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## THE IDEAL RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY: ARTICULATING THE POSSIBILITY OF COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY WITHIN RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS

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THE IDEAL RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY: ARTICULATING THE POSSIBILITY OF  
COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY WITHIN RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By

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Lexington, Kentucky

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2022

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### THE IDEAL RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY: ARTICULATING THE POSSIBILITY OF COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY WITHIN RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS

This dissertation seeks to explain a certain instability that characterizes many contemporary religious communities. Why are people abandoning organized religion at an unprecedented rate? And why do so many religious people behave in vicious ways, even as they claim to preach a message of love? These phenomena are related, and they are both usually explained on epistemological grounds. According to many of religion's recent critics, religious belief requires the suspension of rational thought, and those who abandon it have simply seen the light of reason. Meanwhile, those who remain religious do so despite the testimony of their reason, and the harms they commit against others are dismissed as a product of irrationality. However, this explanation is insufficient. Real-world data show that people leave their religions behind for a host of reasons, many of which have nothing to do with belief. These individuals recount broken relationships, disagreements over social and political issues, and feeling disconnected from their communities and their gods—despite still believing many of their religions' basic tenets. Furthermore, belief in a non-existent entity is not directly correlated with the kinds of viciousness for which religion is often criticized. Many people believe objectively false things, but do not weaponize those beliefs to harm others. Therefore, we should not criticize religion in terms of its claims' truth or falsehood, because these criteria do not successfully explain the problems above.

Instead, we should recognize the decline of religion as an alienation of the individual from her community. I argue that communities are strongest when their members recognize their own interests as aligning with those of the group. This synthesis of interests enables community members to trust and support one another, even in the face of difference. Meanwhile, communities experience instability when their members understand their own interests as alienated from those of the group. This perceived alienation is the product of a misunderstanding of the relationship between the universal and the particular. I draw from the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Immanuel Kant to demonstrate two particular ways in which religious communities can mischaracterize this relationship. In both cases, the result is a community where individuals find themselves unable to form relations of thick trust with subjects beyond themselves. In my final chapter, we see that Hegel suggests a distinct way of doing religion—what he calls folk religion—that overcomes the same kinds of problems as those highlighted by Nietzsche and Kant. Such a religion not only unites its adherents with their god, but also with one

another. The project therefore ends on an optimistic note: religion is not something that necessarily must produce alienation and conflict. It is possible to create a religious community that fosters meaningful relationships among its members.

**KEYWORDS:** Social Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion, Community & Society

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iii
CHAPTER 1. Defining Religion in Terms of the Social .....	1
1.1 Introduction & Scope of Project .....	1
1.2 What's a Community?.....	10
1.3 Creating Collaborative Community: Two Criteria for Thick Trust .....	19
1.3.1 First Criterion: Mutual Perception of Moral Autonomy.....	21
1.3.2 Second Criterion: The Primacy of the Practical .....	28
1.4 Reimagining Religion as Community .....	35
1.4.1 Religious Community with or without Belief .....	37
1.4.2 The Social Function of Religious Belief .....	41
1.5 Can Religion Function as a Collaborative Community?.....	46
CHAPTER 2. Nietzsche's Account of Alienation in the Religious Community.....	48
2.1 Introduction .....	48
2.2 Is God Dead? Nietzsche's Work on Religion .....	53
2.2.1 The Role of Religion in <i>The Birth of Tragedy</i> .....	57
2.2.2 The Slave Revolt: <i>Beyond Good &amp; Evil</i> and <i>Genealogy of Morals</i> .....	62
2.2.3 Religion & Divinity in <i>The Antichrist</i> .....	68
2.2.4 Nietzsche's Religious Writings: A Consistent Account of the Human/Divine Relationship	71
2.3 Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion as a Theory of Community .....	72
2.3.1 Religious Community in <i>The Birth of Tragedy</i> .....	73
2.3.2 The Social Orientation of Nietzschean Master & Slave Morality .....	76
2.3.3 Nietzsche's Social Views in <i>The Antichrist</i> .....	80
2.4 Social Alienation in Nietzsche's Religious Writings: Religious Moral Autonomy & The Possibility of Thick Trust.....	81
2.5 Conclusion.....	84
CHAPTER 3. The Practical Shortcomings of Kant's Rational Religion.....	87
3.1 Introduction .....	87
3.2 Kant on the Function of Religion.....	92
3.2.1 Rational vs. Historical Religion: Kant on Religious Objectivity .....	92
3.2.2 The Teleological Function of Belief.....	96
3.2.3 Religion's Role in the Ethical Community.....	100
3.3 Autonomy in Religious Practice: Kant & Nietzsche's Conflicting Accounts .....	103
3.3.1 Kantian vs. Nietzschean Autonomy .....	103
3.3.2 Moral Autonomy in the Religious Community: The Initial Adequacy of Both Kant & Nietzsche's Accounts.....	106
3.3.3 The Communal Shortcomings of the Greek Religion .....	109
3.3.4 The Superiority of Kant's Model.....	113

3.4	Kant's Underestimation of Historical Religion.....	116
3.5	Conclusion.....	122
CHAPTER 4. Hegel & The Religious Community .....		124
4.1	Introduction .....	124
4.2	Hegel's Philosophy of Religion .....	128
4.2.1	Berne Period .....	128
4.2.2	The <i>Phenomenology of Spirit</i> .....	136
4.2.3	The <i>Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion</i> .....	142
4.3	Hegelian Religion as a Collaborative Community.....	151
4.3.1	Hegelian Religion & Moral Autonomy .....	152
4.3.2	Hegel on the Primacy of the Practical .....	155
4.4	Conclusion.....	158
Epilogue .....		160
References.....		167
Vita.....		171

## CHAPTER 1. DEFINING RELIGION IN TERMS OF THE SOCIAL

### 1.1 Introduction & Scope of Project

At the time of this writing, religion's role in human life is shifting in a number of ways. Within certain geographical regions and certain faith traditions, religion remains as influential as ever<sup>1</sup>; however, there is a simultaneous move away from religious affiliation taking place in many nations, particularly those in the West. This project is primarily interested in this decline of religious affiliation within the United States specifically.

Throughout US history, its citizens have overwhelmingly considered themselves to be Christians, with over 75% of Americans identifying with some denomination of the religion as recently as 2010.<sup>2</sup> However, this figure is rapidly changing, with American Christian affiliation experiencing a 12% decline in the last decade. Of course, the potential causes for this trend are numerous: shifting population demographics and increased education levels are just two factors that can and do certainly contribute to this phenomenon. However, this project arose from the suspicion that mere demographic causes do not tell us the whole story of why American Christianity (and to some degree, American religiosity in general) is on the decline.

I will argue that this phenomenon ought to be of major interest to the discipline of philosophy; however, at this time, the field has not adequately engaged with the changing historical moment. Within academic philosophy, much recent discussion of religion writ

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Islam is experiencing a spike in new affiliations, and southern Africa is projected to contain 40% of the globe's Christians within the next thirty years. See Pew Research Center, April 5, 2015, "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050."

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace." Roughly half of Americans consider themselves to be Protestants of some sort, while approximately one fifth identify as Catholic.

large tends to be reductive, treating the phenomenon as an outdated practice that no rational individual would ever defend. This trend is unfortunate, for it loses valuable opportunities to understand our current evolutionary period in American history. Taking a good-faith look at religion reveals realities about the phenomenon that are often overlooked in contemporary scholarship. Therefore, this project will propose a distinct way of thinking about religion, in an attempt to provide one novel explanation for at least part of the Western trend away from its historical religious affiliations.<sup>3</sup>

“Religion” is one of those slippery terms that evades easy definition. There are few clear criteria for what makes something a religion; elements such as ritualistic practices, alleged deities, and the notion of an afterlife are common, but by no means universal.<sup>4</sup> Given these difficulties, one way that religion is often defined is in terms of belief – whether it be belief in a deity, or in a set of moral principles, or in some other metaphysical phenomena. Because of this role of belief, religion is often treated as a primarily epistemological phenomenon, through which the faithful seek to obtain some information about reality, which then informs how they navigate the world. This is true for both religion’s supporters and its critics. Fundamentalist Christians, for instance, declare that they are saved from their sins through their belief in Jesus Christ, and emphasize that their fellow churchgoers must hold onto their faith in times of doubt. Those who walk away

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<sup>3</sup> As a philosophical project, this dissertation will often consider the concept of “religion” broadly, rather than merely limiting its theoretical scope to that of any single religion, i.e. American Christianity. This is due, in large part, to the fact that Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche are seeking to provide accounts of religion as a general concept, rather than to speak merely of any particular religious tradition. Therefore, while this project takes its starting point in events concerning one historical religious tradition, it should not be construed merely as a sociological examination of that one religion. We are interested in the theoretical underpinnings of religious practice writ large, which (if my account is correct) ought not to be understood merely within the context of any one religious tradition.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Asma proposes these elements as broadly definitive in *Why We Need Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), while noting that even these categories may struggle to capture the essence of some religions.

from the religion are often accused of simply not believing enough. Non-theistic religions may not hold such clearly defined views about particular deities, but nonetheless maintain traditional beliefs about other phenomena, which they take great care to pass down to new generations of believers.

