in the conflict between faith and reason. These are familiar topics in theology and are central to a variety of intellectual strategies in contemporary thought. The impact of Idealism on their development and modes of expression is less often remarked; essays in this section lay special emphasis on this impact. The third strand, where the impact of Idealism is obvious when one investigates certain topics but the topics themselves are less familiar, includes the development of themes in Jewish philosophy, the rise of the category of 'myth' and some aspects of theology in the twentieth century.

The pattern followed in general by the essays is broadly tripartite. First, they establish how the topic in view is handled by particular post-Kantian figures. Second, they give some account of how this thinking is transmitted (or fails to be transmitted) through the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries. Third, they suggest ways in which contemporary thinking displays the impact (or the lack of impact) of Idealism.

The essays in this volume begin the work of developing these kinds of discussion along various central intellectual axes. The first three essays rehearse topics where the impact of Idealism is well known, but whose details are rarely rehearsed in detail. Dale Schlitt's two essays on the Trinity begin with Fichte, Schelling and Hegel and show how their thinking is transmitted via Marheineke and Dorner in the nineteenth century, to Barth, Rahner and Pannenberg in the twentieth century.

Martin Wendte's essay on Christology begins with Hegel and proceeds as far as the thought of Paul Tillich via Marheineke, Baur, Strauss, Dorner, Kierkegaard and Hirsch. The aim of both Schlitt's and Wendte's essays is to tell part of the story of the impact of Idealism on these two central Christian doctrines.

They are accompanied by Joel Rasmussen's essay on Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's work shows one of the characteristic impacts of Idealism on religious thought: a strong reaction against it. Rasmussen offers a nuanced view, rooted in the latest scholarship, showing the ways in which Kierkegaard's oeuvre is a complex appropriation as well as rejection of the thought of Hegel and Schelling and also the counter-Idealist strand of thinking found in Schlegel, Tieck and Solger.

The next four essays examine topics that are familiar and where the impact of Idealism has been noticed less often, especially by theologians. Nicholas Boyle rehearses the impact of Idealism on hermeneutics by showing the ways in which Gadamer's thought is deeply indebted to Hegel's recovery of tradition, which in turn is constituted by engagement with Kant and Herder. The core insight here is that Hegel grasps the importance of the community, of doctrine, for the interpretation of the Bible. Just as Herder offers a more historically satisfactory approach than Kant, so Hegel offers a more 'traditionally' satisfactory approach than Schleiermacher. Like several of the other authors in this volume, Boyle notes the lack of impact of Idealism – in this case in the hermeneutics of Barth and Heidegger – which means that the transmission of Idealism is marked by a long dormant period, roughly from 1831 to 1960, when Gadamer published his recognisably Hegelian *Truth and Method*. Cyril O'Regan traces the impact of Idealism on one of the central questions where theology and philosophy intersect: the relation of the one to the many. His essay has two substantial discussions, of Hegel and of Hölderlin, before considering their impact to a limited extent via Kierkegaard, and more emphatically via Staudenmaier and Baur.

It concludes with a discussion of Idealism's impact on the thought of Guardini, Przywara, von Balthasar and Marion. John Walker's essay discharges two functions. First, it sketches the way in which Hegel understands the relation between philosophy and theology, focusing on the autonomy of each. Second, it explores the way this relation plays out in the work of two British theologians, John Milbank and Don Cupitt. In this account Walker rehearses a noticeable lack of the impact of Idealism: Walker argues that certain shortcomings in the contemporary theologians' conceptions of the relation between philosophy and theology would be remedied by a deeper engagement with Hegel. My own essay on faith and reason also discharges two tasks. The first is to rehearse Hegel's account of the conflict of faith and reason in the Enlightenment and to suggest that this account is the pattern for later investigations by Amos Funkenstein, Michael Buckley, Stephen Toulmin and John Milbank. The second is to present Hegel's account of the deep bond between faith and reason in his retrieval of Anselm's ontological proof for the existence of God against Kant's critique of it. Like several of the topics addressed in this volume, Idealism has failed to have an impact here. It deserves to have an impact on discussions of the ontological argument in philosophical theology.

