

JON STEWART:**An Introduction to Hegel's Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion:
The Issue of Religious Content in the Enlightenment and Romanticism**

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2022, xiii + 277 pp.

This book is a great read. The author's exemplary clarity of expression makes the text readily accessible to the reader. Purposiveness structures the study, guides the writing, and lends coherence to the whole. The scholarship informing the writing of this volume and being documented throughout is excellent. The comprehensive coverage of this book valuably envisions for the reader central themes in the Western intellectual landscape of the past two or three centuries.

Insight after insight is gained into Hegel's general philosophical view and particularly his philosophical understanding of religion. Further, the book's focus on contextual considerations enriches the scrutiny of Hegel himself, his early reception, and his reception in our time. Judicious selection of appropriate representatives of the intellectual-cultural movements of the Enlightenment and Romanticism contribute to their rich portrayal. In experiencing the expansive scope of the source-critical work and the creative interpretive turns that come regularly offering solutions to questions raised in dialectical lines of inquiry, the reader senses being in the presence of an author of significant humanity and decisiveness.

Any successful book dealing with the historical past needs to be shaped by a sense for what's most important in life, because important meaning has the capability of transcending a specific period and finding resonance in any time. History becomes exciting when its relevance for the present informs the account being given of the past. This "introduction" is so much more than a series of comments on the three volumes of Hegel's lectures. Rather, it is the unfolding narrative of Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of religion from the frame of the response he gives to the two major intellectual movements of his time – the Enlightenment and Romanticism. With that story, the reader encounters the philosopher Hegel making the case for the importance of the content of religion in the face of the day's criticisms of it, and that encounter speaks no less to similar criticisms being directed against religion in the contemporary scene.

The Hegel presented here takes a stand for religion and the content it holds dear. While this view runs counter to the perspective that regards Hegel as merely short-changing religion (including Christianity) and dismissing it when philosophy sublates it, this interpretation does not make the opposite mistake of reducing him to a reactionary conservative embracing tradition at the expense of vibrant thinking. Here the analysis discloses a progressive dimension to the religious reflection of Hegel and the author alike, with their commitment to “spirit” preventing their reasoning from becoming boxed in or shut down.

The book accounts for relevant literary works in German, English, Danish, and French. Moreover, it also covers new ground, as evidenced by the way Stewart effectively addresses the five theses he sets forth for the study in the book’s Introduction. He establishes, first, that the agenda of Hegel’s lectures on religion derives in large part from his response to the Enlightenment. Second, Stewart highlights Hegel’s intent to offer a corrective to the mistaken understanding of religious belief that was taking shape in the crucible of cultural currents of the day, as the Enlightenment was eroding religion’s content (undermining key dogmas) and Romanticism was reducing religion’s form (to mere feeling). Third, Stewart demonstrates that Hegel’s account of religion does not actually end with Christianity but instead also includes deliberations on Islam, Deism, and Reformation Protestantism. Fourth, the book offers a resolution to the question of how Hegel’s philosophy of religion is to be interpreted. The discussion of the debates in the 1830s and 40s of Chapter 8 reveals their continued application to and importance for discussions of the present. Stewart shows, fifth, how many of the philosophical and theological deliberations of the Enlightenment and Romanticism as well as Hegel’s response to them provide the animating force of many contemporary reformulations of those problems today. These five theses are interrelated, and the argument for each takes place within a compelling narrative that offers fitting evidence for each within the elucidation of Hegel’s lectures on the philosophy of religion as interpreted in their cultural context.

The Hegel renaissance taking place over the past three or four decades continues still, and so good books on Hegel, such as this one, find currency within the contemporary situation. College students taking a course in Hegel, the philosophy of religion, or German idealism will appreciate this book. Because of its treatment of key theological issues of immortality, God, Christology, freedom, and community, this book will serve seminary students in a course on theology and modernity or constructive theology. Graduate students in philosophy or religion will benefit from this book in studying many subjects. The introductory yet comprehensive overview provided in this accessible primer will appeal to the questing general reader seeking entrance into

its issues. The book will interest Hegel scholars and scholars of the Enlightenment and Romanticism.

This book occupies a unique place in the field of books on Hegel's philosophy of religion, of which I mention five here. The first is William Desmond's *Hegel's God: A Counterfeit Double?* (2003). Desmond, like Stewart, has much to say about God. But in concluding that this is "a 'God' who is not God," he regards Hegel's speculative philosophy of immanence as leading to "a deformation of divine transcendence as other," that is, "a counterfeit double of God." A primary difference is that Stewart's God has not relinquished genuine objectivity for "an immanent self-surpassing process of self-determination."

Another book is Peter C. Hodgson's *Hegel and Christian Theology: A Reading of the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (2005). This fine book is written with the intent of uncovering Hegel's theology in the lectures on religion. Stewart's book, rather, concentrates first on philosophy while secondarily discerning theological insights. Furthermore, Hodgson deals with religion's content, but with the focus on elements of Hegel's Christian theology rather than on viewing it over against the explicit criticisms of the Enlightenment and Romanticism.

Thomas A. Lewis' *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel* (2011) is a third major text. Lewis also writes to restore the central place of religion in Hegel's thought and to show the relevance of Hegel's conceptualization of religion for today. His work has emphasized the significant role of Hegel's anthropology with its elaboration of subjective spirit or freedom, an emphasis shared by Stewart. However, Lewis is more Kantian than Stewart, who argues that Hegel recasts Kant's view *en route* to affirming that our consciousness can and does accommodate both representations and concepts of the divine, both empirically perceived entities and all forms of thought and cognition. An additional difference is that Lewis' analysis of religion has an eye on the issue of religion in the modern state and its potential for challenges to the modern state.

A fourth book is Paolo Diego Bubbio's *God and the Self in Hegel: Beyond Subjectivism* (2017). Bubbio's book, like Stewart's, is about Hegel's philosophy, and specifically about some aspects of his philosophy of religion. The two authors agree on much: they both emphasize the importance Hegel gives to the content of religion and in particular the doctrine of incarnation, hold to the possibility of endorsing subjectivity without yielding to subjectivism, regard knowledge of God and self as both dependent on the God-self relationship, and think that Hegel's view of religion is still relevant. And yet, Stewart's narrative features distinctive qualities separating it substantially from Bubbio's.

The fifth competing book, ironically, is Jon Stewart's *Hegel's Interpretation of the Religions of the World: The Logic of the Gods* (2018). This book covers in detail the world religions Hegel discusses in volume two of his lectures on the philosophy of religion, while the book under review draws insights from volume two but centers on volumes one and three. These two interpretive writings on Hegel, though, complement one another nicely and can be considered as effectual companion volumes.

In short, Stewart's book offers an original and significant contribution to the subject. The impeccable academic work, efficacious methodology, communicative writing style, and far-reaching analysis characterizing Stewart's work make it worthy of being read by scholars in many fields of inquiry.

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