Meanwhile, most of religion's recent academic critics attack the practice on the grounds that it encourages unjustified or irrational beliefs. Among the most infamous of these critics are New Atheist thinkers such as Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, who decry religion as both metaphysically dubious and epistemologically unsound. For instance, Dennett tentatively defines religion as a "social system whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought."<sup>5</sup> Dennett's mention of religion's social element acknowledges that it is not merely an individual intellectual practice; however, he still primarily defines the phenomenon in terms of belief in the supernatural. He goes so far as to say that new-age spiritual practices, which feature traditional religious rites such as meditation or prayer but do not necessarily cultivate beliefs in any particular deity, share similarities to religion but are "another species altogether."<sup>6</sup> And again, he asserts that

[t]he core phenomenon of religion, I am proposing, invokes gods who are affective agents in real time, and who play a central role in the way participants think about what they ought to do.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

In other words, religion's primary function is to cultivate certain beliefs regarding one's purpose in life. Dennett's task in this text is to analyze religious beliefs via scientific inquiry, in order to determine whether religion is a practice that remains useful as history moves forward. He suggests that, if his investigation produces a negative answer, then continuing to cling to religious beliefs would constitute a type of harm.<sup>8</sup> Richard Dawkins takes a similar position: he contends that religion is an outright delusion (that is, an irrational belief), and that those who embrace it are dogmatically committed to ideologies that are obviously and demonstrably false. He spends the entirety of *The God Delusion* refuting what he calls the God hypothesis, or the belief that the world is a product of intelligent design. Dawkins's view is that because religious beliefs about the nature of the world are not supported by Occam's Razor, we must contend with the likely reality that they are false—and that in the face of this falsehood, we ought to reject religion altogether.<sup>9</sup>

Accounts such as these often refer to particular, negative religious behaviors. For instance, religion is often critiqued for cultivating various forms of violence and extremism. This tendency can be seen within a number of contemporary American evangelical Christian communities; for example, members of the infamous Westboro Baptist Church are known for disrupting funerals with incendiary conduct.<sup>10</sup> Violent behavior on the part of religious people is usually understood in terms of belief, just as religion itself is. This explanation typically goes as follows: religious belief is

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), pp. 147-150.

<sup>10</sup> It may be argued that due to their extreme minority views and their clearly political motives, the Westboro Baptist Church is primarily a political group masquerading as a religious group, rather than a genuine body of religious believers. However, the group's official stance is that its members affirm the teachings of the Bible as truth. Given this (at least superficial) role of belief, both models for defining religion that this project will consider (i.e. the epistemological model and the social model) would determine that it is indeed a religion.



epistemologically unjustified, and therefore inherently irrational; violence, bigotry, and the like are also irrational; therefore, when a religious person commits some heinous action, it is simply a case of an irrational person doing irrational things. On this view, those who walk away from religion are those who have seen the light of reason and embraced rationality over fantasy. Religious fanatics, meanwhile, are largely dismissed, as if they are too intellectually far gone to even critique. However, this explanation is insufficient. There are countless people who hold unjustified beliefs about various things, but do not weaponize those beliefs to harm others. Unjustified or irrational belief, therefore, does not adequately explain the cause of much religious violence, and criticizing religion in terms of belief does not provide a tenable solution for how that violence can be mitigated.

We cannot deny that belief is a central tenet of much religious practice, for better or worse. However, treating religion merely as an epistemological endeavor, or a way of gathering information to inform certain beliefs about the nature of reality, fails to capture other elements of the religious experience that are equally important. We can see this by looking to the current trend towards secularization within the United States. If religion were merely a matter of belief in the supernatural, then the testimony of religious “nones” (that is, those who claim no particular religious affiliation) would communicate a lack of belief as the driving cause of their disaffiliation. Lack of belief does show up in these conversations, but it is far from the only thing that does. A recent poll shows that about half of American religious “nones” cite disbelief as the primary reason for their attrition. However, the other half claimed other reasons, such as a political dislike of organized

religion, or an experience of social conflict within their former congregations.<sup>11</sup> And another study, which specifically targeted the 18-22-year-old demographic, primarily shows interpersonal and social issues as the driving force of young people abandoning their childhood religions. Nearly a third of respondents stated that they felt disconnected from their faith communities; only 10% claimed that they had stopped believing in God.<sup>12</sup> All of this shows that people are driven away from religion by far more than a lack of faith in the divine. More broadly, it also suggests that there is more to the religious experience than simply cultivating these sorts of beliefs.

Those who consider religion to have outlived its usefulness take themselves to hold a progressive intellectual position, to have in some sense evolved beyond the foolish views of early human history. However, those who take the New Atheist position on *why* religion is problematic ironically form their own commitment to an outdated philosophical view. The view in question is the Enlightenment-era belief in the primacy of the rational, and the relative unimportance of the practical. Dennett and Dawkins reject religious belief not simply because it is empirically unjustifiable, but because they hold that that which is empirically unjustifiable is irrational, and therefore problematic. The New Atheists hold that we ought to reject religion because it makes no theoretical sense, without appreciating the possibility that perhaps it intends to serve a different function altogether. Such a view fails to recognize the reality that human life itself is first and foremost a practical endeavor, rather than a theoretical one.

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<sup>11</sup> Pew Research Center, Aug. 23, 2016, “Choosing a New Church or House of Worship.”

<sup>12</sup> Lifeway Research, 2017, “Church Dropouts: Reasons Young Adults Stay or Go between Ages 18-22. Survey of 2,002 Young Adults who Attended a Protestant Church Regularly in High School.”

My view is that, if we hope to understand religion's increasing irrelevance, we ought to widen the way in which we discuss religious belief. Following the tradition of pragmatist thinkers such as William James, Stephen Asma points out that there are two broad categories of belief: indicative beliefs, which concern that which is literally true, and imperative beliefs, which can yield a practical benefit to the one who holds them even if they cannot be demonstrably proven.<sup>13</sup> Those who take the position of the New Atheists understand religion's goal to be the cultivation of indicative beliefs regarding the nature of reality, and dismiss religion because its claims cannot be verified. However, Asma argues that religion primarily deals in imperative beliefs. I will argue that, given the experiences of religious individuals as mentioned above, the primary function of religion is to bring believers together within a community – and not to articulate literal truths about the divine. We therefore ought not to analyze religion in terms of its rationality (or lack thereof), but in terms of the community relationships that it fosters.

To put this another way, we can explain religion's increasing irrelevance in terms of the social, and not merely the epistemological. People are not only leaving their former faiths behind because of changing beliefs about the divine—they are also leaving because of social problems, as they feel alienated from increasingly extreme religious communities.<sup>14</sup> This alienation can lead individuals to abandon organized religion, even if they still believe in a god or other religious ideologies. As many religious groups turn increasingly inward (and in doing so, often become increasingly militant), more people are finding no tenable place for themselves within those groups. The goal of this project, then,

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<sup>13</sup> Asma, *Why We Need Religion*, pp. 30-35.

<sup>14</sup> To be clear, this is not to say that social factors are the *only* cause of religious attrition, or that (dis)belief does not also play a major role in the current trend.

is to articulate a theory of community that demonstrates what *social* factors are contributing to the decline of religious affiliation. I will argue that many departures from religion are the result of an unstable religious community structure, which takes the universal and the particular to be inherently alienated from one another. This alienation contributes to the breakdown of relationships among the religious group, as individuals take their own interests to be necessarily opposed to those of their community. Those who remain in these broken and alienated communities struggle to develop reciprocal relationships with others, and this can ultimately lead members of such communities to commit violent and extremist behavior against others. Taking this social view of religion, then, will provide us with a new and useful framework with which to critique various religious phenomena. Due to the nature of religious faith, arguing with a religious person merely in terms of indicative beliefs is almost always fruitless; however, if we can demonstrate that a religious group is committing some harm that is primarily social rather than epistemological in nature, then we can critique religion without ever needing to wade into the issue of whether a god or gods literally exist.

This chapter will provide us with the ideological framework upon which the rest of this project will be built. Its structure will be as follows: first, I will define how I'm understanding community by undertaking an interdisciplinary review of the concept. Clarifying what defines a community in general is essential if we hope to understand any particular *form* of community. We will see that a community is a social group grounded upon relations of thick trust between its members. However, all communities are not created equal; thick trust can exist to a greater or lesser degree within a group. The better of a job that a community does of cultivating thick trust among its members, the more

durable that community will be in the long-term. However, many communities fail to cultivate a significant degree of thick trust among their members, because those communities sustain some form of alienation between the individual and the group. Therefore, in addition to the distinction that the literature traditionally draws between community and society, we shall see that we can also differentiate between multiple kinds of community, based upon the degree to which a community successfully cultivates thick trust among its members. The most durable form of community is what we shall call a collaborative community, where thick trust develops through the synthesis of individual and group interests—a synthesis that effectively overcomes alienation between the two.

With community thus defined, I will spend the next section defining what I take to be two necessary conditions for the growth of thick trust among a group (or, to put it differently, two necessary conditions for the birth of a durable community). The extent to which these conditions are satisfied is what sets a community apart from a society, but also what sets a collaborative community apart from other, less stable forms of community. I take thick trust to be predicated upon two things in a relationship: a recognition of others' moral autonomy, and a mutual respect for the rationality of the practical. Both of these conditions work to overcome alienation between the individual and the group, and therefore foster communal relationships. Communities can exist that satisfy one or both of these conditions; however, in order for a community to be considered a collaborative community, it must meet both of them.

With all of this established, the conclusion of this chapter will demonstrate some ways in which religion functions as a community (as we have defined the term). I will argue that we should understand religion as a primarily social endeavor, and not merely as

a way of forming beliefs that are literally true. To make this point, I will highlight several ways in which religion serves a primarily social function in human life. Some benefits of religious practice have little to do with indicative belief—they can be procured regardless of whether the individual affirms the claims of a religious tradition. Other benefits do involve belief, but in these cases, that belief works to provide some primarily social benefit to the one who holds it. We should therefore not think of religion as merely a way of forming indicative beliefs about the world, but of forming imperative beliefs that allow one to participate in a community with others. Defining religion in terms of the social means that we can use our framework for what grounds a durable community to analyze and critique *religious* communities specifically.