The final three essays explore less familiar topics where the impact of Idealism is, on closer investigation, readily visible. Paul Franks' essay on Jewish philosophy traces the mutual influence of Idealism and Jewish philosophy in its Platonic and Kabbalistic variants, focusing on Maimon, Cohen and Rosenzweig, but taking in a range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century figures. The theme of supersession, both as a topic of discussion and as a deeper structural issue (in Hegel's 'sublation', for example) plays a significant role in this account. The story of Jewish philosophy and its relation to Idealism has not been told with such clarity before. George Williamson's essay traces the impact of Idealism on understandings of mythology from Schelling, Hegel and Strauss (who make up the main body of the essay) to Heidegger, Cassirer, Landauer and Buber. The notion of 'myth' is of central importance to discussions of religion in a range of disciplines, from Biblical studies to social anthropology. The story of its genesis in the nineteenth century, and its debts to German Idealism, is not often told. Williamson offers a detailed account of the early period of its development. Rowan Williams engages a central theological topic in twentieth-century theology, the analogy of being, and shows how the rival accounts offered by Barth and Przywara make more sense when one interprets them as different displays of the impact of Idealism. He also shows that theological investigation at this high level of sophistication

forces a more sophisticated engagement with figures like Hegel than is often found in theology.

German Idealism had an extraordinary impact on religion, whether one focuses on scholarly concerns with Christian doctrines or with popular understandings of atheism and evil. But it also in many cases failed to have the impact that its texts warrant. This volume begins the business of charting both the impact and the lack of impact. It is offered to today's scholars as a report of the state of play and to today's students as an encouragement and inspiration to deepen this work. There is much left to be done.

In each of the three strands identified above there are some obvious lacunae that can be acknowledged frankly and for whose omission there is no good reason beyond the contingencies surrounding a volume of this kind. These include the topics of atheism and evil, both of which were comprehensively transformed by the development of Idealism. They include the theology of Schleiermacher who, along with Schopenhauer, represents an alternative and non-Idealist reception of Kant. (Nicholas Boyle's essay discusses Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, but no essay tackles his doctrinal work.) They include the development of the thought of British Idealists.[1] They also include Idealism's impact on figures such as Marx and Nietzsche and, via them, such twentieth-century figures as Weber, Heidegger and Foucault. These latter figures have had a decisive impact on the study of religion in general and on theology more specifically. Each is in different ways a commentator on Nietzsche and each is indebted to the post-Kantian developments found in Schelling and Hegel. A volume that aimed at exhaustiveness (unlike this one) would cover these developments and many others. It would also deal with the ways in which contemporary theology is in many ways indebted to forms of thinking that explicitly critique developments in German Idealism, such as those found in early German romanticism, in pragmatism and in analytic philosophy. One would rightly expect to find discussion of various counter-movements and investigation into figures like Jacobi, Novalis and the Schlegels, and into Peirce, James and Dewey, and into the Viennese and British schools of philosophy that flourished after the Great War. Such counter-movements are negative expressions of the impact of Idealism: despite their importance such reactions against Idealism are absent from this volume and it will be up to future scholars to fill in the gaps identified here.

The most serious omission is also the most difficult to remedy. This is an account of the impact of French phenomenology on contemporary theology that, at the same time, shows the impact of Idealism on the French tradition. This is a giant undertaking because it requires a facility in the most complex

intellectual discussions in contemporary theology, a grasp of the details of the development of French philosophy in the mid- to late-twentieth century, a background in the nineteenth-century German primary texts and, finally, knowledge of the history of the transmission of ideas across nearly two centuries. There is a fascinating book to be written on this difficult topic. It will require a colossus to write it: a theologian, philosopher and historian of ideas. Were it already in print, an abbreviated account might perhaps have been offered in this volume. All that exists of such an enterprise here is the following brief observation: the influence of French phenomenology on contemporary theology is itself an expression of the impact of Idealism. It will be for other scholars to investigate this complex nexus of ideas.

Two serious lacunae that can be remedied partially are the development of atheism and the development of thinking on evil in the nineteenth century. A few remarks on these topics are appropriate because they exercise a disproportionate influence on theology in the twentieth century.