## 1.2 What's a Community?

If we are going to understand religion in terms of community relationships, we should begin by defining what, exactly, we mean by the term “community.” Specifically, what sets a group apart as a community, rather than a society or other type of human social group? Ferdinand Tönnies was the first to draw a distinction between society and community, or *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*. The former is founded upon a mutual commitment to a certain form of self-interest, where a group cooperates with one another as needed in order to protect their own interests from others.<sup>15</sup> The latter, on the other hand, typically decries a strong commitment to radical self-interest.<sup>16</sup> These communities often

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<sup>15</sup> See Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*, trans. and introd. Charles P. Loomis (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1957).

<sup>16</sup> Such an account of community understands the concept of self-interest within a primarily Hobbesian framework. Hobbes treats the individual agent as a fundamentally egoistic entity, whose central concern is always to promote her own interests as she sees fit. Hobbes, of course, treats the interests of the individual and the group as if they are in continuous tension with one another – this tension encourages an interpretation of *Gesellschaft versus Gemeinschaft*, which this project will ultimately reject.

encourage shared allegiance to a central authority figure and mutual commitment to definite social roles, all in the name of the group's well-being. Generally speaking, in contrast to a society, a community is not oriented merely towards the interests of its individual members, but rather towards the interests of the group itself.

Taking up this distinction, economists Paul Adler and Charles Heckscher argue that what primarily differentiates *Gemeinschaft* from *Gesellschaft* is the presence of thick trust versus thin trust among members of the group. A community develops in the presence of mutual thick trust, whereas a society is characterized by mere thin trust between its members. Adler and Heckscher distinguish these kinds of trust in this way: when I have thick trust in another person, I possess a high degree of confidence in my ability to predict the behavior of that person. I specifically trust that the person in question will act with the well-being of others and not merely herself in mind.<sup>17</sup> For example, if I have thick trust in a coworker, I can trust that she will not steal money from my unwatched desk, even if she could get away with doing so. Thin trust, on the other hand, assumes self-interest as a primary motivator for others' actions, and makes predictions based upon this assumption.<sup>18</sup> Thin trust would assume that a different coworker would only keep his hands off my property if someone else were present to witness any potential thieving actions. In a community, I can go about my daily life with confidence that those around me are looking out for my well-being as carefully as their own; in a society, I can only assume I will be safe as long as harming me comes with negative consequences to others.

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<sup>17</sup> Paul S. Adler & Charles Heckscher, "Towards Collaborative Community," in *The Firm as a Collaborative Community: Reconstructing Trust in the Knowledge Economy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Some version of the thin versus thick trust distinction is commonly employed and widely accepted in social thought.<sup>19</sup> It is often claimed that thick trust is the thing that makes a community a more durable form of social relation than a society. When one is confident that she can predict the behavior of others, this confidence encourages her to conduct herself in such a way that will benefit the group, as she trusts that others will do the same. This trust, and the mutual respect that comes with it, reduce conflict and encourage altruistic behavior within a group, and yield better long-term outcomes for group relationships. (People generally get along better when they believe that others are not working against them!) However, while they agree with this assessment, Adler and Heckscher argue that we should take things a bit further. They claim we should not only distinguish between society and community writ large, but also between different kinds of community—some of which do a better job of fostering thick trust than others. Adler and Heckscher contend that if our goal is developing a long-lasting community with high levels of thick trust among its members, neither *Gemeinschaft* nor *Gesellschaft* as they are traditionally understood adequately accomplish that goal. This is because both of these social groups foster some degree of tension between the individual and the group, a tension which ultimately stifles the growth of thick trust.<sup>20</sup> Another way to put this is that both of these groups preserve an ideological dichotomy of the individual versus the collective, in which the two entities are conceived of as being essentially distinct from one another, and therefore as having distinct interests.

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<sup>19</sup> See Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: Free Press, 2014); Erich Fromm, *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973).

<sup>20</sup> Adler & Heckscher, "Towards Collaborative Community," p. 20.



Adler and Heckscher argue that this distinction hinders the task of community-building, as it interferes with one's ability to place trust in others. Thick trust requires that I, as a reasonable person, am confident in my ability to assess how someone else, whom I take to be another reasonable person, will conduct themselves in our shared environment. Adler and Heckscher believe that such confidence is only consistently possible when the individual understands her own interests and the interests of the group as being aligned with each other.<sup>21</sup> When the individual understands herself to be alienated from the group, these interests may appear to diverge. One may see one's community as an entity distinct from oneself, with needs opposed to one's personal needs. This can lead to the perception that one must choose between conflicting interests. In the face of this perceived alienation, the individual may eventually choose to act in a manner that seems to serve her own self-interest, at the expense of the group's well-being—and may be perfectly justified in calling this a rational choice.<sup>22</sup> The potential for such behavior undermines others' confidence in the individual, and prevents them from developing a significant degree of thick trust in her. Therefore, while communities produced by these relations may appear stable in the short term, they are subject to continuous tension among their members.

The inherent alienation within *Gesellschaft* (as opposed to *Gemeinschaft*) is relatively well-documented.<sup>23</sup> When a society is founded primarily upon individual self-interest, this type of social group treats each person as an island unto herself. The traditional

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>22</sup> I say “seems to serve her own self-interest” here because this appearance may be false – in a healthy social group, what benefits one will benefit others. However, this reality may be obscured to the individual making the choice, and it is her *perception* of conflicting interests that matters here.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, Marx famously draws upon this language in his account of economic alienation. See *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988).

account is well-known: prior to establishing a society, individuals struggle to meet their own needs within a state of nature. They eventually find that the most effective way to protect their own interests from others is to enter into a social contract with them. However, this social contract, and the society that arises from it, remains at its core a highly individualistic endeavor. The purpose of the social contract is to sustain the interests of each individual, not to unite them towards a common purpose beyond themselves. Such an arrangement therefore preserves the idea that each individual can really only look out for herself, and that the group is just another foreign subject against which she may eventually need to defend her own interests. Adler and Heckscher argue that splitting the interests of individuals in this way degrades any possibility of long-lasting community among those individuals.<sup>24</sup> Community requires trust in others—specifically, trust that they will behave in a way that considers the interests of the whole group, rather than merely the individual. But in a society, the interests of the group itself are subordinate to those of its individual members, and the society only exists because the individuals happen to have found it expedient. Because this group is held together only by a minimal social contract, that contract could easily be cast aside whenever doing so suits the fancy of enough individuals. This emphasis on individual interest leads to a social group that is characterized by human alienation from one another, which precludes the possibility of long-term thick trust between members of the group.

In contrast to this self-interested society, *Gemeinschaft* is often proposed as a less alienated alternative. In such a community, members of the group understand themselves not as isolated individuals, but as parts of a greater social whole. Self-interested behavior

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<sup>24</sup> Adler & Heckscher, “Towards Collaborative Community,” p. 19.

is decried in this type of group, because the community itself is prioritized as a distinct entity. However, despite this apparent overcoming of social isolation, Adler and Heckscher argue that the traditional model of *Gemeinschaft* also sustains structures of alienation, and therefore fails to cultivate extensive thick trust among the group. Whereas *Gesellschaft* prioritizes the interests of the individual over those of the group, *Gemeinschaft* reduces the individual to her membership in the group. *Gemeinschaft* is characterized by a group commitment to an existing status quo, to which individual members are expected to conform. The group often organizes around a central authority figure or ideology, and individual identity is defined by one's relation to that central entity. For Adler and Heckscher, such a community typically emphasizes adherence to a hierarchical system of authority, along with a commitment to definite social roles; these emphases result in a low tolerance for individuality, particularly among those who are reluctant to conform.<sup>25</sup> Within *Gemeinschaft*, one is no longer treated as an individual, but as a part of the community first and foremost. Importantly, the community is treated as an entity unto itself, something that exists above and beyond its individual members – and the needs of which take precedence over those of the individual. This leads to a prevailing perception of community needs versus individual needs.

Adler and Heckscher believe that handling the individual in this way fails to create conditions for thick trust among a group. To see how this is so, we can look to the social criticisms of the Frankfurt School critical theorists. To borrow a term from Herbert Marcuse, we can say that this type of community flattens out the individual, which results

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

in her individuality effectively being lost within the group.<sup>26</sup> Following Freudian social theory, Marcuse argues that many social relations fundamentally repress individual human drives and desires. In such a repressive context, individual freedom is lost to a rigid social structure that provides a new identity at the cost of one's old one. The group therefore functions not as a union of unique and autonomous individuals, but as a homogeneous collective, a collective to which the individual is sacrificed. Of course, in reality, no group is actually homogeneous, and individual strengths and needs are not identical across the group. Such a group fails to appreciate this reality, however. An expectation to downplay one's individuality, and to effectively put the needs of one's community ahead of one's own, can foster resentment for that community among its members. Indeed, Sigmund Freud argues that such resentment is common, and that it is the root of all sorts of problems in human relationships.<sup>27</sup> A frustrated and repressed individual may act out in a way that satisfies her own desires, even if doing so puts the well-being of her community at risk. This has negative consequences for the possibility of thick trust. In such a community, where individual needs and desires are often subordinated to the interests of the group, it is difficult to reasonably anticipate how others will behave. This community is always prone to outbursts in which an individual seeks to satisfy some overwhelming repressed desire, often at the expense of the group, which she takes to be an oppressive alien entity. In such a situation, relations of thick trust are effectively precluded, for one cannot develop reasonable confidence in her ability to predict the behavior of others.

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<sup>26</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 57.

<sup>27</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), p. 15.

In *Gemeinschaft*, the group is exalted at the expense of the individual; in *Gesellschaft*, the individual is prioritized over the group. However, despite the apparently opposite nature of these problems, they share a central root. Both of these social groups preserve an ideological dichotomy of the individual versus the collective, which makes it difficult for thick trust to develop among their members. In both of these relations, the members of the group understand their own needs as being distinct from the needs of the group—leading them to believe that they must choose between the two. Any task that they undertake is treated as *either* work for the sake of the individual, or work for the sake of the group, but never both.<sup>28</sup> As long as the interests of the individual and the group are taken to be at odds with each other in this way, it is difficult to develop thick trust in other members of the group, for there is always a risk that the individual will fall into some destructive self-interested behavior.

In contrast to these, Adler and Heckscher argue that a community functions best when its members recognize their interdependence with one another, while nonetheless maintaining their status as unique, autonomous agents.<sup>29</sup> In other words, they must acknowledge their community as an essential and inseparable part of themselves, rather than as something distinct from their lives as individuals, even as they recognize that they cannot be reduced to their community. This type of community overcomes alienation through an emphasis on cooperation, in a context where individual needs and strengths are respected. It recognizes that working together towards a mutually beneficial end goal produces the greatest results not only for the group itself, but also for individuals.<sup>30</sup> Such a

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<sup>28</sup> Adler & Heckscher, “Towards Collaborative Community,” p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

community, which Adler and Heckscher call a collaborative community, does not require the individual to neglect her own interests, or to reduce herself to an undefined part of a collective. It instead requires her active and continuous participation in a social group, one from which her individual existence is simultaneously distinct yet inseparable. Such a community avoids the pitfalls of *Gesellschaft*, where individuals may feel that they must choose between their own interests and those of the group—the interests are recognized to be one and the same! However, unlike in *Gemeinschaft*, the individual members of a collaborative community are not leveled within the group. There is no expectation to submit oneself to hierarchical social norms that one may find disagreeable. This community instead considers the unique strengths and unique needs of its individual members, preserves their status as autonomous participants in a group effort, and works to build a community in which all of its distinct members can flourish.

This concept of a collaborative community provides an alternative to the traditional account of *Gemeinschaft*. In contrast to other versions of community, Adler and Heckscher contend that it is a collaborative community which is the most stable form of human social life in the long term. This is because only this type of community reliably generates thick trust between its members—and thick trust is an essential element of durable social relations. In both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, Adler and Heckscher criticize what they see as an alienation of the individual and the group from one other. Because individuals in these groups understand their community as an entity distinct from themselves, those individuals must perpetually choose between self-interest and the interest of the group. Thick trust is essentially a confidence in other people that they will refrain from destructive self-interested behavior. For Adler and Heckscher, neither *Gemeinschaft* nor *Gesellschaft*

sufficiently discourage such destructive self-interest, for they always run the risk of the individual elevating her own perceived interests above those of the group. In such a context, thick trust in other people is difficult to establish, and a community is therefore difficult to hold together. A collaborative community, however, effectively cultivates thick trust because it reveals the interests of the individual and the group to be synthesized, in a way that *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* do not. We can therefore think of collaborative community as an attempt to move beyond the traditional distinction of *Gemeinschaft* versus *Gesellschaft*—and with it, the prevalent Western tendency to sharply divide the individual from the group. Within a collaborative community, radical notions of individualism are recognized to be detrimental to the possibility of long-lasting social relationships. However, this paradigm nonetheless simultaneously seeks to preserve the interests of the individual (which cannot be reduced to those of the group) as a uniquely important element of those same relationships. A person who understands her own well-being as being connected to that of the group is unlikely to behave in such a way as to compromise the well-being of that group. And when an individual's own needs are met, there is far less chance that some dark repressed desire will manifest into violent or destructive behavior at the expense of others. It is therefore much easier for members of a collaborative community to place their trust in other individuals. This trust in one's fellow group members results in a community that is more stable overall, better equipped to meet the needs of all its members, and therefore more likely to last in the long-term.

### 1.3 Creating Collaborative Community: Two Criteria for Thick Trust

As they consider community in its various forms, Adler and Heckscher employ thick trust as their defining concept. However, one shortcoming of their account is that they

do not explicitly articulate the conditions that are required for thick trust to develop between members of a group. One may participate in hundreds of social groups and meet thousands of people over the course of one's lifetime, but only develop thick trust in a fraction of them. What is it that sets those few meaningful relationships apart from the rest? And why do some groups successfully set the stage for a collaborative community, while others fall to instability and infighting despite efforts to foster community?

Human relationships do not occur in a vacuum; they take place within a particular practical context. A community, like any other type of social relation, begins to form under given conditions which can either promote or impede its development. Understanding what conditions promote the growth of thick trust is critical if we wish to present collaborative community as a social ideal towards which we ought to strive. These conditions can provide us with a blueprint for how to best organize particular communities. Given our discussion thus far, I believe that we can articulate two necessary conditions for the growth of thick trust—conditions that are consistent with Adler and Heckscher's account, even if they are not explicitly stated therein. We can put these conditions as follows: 1. Members of a group must take each other to be participating in their relationships as autonomous moral agents; and 2. Members of a community must define rationality in terms of the practical and not merely the theoretical. These are not necessarily the only conditions required for thick trust (in this sense, they may not be sufficient conditions), but I contend that if these conditions are not met, then thick trust cannot develop within a group. We shall see that both of these conditions work to overcome some degree of alienation between the individual and the group, and it is this overcoming that sets the stage for thick trust to develop within relationships. A community can exist that only satisfies one of these



conditions (I suspect that the traditional account of *Gemeinschaft* describes one such community); however, in order to effectively overcome social alienation and therefore achieve the greatest degree of stability, a collaborative community must satisfy both of them.

### 1.3.1 First Criterion: Mutual Perception of Moral Autonomy

First, in order for thick trust to develop between two or more people, all involved parties must take each other to be acting as autonomous moral agents. Properly treating the concept of autonomy is itself a task worthy of an entire dissertation; for our purposes, a brief overview should suffice. Autonomy can be widely defined as an individual's capacity for self-governance.<sup>31</sup> It is often divided into the domains of moral autonomy and personal autonomy, although the distinction between these two is sometimes contested.<sup>32</sup> Without getting into this debate, I take Adler and Heckscher's account to be primarily interested in moral autonomy, so we will set the issue of personal autonomy (that is, autonomy regarding matters without obvious moral weight) aside. Moral autonomy concerns whether an agent's moral actions can be understood as having the agent's own will as their source. The concept can be traced back to Kant, who takes an individual to be autonomous insofar as she is able to hold herself accountable to the demands of the universal moral law. The stakes are high with this issue, as moral responsibility implies moral agency; if we are to hold people accountable for their actions, then we must in a sense be able to assign responsibility for those actions to the people who commit them.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 3-20.

<sup>32</sup> See Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 117-148.

<sup>33</sup> Or, to put this in Kantian terms, necessity implies possibility.

One of the most poignant questions regarding moral autonomy is this: under what circumstances, if any, can an agent's capacity for free moral choice be compromised? Most theorists of autonomy agree that there are at least some moral choices which are clearly not autonomous, and for which the individual therefore cannot be considered morally responsible. For example, a person who has been kidnapped at gunpoint and forced to rob a bank would not be considered morally culpable for the crime. However, such obvious examples notwithstanding, drawing a line as to what does and does not compromise one's moral autonomy can be difficult. At one end of the spectrum are contemporary "thin" views of autonomy, which seek to retain at least some degree of agency (and therefore of responsibility) even for choices made under certain extenuating circumstances.<sup>34</sup> At the other end is Kant, who claims that one's autonomy can be compromised not only by external entities, but also by one's own non-rational desires and emotions.<sup>35</sup> Kant's view on autonomy is almost universally derided at this point, as it is often accused of a compartmental understanding of human nature which takes reason and emotion to be inherently distinct.<sup>36</sup> However, even if we accept that Kant's criteria for autonomy are too strict, we are still left with two opposing realities: moral responsibility requires the capacity for free moral choice, and moral responsibility is (at least sometimes) overridden by factors outside of the individual's control.

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<sup>34</sup> One such account is provided by Uma Narayan, "Minds of Their Own: Choices, Autonomy, Cultural Practices, and Other Women," in *A Mind of One's Own*, ed. Louise Antony and Charlotte Witt (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 418-432.

<sup>35</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, (New York: Cambridge, 1996), 4:399 & 4:433.

<sup>36</sup> One important criticism is given by John Stuart Mill, whose account of autonomy expands to include the agent's own desires as sufficient cause for autonomous moral action. See Mill, *On Liberty* (Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche Books Limited, 2001), p. 53.

What matters here is whether the action in question can be said to have the agent itself as its cause, or whether it is caused by something external to her. Establishing the agent as the originator of her moral choices has significant implications not only for the possibility of morality itself (as if that were not enough!), but also for the possibility of communal relationships. Trusting another person within a community requires that I take that person to be capable of exercising moral self-governance. In our previous example, I said that thick trust means I can trust that my coworker will not steal money from my unwatched desk, even if she would face no punishment for doing so. This means that I trust my coworker to hold herself to a particular moral standard, one which values the interests of others alongside her own, even if there is no one else present to impose such a standard upon her. However, in the absence of thick trust, I could not reasonably place such confidence in another person. Thin trust (as opposed to thick) assumes that a Hobbesian sort of radical self-interest is the primary motivator behind others' actions, and only places confidence in others' social behavior when a Hobbesian type of social contract is in place. Such a social contract exists to impose behavioral limitations upon individuals, and assumes that in the absence of such limitations, individuals would default to their own interests at others' expense. Thin trust, therefore, takes individuals as unwilling and/or unable to hold themselves to moral standards beyond those of radical self-interest. This unwillingness and/or inability to exercise one's moral autonomy undermines the possibility of communal relationships among members of the group. Therefore, articulating the conditions under which community is possible means articulating the conditions under which moral self-governance is possible.