Atheism after Hegel

The French atheism of the eighteenth century – of Voltaire, of Diderot, of d'Holbach – has a distinctive shape. It sets its face against rationalist developments in theology, to whose further development the atheist critiques act as a spur. Their principal features include attempts to drive a wedge between 'faith' and 'reason' in general, and between 'blind' faith and 'clear' reason in particular. They focus on the allegedly corrupt effects of ecclesial authority on belief, which are contrasted unfavourably with the liberating effects of autonomous reason. They mock the allegedly contorted rationalisations of rationalist theology (whether broadly Leibnizian–Wolffian or, later on, broadly Kantian) and offer as a contrast the illumination offered by philosophy freed from the censorship of theologians and unshackled by the burdens of doctrinal obedience. Religious belief is often cast as something obediently unthinking, wilfully dishonest or positively stupid. Certain strands of atheism in our own time mirror this French pattern, and it is by no means rare to find popular books by intelligent authors who characterise religious belief as exhibiting those features painted in such garish colours by the great French eighteenth-century atheists.

The atheist developments in German philosophy in the nineteenth century are not of this kind, by and large. The impact of Idealism on atheism is intellectually more serious, more sophisticated and in the long term more damaging or liberating (depending on one's point of view). Three figures

in particular deserve thorough study: D. F. Strauss, Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx. Between them they develop a range of forms of thinking that prove particularly corrosive to popular religious belief and provoke the theologians who follow them to develop new theological forms of enquiry. All three, with justification, see themselves as inheritors of Hegel's thought. The shapes of thinking of Strauss and Feuerbach are particularly noteworthy and can be sketched. For reasons of space Marx cannot be considered here.[2]

Strauss' *The Life of Jesus* (1835) is a monumental study of the Gospels that treats in detail nearly every episode of Jesus' life.[3] It is its short preface that was to prove most significant: it provides the intellectual framework for the study. Perhaps Strauss changed the way people thought, or perhaps he summarised in a decisive way changes that had already taken place. Either way, atheism (especially in relation to the Bible) looks different after Strauss' book. The preface ostensibly addresses a choice faced by the Biblical critic: either one acknowledges that modern thought requires a fundamental revision of the kinds of claim one can make about the Bible, or one buries one's head in the sand and becomes an irrelevant intellectual dinosaur. To be a modern thinker, for Strauss, is to think in a certain kind of way and either one comes to terms with this or one refuses. If one comes to terms with it, then one writes in an up-to-date modern idiom with modern insights. If one fails to do so, one remains mired in an archaic frame of mind, repeating nostrums that become increasingly meaningless to contemporary folk. The deeper influence of Strauss' preface, however, arguably lies in the way it draws certain contrasts. The principal ones are 'scientific' [*wissenschaftlich*] versus 'unscientific', 'modern' versus 'ancient', 'myth' [*Mythos*] versus 'history', and 'supernatural' versus 'natural'. (George Williamson's essay in this volume explores the significance of the category 'myth' and the ways its uses change.)[4] Strauss' categories are, one might say, binary. That is, they are oppositional and mutually exclusive. To be scientific is good; to be unscientific is bad. For one's thinking to be modern is for it to be the opposite of ancient; to be historical is to exclude the mythical. Strauss sets these binary oppositions in a way that looks almost common-sensical to those who follow him. They are the predecessors of further opposed terms that are familiar today: 'academic' versus 'confessional' approaches or 'outsider' versus 'insider' perspectives. Strauss' decisive influence (made possible in English owing to the widely read translation by George Eliot) is his success in persuading succeeding generations to deal in these binary oppositions. They are corrosive for theology for the same reason as Kant's oppositions between 'authority' and 'autonomy' and between 'tradition' and 'reason'. (Nicholas

Boyle's essay in this volume explores the ways in which a fundamental recovery of tradition is a crucial impact of Idealism on subsequent philosophical thought.)[5] Once one accepts the opposition, one is faced not with a complex historical situation but with a stark choice: this or that, yes or no, right or wrong. Once one accepts the opposition one also accepts that one must choose one way or the other. It requires great independence of mind to refuse such a choice.

Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* is, in its own words, a 'translation of the Christian religion out of the oriental language of imagery into plain speech'.[6] Its ostensible argument is that Christianity appears to be about God but really it is about humanity. His most famous formulation comes from the chapter 'The mystery of the suffering God': 'Religion is human nature reflected, mirrored in itself . . . exalted to that stage in which it can mirror and reflect itself, in which it can project its own image as God. God is the mirror of man'.[7] At a deeper level, however, Feuerbach (like Strauss) offers a series of binary oppositions: appearance and reality, imagery and plain speech, delusion and truth. These are emphatically opposed to each other. But Feuerbach goes further and suggests that certain terms that look like oppositions are in fact identical: supernatural and natural, transcendent and immanent, heaven and earth, divine and human, God and man. Feuerbach thus offers a two-pronged attack that is certainly presented as a series of arguments, but whose deeper force is felt because it functions at the level of basic categories. The first prong is to oppose certain terms and, like Strauss, to persuade the reader to choose between them. The second prong is to identify certain other terms and to persuade the reader to refuse to distinguish them. These two prongs have the same result: Christians are deluded in their speech about God; the truth is that their speech is about humanity. This is because 'God' and 'man' are the same thing. 'God' is merely imagery; in plain speech one finds that its object is 'human reason' itself.

The shapes of thinking displayed by Strauss and Feuerbach are striking. They depend for their force not upon empirical enquiry but upon the categories they bring into play. This is not what they themselves say about their work. Strauss emphasises the painstaking detail of his investigations into the Gospels; Feuerbach insists on the empirical study on which his claims rest. In reality (to use Feuerbach's idiom) it is the strong binary contrasts (Strauss) or the mixture of strong binary contrasts and emphatic identification of apparent opposites (Feuerbach) that proves decisive. Strauss' influence lies in the way his binary oppositions come to appear as common sense to his successors. It becomes obvious that one must choose between modern and ancient

forms of thinking. His genius lies in the force of these oppositions. It is thus obvious to his successors that scholarship is either modern and respectable or reactionary and unscholarly. Feuerbach's appeal lies in the simplicity of his proposals: what appear to be two things (transcendent and immanent, divine and human) are in truth one thing (human thinking itself). His genius lies in the unanswerability of this identity: once one entertains this possibility, it is hard to see what argument could establish the non-identity of the divine and the human. After all, anything one says will be a display of human thinking.

These shapes of thinking in Strauss and Feuerbach are developments of aspects of Hegel's philosophy. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel distinguishes between representation or picture-thinking (*Vorstellung*) and the concept (*Begriff*). To simplify a sophisticated set of enquiries, Hegel suggests that religious thinking and philosophical thinking are both displays of 'spirit'. By spirit, Hegel means a form of thinking that overcomes the false opposition (very common in modern philosophy) between individual and community, between 'I' and 'we'. These two ways of thinking, the religious and the philosophical, have the same 'spiritual' substance, but they take a different form. Religious thinking deals in images. It pictures God. It thus offers an emphatic opposition between subject and object, thinking and being, sign and signified. Philosophical thinking by contrast deals in concepts. It conceptualises. It thus offers a complex relation between subject and object (where the subject acknowledges its own productivity in its apparent reception of objects), between thinking and being (where thinking is always thinking of some being and being is always mediated in thinking), between sign and signified (where what is signified is always mediated by sign, and a sign always points beyond itself to something else). Where religious thinking deals in emphatic oppositions, philosophical thought deals in complex relations. Hegel's account is both re-descriptive and reparative. In the case of 'religious' thinking he seeks to re-describe it in 'philosophical' terms. In the case of errant reasoning in modern philosophy, he seeks to diagnose the error and offer his own corrections. The emphatic oppositions of religious thought are quite normal forms of everyday thought, but they become errant when they become models for philosophy. The 'representational' opposition of subject and object (e.g. between God 'out there' and humanity 'over here') becomes errant when it is cast as a 'conceptual' opposition in philosophy between subject and object (e.g. between the object 'over there' and the subject 'in here', as one finds in Descartes) or when it becomes a purely subjective matter (e.g. the 'merely conceptual' idea of God, as one finds in Kant). Hegel sees modern philosophy as a history of false

oppositions (in Descartes and his successors) or of false identities (in Kant and his successors). His repairs take the form of distinguishing oppositional forms of everyday thinking (e.g. in religion) and complex relational forms of conceptual thinking (e.g. in philosophy). He rejects oppositional forms of conceptual thinking (e.g. in Descartes) and one-sided identity thinking (e.g. in Kant).