What we see here, then, are two related dichotomies: that of heteronomous versus autonomous decision-making, and that of self-interest versus group interest. As Adler and Heckscher describe it, a society takes its members to be necessarily self-interested, and heteronomously compels them to make choices that (prima facie) conflict with their self-interested tendencies. Meanwhile, members of a community take one another to be in some sense beyond motives of pure self-interest, and trust one another to make moral choices without external coercion. We therefore see the exercise of individual moral autonomy in community relationships, to a degree that we do not see in a society. But are these dichotomies legitimate? It could be objected that I am inaccurately describing the social contract as a heteronomous imposition, when it should actually be understood as an autonomous expression of the group's collective will. Hegel, for instance, makes such a claim; he argues that the social contract is not a source of heteronomy at all, but rather an amalgamation of the universalizable rational will of all its individual members. Hegel claims that in a society, rules and requirements are freely given by all agents to themselves, and that actions performed in compliance with such rules should be considered autonomous, since they have the will of the agent as their source.<sup>37</sup> Importantly, such a society proceeds from the understanding that individual and group interests are not fundamentally distinct, but mutually constituted. In such a situation, then, it would be strange to speak of social rules as heteronomous entities, since they have their beginning with the individual and serve the individual's interests.

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<sup>37</sup> GWF Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. S. W. Dyde (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), p. xxix.

It's worth saying that Adler and Heckscher's account of collaborative community largely agrees with Hegel regarding individual versus group interests; both accounts conclude that what is good for the community is also what is ultimately good for the individual, and that destructive self-interest interferes with the actualization of all involved parties. In other words, both accounts would argue that the distinction between self-interest and the interests of the group is a false dichotomy. However, there is a major disagreement between these two accounts concerning whether the social contract should be considered heteronomous to the agent. This disagreement raises critical considerations for the possibility of communal relationships. To be autonomous is to be self-governing; therefore, the primary thing at stake here is what ought to be considered a heteronomous influence upon the agent's free choice. Hegel's account describes a society where the interests of the individual and the collective have already been revealed to be synthesized. In other words, members of the group do not perceive their own needs as being alienated from those of the group. The rules and requirements of the group, therefore, do not appear as heteronomous entities to the individual, because she understands them as working not only for the benefit of others, but also for herself—and as being given by her own will. Presumably, such a society would only set forth rules which aligned with the universalizable free will of all rational agents, and those agents would comply with the understanding that they are freely choosing to do what benefits everyone (and therefore also themselves). Under such circumstances, it is quite reasonable to conclude that the social contract as Hegel would understand the concept is not heteronomous to the agent. This synthesis of interests, however, is not at all apparent in the society that Adler and Heckscher describe. Instead, they depict a society where destructive self-interest reigns, even within the social contract;

its mandates function to preserve the individual's interests, and the society is prone to instability because its members take their own interests to be opposed to those of the group. In other words, Adler and Heckscher describe a Hobbesian society that retains a radically self-interested understanding of human nature.<sup>38</sup> It is a social group characterized by rules with which no one really wants to cooperate, rules which are only begrudgingly accepted out of fear of punishment (or fear that one's own interests will be threatened). The social contract is therefore understood by members of such a society as a source of heteronomy, because the mutual constitution of the individual and the group has not yet been revealed.

What matters, then, is not whether the social contract objectively *is* a heteronomous force upon the will of the individual, but merely whether she *understands* it to be so. The ultimate truth of the matter may very well be that one's interests and those of the group should not be distinguished from one another (everyone cited in this conversation would, in fact, agree with this statement). However, if this truth is not recognized by the members of the group, then those individuals are likely to experience some friction within their relationships. If one takes her own interests to be fundamentally opposed to those of the group, she will always see the requirements of the social contract as alien restrictions upon her behavior. The problem of alienation, then, is deeply apparent here. What counts as the "right" or moral course of action is directly informed by how one conceives of one's own relation to the social group in question. Begrudgingly abiding by the social contract betrays a belief that one's own interests and the interests of others, or of the group itself, are opposed to one another. Meanwhile, developing thick trust in other people means recognizing that one's own interests and the interests of others are in some way intertwined.

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<sup>38</sup> Adler & Heckscher, "Towards Collaborative Community," p.19.

The project of community-building is, at its core, a project of overcoming alienation. Recognizing others as autonomous moral agents is an action that works to overcome alienation between the individual and the group, because it begins to recognize the interests of these two to be mutually constituted. Societies treat the individual as a creature who must be contained by a heteronomous system of checks and balances. Communities break down this alienation by removing the need for an external check upon individual behavior. Members of such communities trust one another to recognize that radical self-interest is an illusion, and that what benefits the individual in the end is what also benefits her community.

In short, we can say that societies and communities operate on two distinct views on moral autonomy, one of which is grounded in structures of alienation while the other is not. Societies begin with the view that self-interest and group interests are fundamentally distinct from one another, and assume a lack of robust moral agency on the part of their members. To compensate for this, the social contract is imposed as a set of apparently heteronomous rules, in order to secure certain desired behaviors. This solution only further cultivates alienation between the individual and the group. Meanwhile, communities begin by taking individuals as capable of moral self-governance, and leave them to exercise this capacity instead of imposing rules upon them. Social norms present not as alien entities to which one is subject, but rather as a free choice made by the individual herself to pursue the interests of the community (and therefore also her own interests). Building a collaborative community requires that people recognize each other to be free moral agents—and by extension, it requires an overcoming of alienation between the individual

and the group that would pit their interests against each other. The standard Western distinction of self-interest versus the interests of the group, therefore, must be reconsidered.

### 1.3.2 Second Criterion: The Primacy of the Practical

Discussions of autonomy are often connected to discussions of rationality. Perhaps the most infamous such account is Kant's, which claims that an autonomous action is necessarily a rational one, and vice versa.<sup>39</sup> Kant is well-known for placing a divide between human reason and human emotion; he sees the latter as obscuring the voice of one's reason, and as offering heteronomous motivations for behavior which can interfere with one's pursuit of the moral law. Kant's view is representative of the Enlightenment tradition at large, which elevates reason to a lofty position and presents rationality as a standard towards which all ought to strive. This view understands reason and emotion as being diametrically opposed to one another—if something is not rational, then it is therefore *irrational*, a term that is not only descriptive but has come to carry all sorts of negative connotations.<sup>40</sup> In turn, this view privileges what is deemed rational at the expense of what is not by declaring the rational to be ultimately desirable and, therefore, anything not rational to be undesirable.

Kant and his intellectual descendants have been widely criticized for this dichotomy, with good reason. When reason and emotion are polarized in this way, with reason privileged, a good-faith understanding of the human condition becomes difficult to

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<sup>39</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (New York: Cambridge, 1996), 5:33.

<sup>40</sup> In order to avoid these negative connotations, I will be following the example of feminist theorists such as Genevieve Lloyd, who suggests that we ought to think of emotions as non-rational as opposed to irrational. It is not the case that emotion stands in stark contrast to reason, or that an emotional experience is irrational in the same sense that believing  $2+2=5$  is irrational. The term "non-rational" seeks to create distance from the negative connotations of being "irrational," and I will primarily employ the former.



attain. We know now that human beings are not dualistic entities with a rational mind trapped within an irrational body, caught up in an endless struggle between the two; even our most apparently “rational” decisions are often heavily influenced by emotion, and to speak of a purely rational “view from nowhere” is oxymoronic.<sup>41</sup> Evolutionary studies show that the neocortex, the part of the brain responsible for logical planning and reasoning, is the most recently developed structure within the organ; our emotional experience, regulated largely by the limbic system, functions independently of our reason, and processes the brain’s initial reaction to a majority of stimuli.<sup>42</sup> This suggests that we should certainly not think of ourselves primarily as creatures of reason; if anything, we are creatures of emotion who have only recently come to dabble in rational thought. In practice, the human being’s necessarily emotional nature reveals itself at every turn. Recent research in psychology suggests that despite the evolution of the neocortex, the human decision-making process is still primarily of an emotional nature, not a rational one. When faced with a choice, we tend to rationalize after the fact to justify an emotionally-driven response, rather than to logically discern the proper course of action before acting.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, William James argues that an ardent commitment to rationality is itself an emotional endeavor; one who maintains a skeptical attitude towards that which cannot be rationally demonstrated does so in order to protect herself against the *emotional* experience of being wrong—not to discern truth for its own sake.<sup>44</sup> All of this can be summed up as follows:

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<sup>41</sup> I have in mind here, of course, the dualistic philosophical tradition as represented by thinkers such as Descartes and Husserl.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Asma, *Why We Need Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp.3-5.

<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Random House Inc., 2012), especially p.29.

<sup>44</sup> William James, “Will to Believe,” in *Pragmatism and Other Writings* (Penguin, 2000), Section VII.

human experience is not merely (or even primarily) rational, and taking it to be so drastically misunderstands the nature of the human being.

This is why rationality as it is understood in the Enlightenment tradition cannot provide us with the thick trust required to ground a durable community. The concept of thick trust does certainly have a rational element; if I hope to develop confidence in my ability to predict the behavior of someone else, it helps if I can assume that she is conducting herself as a reasonable individual, since by definition one cannot reasonably predict erratic behavior. However, basing our predictions of other people's choices merely upon our own estimations of their rationality leads to a number of problems. First, if I tend to analyze the potential actions of others purely in terms of what is rational, this analysis will often yield an inaccurate result, because people (even objectively rational people) do not base most of their decisions primarily upon the dictates of their reason. They instead make decisions within a given practical context, and can be heavily influenced by their non-rational emotional experiences and other compelling factors within that context. Reason can and does play a role in this decision-making process, but it is not the only influential factor, or even the primary one, as we have seen above. Second, even though reason is often treated as a faculty that produces self-evident truths, it can often be difficult to discern what is genuinely the "rational" course of action in a given context. "Reason" as we tend to describe it is not as universalizable as one may think. What may be considered rational to a person outside of a situation may be viewed as deeply irrational by someone within it, and vice versa. For example, feminist theorist Uma Narayan writes about the practice of veiling, in which some Indian women choose to wear cumbersome traditional clothing even when they are not explicitly required to do so. Narayan points out that many

Western feminists view the practice as irrational; if these poor Eastern “dupes of patriarchy” could only be set free from the oppressive norms clouding the exercise of their reason, they would surely choose to cast their veils aside and live as “enlightened” Western women do.<sup>45</sup> However, for Narayan, the choice to veil is often a considered and rational response to the practical conditions of a woman’s life, one that is made after much careful reasoning. For instance, a woman may choose to wear a veil in order to avoid unwanted attention from men in public, or to maintain a good relationship with traditionally-minded family members. Narayan argues that such women are not irrational dupes at all, but rather that what is “rational” in one context is not necessarily universalizable. Therefore, choices made in response to particular conditions should hardly be condemned as “irrational” by those outside of that practical context, because they represent thoughtful and reasonable responses to a set of circumstances. These realities demonstrate that individualistic views of reason, which take *one’s own* reason as a universal standard while distancing themselves from practical “irrational” elements of the human experience, will often fail to accurately predict how others will behave.

Discussions of community, therefore, must occur in a context that broadens the definition of what is considered rational. Hegel’s famous claim that the real is rational and the rational is real comes to mind here, demonstrating that rationality cannot be understood outside of a given practical context.<sup>46</sup> Marx also recognized this reality; in his theses on Feuerbach, he criticizes that intellectual tradition which attempts to sever the theoretical

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<sup>45</sup> Uma Narayan, “Minds of Their Own: Choices, Autonomy, Cultural Practices, and Other Women,” in *A Mind of One’s Own*, eds. Louise Antony and Charlotte Witt (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 418-432.

<sup>46</sup> GWF Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. xix.

from lived human experience, noting that all social life is essentially practical.<sup>47</sup> This means simply that any attempt to understand human behavior must be made in reference to some concrete practical circumstance, for individual decisions cannot be understood separate from their contexts. We can take this even further, however, and discuss this issue specifically in terms of trust. If the members of a community engage with each other as if they were people of pure reason, elevating the exercise of the rational while dismissing the practical,<sup>48</sup> it will be quite difficult for those individuals to develop thick trust in one another. To share thick trust with another person means to develop confidence in one's ability to predict another's behavior; however, if one's assessment of others takes place purely in terms of what one personally takes to be rational, those predictions will often be proven false. In other words, holding others to a standard of pure reason erodes the possibility of trust between parties over time. If I expect others to behave how I would consider "rationally," I will be continuously proven wrong, and I will eventually come to believe that I cannot trust anyone. Furthermore, my own criteria for what makes a choice "rational" are informed by the practical conditions in which I find myself, and the "rational" course of action may vary in dissimilar conditions. It is incredibly short-sighted to assume that others, particularly those who live in oppressive or otherwise suboptimal situations, should set their own situations aside and let some ideal of pure reason guide their choices. Such an expectation dismisses the lived experiences of one's fellow community members. When an individual's reasoned response to a situation is dismissed

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<sup>47</sup> Karl Marx, *The German Ideology, Including Theses on Feuerbach* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), p, 569.

<sup>48</sup> As, for instance, the New Atheists encourage their readers to do.

by others, this hinders the possibility of meaningful, trusting relationships between those parties.

Instead, if I hope to understand how others will behave, I must recognize that the human decision-making process (both my own and that of others) is always already embedded within a practical context, and that evaluating actions in terms of pure reason alone does not accurately account for this reality. This brings us to our second condition for the growth of thick trust. We can put this as follows: Thick trust can only develop when the members of a group define rationality in terms of the practical and not merely the theoretical. This second condition works to overcome alienation between the individual and the group by recognizing that the human experience cannot be universalized at the expense of the particular. Privileging the rational takes reason as a universal standard, as an equally accessible aspect of human experience. However, doing so often ignores the practical elements of a person's life, and it alienates individuals from others by encouraging a simplistic view from nowhere that only focuses on one's "rational" experiences. This position undermines the possibility of meaningful relationships with other people by ignoring what makes each community unique, and by distancing the individual from her lived experience within that community.

Therefore, an essential part of building a durable community is recognizing that we are simultaneously theoretical and practical beings, and that what is "rational" is not merely theoretical. Communities are not groups of philosopher kings who remove themselves from the practical and set aside their emotions to engage in rational discourse; they are groups embedded within a particular context, which seek to find ways to navigate the particularities of their own experiences. Communities do not merely seek to provide

rational answers to the problems of life, but also to help their members learn to cope with experiences that are often non-rational in nature. Living with others means learning to navigate conditions that may make no rational sense (or at least make no sense outside of a particular context). We can be fully aware that the things we feel (for example) are not rational in the Enlightenment sense of the term, but that awareness on its own does not eliminate those feelings or help us to address them. Solutions that are primarily rational in nature, which do not account for this emotional element, come off as cold and disconnected, and reflect a lack of genuine connection between parties. They betray a rationalistic view which seeks to isolate itself from the human experience, rather than to embrace it. Trusting other people means not only recognizing their rationality, but also acknowledging that their choices are often influenced by practical factors, which may or may not appear “rational” to others. Such a community does not treat these practical realities as obstacles which one should strive to overcome; it instead recognizes them as necessary elements of the human experience.

To sum up, this section has sought to define two necessary conditions for the growth of thick trust among members of a group. These two conditions demonstrate that thick trust has both rational and practical elements. In order for a community to flourish, its members must participate as free agents whose rational responses to their practical situations are respected as such. Accounting for these realities of the human experience allows organic, meaningful relationships to develop between individuals, because those individuals can feel confident in their predictions of other people’s behavior. Communities that satisfy both of these conditions therefore enjoy a high degree of stability, as members of the group

understand that group as a place where their needs will be consistently recognized and satisfied.

#### 1.4 Reimagining Religion as Community

The preceding pages have demonstrated what I take to be two necessary conditions for the development of thick trust within a community. With all of this talk of community writ large, however, we have said little about particular *kinds* of communities. At this point we can now turn to the community that we are really interested in, i.e. the religious community. To talk of religion in terms of community means to recognize that the practice of religion has necessary social elements. We can point to such elements within all of the major world faiths, albeit to varying degrees.<sup>49</sup> To be clear, it is not controversial to state that religion is in some way a social phenomenon. Durkheim famously understood religious practice as the unification of a social group around a central concept of the sacred, with the purpose of creating a single moral community.<sup>50</sup> And even religion's most ardent critics recognize some of its social aspects, even if they do not take those aspects alone to be definitive of the practice.<sup>51</sup> However, in contemporary scholarship, religion is still usually discussed primarily in terms of individual belief, and only secondarily in terms of those beliefs' social function. It is treated as a way of forming one's personal ontology, which then influences how one interacts with others. My view is that these two should be reversed—we should think of religion primarily in terms of the social, and understand

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<sup>49</sup> Some religions emphasize group worship practices, while others seek the divine through more individual means. I take religion to be necessarily social in the sense that, even if religious practices occur primarily at the individual level, religious belief itself is instilled through education from others—a necessarily social process.

<sup>50</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 47.

<sup>51</sup> For instance, there is Dennett's definition of religion as a social system that seeks to inform beliefs.

religious belief as serving a primarily social function. In other words, religion is not a matter of individual beliefs that inform social behaviors, but rather of social behaviors that inform individual beliefs. Differentiating between two different kinds of belief, indicative and imperative, will provide us with a useful distinction to clarify this point. The goal of this section, therefore, is to demonstrate that religious practice is not merely a matter of seeking information about reality that is literally true. We should think of religion primarily as a practice by which an individual seeks out the kinds of relationships that characterize a community – and takes up beliefs that are instrumental to this end.

My view echoes that of Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, in which he claims that religion is one avenue by which individuals seek a place for themselves within a group. For Taylor (as a Hegelian), human history is a continuous series of attempts to enter into relation with those beyond oneself. While religious affiliation is on the decline in many places, there has also been a recent resurgence of religious belief in particular social circles, perhaps most notably among the American far right. For Taylor, it is no coincidence that such a group, which currently represents an ideological minority, would be drawn to religion. He argues that this resurgence is not primarily a matter of belief in Christian tenets for their own sake, but rather a desire for the kind of homogeneous group identity that characterized earlier periods in American history. He writes that

part of what drove the Moral Majority and motivates the Christian right in the USA is an aspiration to re-establish something of the fractured neo-Durkheimian



understanding that used to define the nation, where being American would once more have a connection with theism, with being “one nation under God.”<sup>52</sup>

Religious belief here, for Taylor, does not arise from an individual desire to know more about God and one’s place in the universe. Religion (specifically Christianity) rather represents a social institution that harkens back to a historical moment in which the believer would have felt connected to a wider social group. Uniting around a central religious ideology allows those who feel alienated from their society to find a form of community. The contents of these religious beliefs are not particularly important; for the purposes of community-building, it does not really matter if a group believes in Jesus, or Brahma, or the Flying Spaghetti Monster. What matters is rather that the members of the group share a certain set of core values, or beliefs about their place in the world. For the aforementioned Moral Majority, their particular group identity is defined in terms of their shared beliefs regarding social issues and Christian moral standards. Sharing moral values begins to set the stage for relations of thick trust between individuals, enabling the development of a community.<sup>53</sup>

#### 1.4.1. Religious Community with or without Belief

One interesting thing about organized religion is that it can work to instill these values, and therefore provide a sense of community belonging, even if one has not fully cultivated certain religious beliefs. To see an example of this, we can look to one of the most common times for a person to take up religion: during childhood. Religion in early

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<sup>52</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 487-488.