Even in this brief sketch one can begin to see certain interesting features in the shapes of thinking displayed by Strauss and Feuerbach. Both thinkers seem to be developing Hegel's distinction between 'representation' and 'concept'. Both thinkers seem to characterise religious thought as 'representational' and philosophical thought as 'conceptual'. But, at a deeper level, matters are not quite as they seem. Hegel claims that oppositional forms of thinking are quite normal in everyday thinking; but if one wishes to think philosophically one must repair false oppositions or one-sided identities of the kind generated by Descartes and Kant, and instead deal in complex relational forms. Strauss and Feuerbach do not understand that this is a philosophical enterprise, in Hegel's sense. They take it to be a 'scientific' one.

There are some tangles here, but they are relatively easy to comb out. Hegel, at the end of the *Phenomenology*, describes his project as 'scientific' (*wissenschaftlich*). By this he means what we would call 'philosophy' rather than natural science. Hegel himself went on in his *Encyclopaedia* to explore the relation between natural science and philosophy. But when Strauss and Feuerbach say (as they do) that their work is 'scientific' (same word: *wissenschaftlich*) they mean something much closer to natural science. Both Strauss and Feuerbach make a great deal of their empirical researches, for example. But for Hegel there is no natural scientific enquiry into 'subject and object' or 'thinking and being'. These are philosophical, and not natural scientific, matters.

For Hegel 'God' can be an expression either of an opposition between subject and object (as in religion) or an expression of a complex relation between subject and object (as in philosophy). But it is a giant leap backwards to say that 'God' is an expression of illusory object A (in religion) whereas it is an expression of real object B (in philosophy). This way of thinking is a curious melding of the worst of both Cartesian and Kantian worlds. First, it generates a false opposition between subject and object. In Cartesian thinking one finds a false opposition between the world out there and the subject in here. In Feuerbach's thinking one finds a false opposition between the self out there (whether pictured as God or pictured as the thinking self) and the

self in here. In Kantian thinking one finds a one-sided identification between subject and object: God is reduced to an idea of reason. In Feuerbach's thinking one finds a one-sided identification between subject and object: God is the same as reason itself. Worse, Feuerbach's shape of thinking is fully 'representational': it happens to insist on one kind of representation (the self) rather than another (God). It is not truly 'conceptual' because this would require a more relational account of subject and object, or of thinking and being. The sign of truly conceptual thinking is its ability to overcome false oppositions and one-sided identifications. Feuerbach's shape of thinking overcomes neither.

Strauss, too, takes a giant step backwards from Hegel's perspective. Instead of preserving the distinction between oppositional forms of thinking (in religion) and relational forms of thinking (in philosophy), Strauss insists one must choose between them. One must choose between representations and concepts even within religion itself. Thus he distinguishes between what is 'essential' and what is 'inessential' to the Gospels narratives, with a view to expunging the mythically 'inessential' for the sake of the dogmatically 'essential'.[8] From a Hegelian perspective Strauss mistakenly identifies 'myth' with 'representation' and 'truth' with 'concept'. But for Hegel representational and conceptual forms of thinking *both* grasp the truth. The difference lies in the forms they take: representational forms of thinking deal in oppositions between thinking and being whereas conceptual forms of thinking deal in complex relations between them. Strauss invents a new and bizarre form of thinking: an opposition between representational and conceptual thinking. The oppositional account of the representation in religion and the sophisticated relational account of the concept in philosophy is rejected in favour of a new creature undreamed of in Hegel: an oppositional account of the concept in philosophy. This is so thoroughly confused as to suggest that Strauss does not understand Hegel's philosophy.

The effects of these problematic developments of Hegel's contrast between representation and concept, in both Strauss and Feuerbach, are far-reaching for forms of atheism and they constitute an important impact of Idealism. They produce false oppositions (between subject and object, and now between representation and concept, myth and history, subject and self) and one-sided identities (between God and humanity). They fail to offer complex forms of relation of the kind Hegel so painstakingly develops. Atheist arguments come to ask questions of the form, 'what is the real object?' rather than the more Hegelian question, 'what is the relation between subject and object?' They ask of scholarly enquiry, 'is this representational or