<sup>53</sup> Shared values, at their core, represent a validation of the practical situations in which the members of a community find themselves. This is therefore a matter of satisfying our second criterion for thick trust.

life begins as a social practice—for children from religious families, their earliest exposure to such ideas almost always comes through education from a faithful family member. The influence of such education cannot be overstated, as the strongest predictor of religiosity in early life is religious affiliation of an adult caregiver. It should not be surprising that young people tend to identify with the religions of their families. However, the influence is long-lasting; in the United States, parental religious commitment is shown to be positively correlated with children’s religious practice through late adolescence—if a teenager’s parents are religious, it is likely that the teenager will claim the same religion until at least their eighteenth birthday.<sup>54</sup> Of course, as a child grows up, they will begin to form their own beliefs about the world, and for the child of a religious family, religious beliefs factor into that worldview. Older children can decide for themselves whether they personally find the faiths of their families compelling. However, at the young age at which many children are first introduced to religious concepts, such beliefs can hardly be considered robust or fully formed. A child does not participate in religious activities because they have cultivated meaningful beliefs about complex religious ideologies; they do so because they are placed into those activities by their parents. For such young “believers,” therefore, religious practice is not primarily a matter of belief, but rather of participating in the communities of their families. In light of this reality, it has been suggested that we can think of religious identities as social artifacts, which are cultivated through community religious practices. On this view, religious identity is formed socially,

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<sup>54</sup> Pew Research Center, Sept. 10, 2020, “U.S. Teens Take After Their Parents Religiously, Attend Services Together and Enjoy Family Rituals”

and then experienced individually as a product of that social development.<sup>55</sup> Children learn about religious ideologies that hold significance to their family, just as they would learn about other matters of cultural and historical importance. They learn that to be part of their family unit, and of their wider social community, means to take up a certain attitude towards a particular religion. This religious community provides them with support to navigate the various experiences of their early lives, as well as presenting an additional avenue by which to strengthen their communal ties with their existing family.

Participating in family religious traditions is therefore a crucial part of developing and maintaining communal relationships. It is worth noting here that we can distinguish between public religious practice, and private religious belief. Even if a child is too young to have developed a robust personal stance on complex religious ideology, that child is still encouraged to participate in the social aspects of religious practice. Studies suggest that young people raised in a religious context tend to participate in religious rites primarily to appease their families; it has been shown that young people are likely to engage in religious practice (such as attending a worship service) at the same frequency as their parents, even if they blatantly disagree with their parents about theological or ideological issues.<sup>56</sup> This suggests that, in early life, religion is primarily a social endeavor: as young people begin to locate their own places within their communities, they participate in longstanding religious practices in order to be accepted by others within those groups. The social benefits of participating in these practices can be procured regardless of whether the young person

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<sup>55</sup> Duane Bidwell, "Practicing the Religious Self: Buddhist-Christian Identity as Social Artifact," in *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, volume 28, 2008, pp. 3-12.

<sup>56</sup> Pew Research Center, Sept. 10, 2020, "U.S. Teens Take After Their Parents Religiously, Attend Services Together and Enjoy Family Rituals"

actually forms a belief about the truth status of a religious claim. One can make friends and find a support system at church even if God is not part of that support system.

To expand upon this point, it is significant that most religious young people who abandon their faith, do so in their late teens or early 20's.<sup>57</sup> This period of life often coincides with the introduction of new potential communities: college classmates, co-workers at one's first major job, or newfound friends in a new city. It is often suggested that young people who renounce their faith after moving away from home do so for primarily intellectual reasons: a college education inspires them to question the dubious claims of their old religion, and they come away as a newly enlightened atheist. Surely this is the case in some circumstances. But we should also consider that this is the same moment in a person's life when their place within their existing community shifts, while they simultaneously enter into new communities. Moving away from home for education or vocation often means that one is unable to participate in one's existing religious community to the same extent as before. Identifying as a part of that community therefore becomes less important, as the other members of that community become a less central presence in the experiences of one's life. One will necessarily find more value in those communities where one lives and moves daily than in those which one has physically left behind. Therefore, we should not simply assume that all young adults who walk away from their childhood religion do so for intellectual reasons. We should consider the possibility that such individuals simply no longer find social utility in their former childhood communities.

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<sup>57</sup> Chan, M., Tsai, K.M. & Fuligni, A.J. Changes in Religiosity Across the Transition to Young Adulthood. *J Youth Adolescence* **44**, 1555–1566 (2015).

#### 1.4.2. The Social Function of Religious Belief

Up to this point I have spoken of religion as a primarily social endeavor, which may or may not lead a person to develop beliefs in any particular religious tenets. In the aforementioned examples, belief could play a role in the formation of community relationships, but those relationships could also develop in the absence of robust belief, as long as the religious community structure remained intact. However, it would be intellectually dishonest to claim that religious belief is *never* important. In fact, many religious people experience their beliefs as the *most* important element of their religious practice. They build their entire lives upon these beliefs—beliefs that inform how they choose to navigate the world on both an individual and social level. For these individuals whose religious experience is necessarily a matter of belief, wouldn't it make sense to talk about that religious experience as a primarily epistemological phenomenon?

We should absolutely recognize the importance of belief in such cases; however, we should be cautious as to how we think of these beliefs. When we speak of belief, we must remember that there are different *kinds* of belief, which serve different functions in the lives of those who hold them. A misunderstanding regarding the nature of religious belief can yield inaccurate conclusions regarding religion's proper place in human life. William James claims that belief is never an end in itself; it is useful only insofar as it fulfills some pragmatic end for the one who takes it up. James therefore conceives of beliefs as "teleological instruments" that assist an individual with navigating something that she is experiencing in her life.<sup>58</sup> Depending on the desired function, these instruments can sometimes serve that function independently of whether they pick out

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<sup>58</sup> William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," *Mind*, 4, no. 15 (1879): p. 319.

literal truths about the world. Taking up this framework, Stephen Asma differentiates between what he calls indicative and imperative beliefs, the former of which is experienced cognitively and the latter of which is experienced emotionally.<sup>59</sup> Indicative beliefs pick out literal facts about the nature of the world, while imperative beliefs involve instinctive and emotional responses to stimuli rather than rational ones.

When religion is condemned, it is usually condemned on the grounds that it does not cultivate literally accurate beliefs. In other words, religion is treated as an attempt to develop indicative beliefs that ultimately fails. But Asma claims that this is the wrong way to conceive of religious belief. He argues that it should instead be thought of as a type of imperative belief, one which provides an emotional response to a problem instead of a purely logical one.<sup>60</sup> There are a number of aspects of the human experience that reason alone simply cannot address. How can one make logical sense of death, or disease, or the host of other problems in the world? Rationally reflecting on these problems may make some logical sense of them, but it hardly makes them easier to accept. Asma provides a poignant example from one of his own students, who had a sibling who was brutally murdered.<sup>61</sup> In the wake of the tragedy, the slain boy's mother (who was formerly not religious) embraced Christianity because it promised that she would someday see her son again. Asma's student felt that her mother's belief was dubious, but she also recognized that it was primarily that belief which carried the grieving woman through the days and years following the murder. Because she believed that there was a chance she would see her son again, the mother was not overwhelmed by her grief; she

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<sup>59</sup> Asma, *Why We Need Religion*, pp. 30-35.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-33.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

was able to continue serving as a parental figure for her surviving children. In this case, a dubious epistemological position offered concrete practical, social benefits. We have here a belief that is clearly not rational (in the Enlightenment sense of the term), but nonetheless carries value despite its lack of demonstrable literal truth—namely, the value of empowering a grieving individual to continue living her life to the fullest extent possible.

The account that Asma provides is by no means unusual. It is common for individuals to flirt with religion during difficult periods of life, regardless of their former history with it. Many who experience the illness or death of a loved one turn to religion as a source of comfort, even if they have no significant religious affiliation prior to the event. During the initial spring 2020 wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, internet searches for the word “prayer” reached an all-time high.<sup>62</sup> Willingness to “try out” religion in circumstances such as these (or at least to investigate it) suggests that these individuals are searching for something to help them navigate a particularly taxing situation, and they are curious as to whether religion can provide some sort of assistance to that end. In these instances, the literal truth value of any particular religious claims is not necessarily relevant for the task at hand. These individuals are experiencing a practical need, one which is primarily emotional in nature. Logical assurances and answers to one’s questions can provide some sense of relief, but they are by no means guaranteed to do so.

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<sup>62</sup> Jeanet Bentzen, “In Crisis, We Pray: Religiosity and the COVID-19 Pandemic” (May 2020). CEPR Discussion Paper No. DP14824.

Asma argues that religious belief, which deals in primarily non-rational phenomena, can be preferable to reason alone for navigating such non-rational circumstances.<sup>63</sup>

For the present project, it is important to note that we should understand these benefits of imperative religious belief in primarily social terms. At its core, religious belief provides a feeling of connection to something beyond oneself. This “something” can be an existing body of religious believers, a deity, or both. Theistic religious practice typically entails more than merely believing in a god or gods; it involves a continuous effort on the part of the believer to engage with both the divine and the religious community. Religion often represents a sort of relationship between the particular believer and whatever she takes to represent the universal.<sup>64</sup> This is not confined to any particular faith; religious theorist Karen Armstrong notes that this quest for connection, to understand one’s relationship to the universal, can be seen in all manner of historical religious practices, regardless of their temporal or geographical location.<sup>65</sup> This suggests that even individualistic religious behaviors such as prayer and meditation can still be thought of as types of social practice. On a more human level, a religion can provide its followers with a social support network, one which can help them to navigate the non-rational experiences of their lives. Whether it is through an existing religious community through or a perceived connection with the universal, religion can inform the belief that one need not endure the trials of life alone.

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<sup>63</sup> For more on how religious belief can help one to process sorrow and grief, see Asma, *Why We Need Religion*, pp. 36-63.

<sup>64</sup> I have in mind here Hegel’s account of religion in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which points out a variety of different ways that religious practice can represent this relationship.

<sup>65</sup> Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (New York: Random House Inc., 1993), p. xix.



At this point Marx's declaration that religion is the opium of the masses may come to mind. Perhaps religious beliefs can provide some sort of comfort through life's difficulties, but if those beliefs are ultimately untrue, then what good is that comfort, really? How can we as rational individuals allow people like the mother of Asma's student to live their lives based on fictions? At its core, this is the New Atheist position: that an inconvenient truth is preferable to a pleasant lie. Our aforementioned critics believe that religious claims ought to be tried in the court of reason, and if they are found wanting, they ought to be cast aside, regardless of whatever other benefits they provide. To this sort of objection, I would respond that even if we were to cast aside religion, we cannot cast aside the kinds of experiences that lead a person to become religious. Practical problems are something that we as human beings cannot escape. We have already seen that, when it comes to certain matters of human life, reason on its own may struggle to provide adequate solutions to certain problems. Human beings are fundamentally emotional creatures, with emotional needs that reason may struggle to accommodate. Those rationalistic suggestions that we decry religion in the name of reason do little to suggest how, exactly, one ought to handle those problems for which reason has no answer. What good is it to be a man of reason, if reason is all that one has?

To sum up this section, I have sought to demonstrate that we should think of religion in terms of its social function. Religion is not merely a matter of forming literal beliefs, but of seeking connections with others. These connections can be fostered with or without belief – but we should understand religious beliefs as being primarily imperative rather than indicative in nature. With all of this demonstrated, we can now begin to apply our framework of what constitutes a durable community to *religious* communities.

### 1.5 Can Religion Function as a Collaborative Community?

My primary task in this chapter has been to show that many criticisms of religion fundamentally misunderstand the practice. Highlighting the social aspects of religion grants us a new understanding of the lived experiences of many religious people, and can help us to make some sense of the complex global trend away from organized religion. I have thus far condemned criticisms of religion when they occur primarily on epistemological grounds, as I take them to begin in the wrong place. It is worth saying, however, that even when these criticisms fail, they still often represent a worthy task: that of highlighting the historical problems that have been associated with religious practice. It is undeniable that religion has been the source of all sorts of social ills, and that much suffering has been caused in the name of various faiths. To be abundantly clear, this project is not a defense of religion itself against *any* critics of the practice, and nowhere am I seeking to minimize the atrocities committed in the name of religion through the course of history. Rather, my position is that attributing religion's grievances to mere inaccurate metaphysics, or to epistemological negligence, fails to do justice to the victims of religious violence. The kinds of religious harms that we see most often—whether physical or emotional in nature—are not merely the product of false beliefs about some aspect of reality. Instead, a religion perpetrates harm when its teachings lead to the breakdown of relationships, which are fundamental to the flourishing of the human being. Presenting falsehoods as facts may be a kind of epistemic injustice, but such injustice on its own is surely less egregious than that physical and social violence inspired by bigotry and extremism. It is one thing to simply present falsehoods as facts; it is another to weaponize those falsehoods in order to alienate believers from meaningful relationships with other people. If we understand religion as a social phenomenon, then we should recognize that

at least some of its failures are of a social nature. Understanding religion in this way provides us with a framework within which we can not only envision what ideal religious practice could look like, but also critique particular religions when they fall short of that ideal.

Such a critique will be the task of the next two chapters. We saw in this chapter that there are varying degrees of community, some of which are far more stable and durable in the long-term than others. My interest is not merely to define religion as a community in the traditional sense, but to consider whether religious practice can ground a particular *kind* of community: what we have been describing as a collaborative community. In other words, can religion be practiced in such a way that it overcomes alienation between the individual and the group? We have seen that a collaborative community develops when two necessary conditions for the growth of thick trust are satisfied. I will spend the rest of this project considering what it would take for religious communities specifically to satisfy both of those necessary conditions. However, in order to reach a positive conclusion, we will first work through some common failures of religious communities. Towards that end, Chapters Two and Three will demonstrate two ways of doing religion that fail to meet each of our necessary conditions respectively. We will first look at religious systems that fail to preserve the moral autonomy of the believer, and how this failure precludes the possibility of a durable community among the religious group.

## CHAPTER 2. NIETZSCHE’S ACCOUNT OF ALIENATION IN THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

### 2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided us with a framework for understanding the nature of community—specifically, for defining what makes community relationships durable. We have seen that, in order for a community to initially develop, members of a group must form relations of thick trust with others in that group. I argued that the growth of thick trust is predicated upon the satisfaction of two necessary conditions which work to overcome some form of alienation between the individual and the group. Since these conditions can be satisfied to a greater or lesser extent in practice, we saw that we can differentiate between traditional, alienating versions of community (which present barriers to the growth of thick trust) and a novel version called a collaborative community (which surmounts these barriers).<sup>66</sup> Noting the social function of religious practice in human life, I also argued that we ought to think of religion in terms of the social—contradicting a more common way of understanding the practice, which takes it as an attempt at instilling indicative beliefs regarding the nature of reality. I argued that this epistemological model of religion does not adequately explain the recent global trend away from the practice. My position is that we should not understand this trend merely as the product of an intellectual break with religious ideology. We should also understand it as the product of broken communal relationships, as individuals experience alienation from unstable faith communities.

Understanding how this alienation occurs in religious communities (and whether it can be overcome) is the goal of the rest of this project. Thus far, we have largely spoken

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<sup>66</sup> Paul S. Adler & Charles Heckscher, “Towards Collaborative Community,” in *The Firm as a Collaborative Community: Reconstructing Trust in the Knowledge Economy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006),” pp. 20-21.

of religion in the abstract, without referring to how particular tenets or practices can impact the possibility of community relationships. However, we cannot remain at such an abstract level of discussion. Our aim is to articulate the possibility of a collaborative community that is specifically religious; therefore, we must now examine specifically religious structures, in order to see how they can foster or hinder the growth of community relationships. Towards this end, an exhaustive account of all historical religions is neither possible nor necessary—we are interested in categories of religious practices, rather than every single possible way of doing religion. I will therefore be limiting the scope of our discussion to two philosophical accounts of religion that I take to be uniquely interested not only in the well-being of the individual religious practitioner, but also in the well-being of the religious group as a whole. In other words, we shall examine the work of two philosophers who understand religion as a form of community. These accounts will illuminate some ways in which particular religious structures can impact community relationships—ways that will align with the conditions for community laid out in the previous chapter.

The first of these accounts, which will be the subject of this chapter, is provided by Friedrich Nietzsche. At the outset, including Nietzsche in a discussion of religious community may appear to be a strange choice, for at least two reasons.<sup>67</sup> First, much of his work on religion is infamously negative, with his declaration of the death of God securing

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<sup>67</sup> In addition to the issues raised above, it may be asked why, in a project that is concerned with the alienation of the individual from the group, I have chosen to consider Nietzsche instead of, for instance, Karl Marx, whose work addresses alienation in more detail. I have chosen to avoid an in-depth discussion of Marx because I take Marx's central concern to be with economic alienation, not with religion. Compared to Nietzsche (who writes extensively on the subject), Marx speaks relatively little about religion, and what accounts he does provide are less nuanced than Nietzsche's. Given that this chapter is uniquely interested in *religious* alienation and does not have sufficient space to adequately consider the intersection of religion and economy, I have elected to explore Nietzsche's more extensive commentary on religion itself.

him a reputation as one of history's most devout atheists. Using Nietzsche to motivate a positive account of religion's function in human life may therefore seem to contradict Nietzsche's own views. And second, Nietzsche is often read as a radical individualist, whose primary philosophical commitment is the progress of the overman against the mediocrity of the herd.<sup>68</sup> It is extraordinarily uncommon to see discussions of community in Nietzsche's thought, since much of his work seems to speak to the level of the individual. My view, however, is that Nietzsche is typically misunderstood on both of these counts. He is not broadly opposed to religion qua religion, but rather to a particular form of religious teaching that splinters the concepts of the human and the divine. And his concern lies not merely with the well-being of the individual, but also with the community of which that individual is a part. Given both of these realities, I hope to show that Nietzsche's philosophy is fundamentally concerned with the problem of religious alienation, both of the human from the divine and of the individual from the group. By looking to both his negative and positive accounts of the phenomenon, we can determine how particular religious practices can create social conditions that impact the growth of durable community relationships among individuals.

This chapter will be structured as follows: first, I will work through three distinct periods in Nietzsche's religious thought, tracking the issue of religious alienation across these moments. We will begin with *The Birth of Tragedy*, in which Nietzsche provides a positive account of religion's social function in the life of the Greeks. We will see that the

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<sup>68</sup> Nietzsche himself encourages this interpretation in the *Genealogy of Morals*, where he describes Judeo-Christianity as prejudiced against egoism. Given Nietzsche's general belief that Judeo-Christian morality represents the opposite of the truth, this has led some to read him as favoring egoism. However, we shall see that this interpretation misconstrues his position.

early Nietzsche takes such a religion to empower its followers to overcome nihilism by deifying the distinctly human. Afterwards, we will turn to *Beyond Good and Evil* and the *Genealogy of Morals*, to compare Nietzsche's most well-known polemics against Judeo-Christianity with his views on the religion of the Greeks. In these texts, Nietzsche criticizes Judeo-Christianity for its alienating properties. Finally, we will work through some passages in *The Antichrist*, to demonstrate that even the texts most commonly associated with Nietzsche's "atheism" present a challenge for those who take him to hold this position.

Despite the wide scope of his thought on the subject, I will argue that Nietzsche's overarching view on religion remains consistent across these three moments. His work demonstrates a recurring fixation on the concepts of humanity and divinity, specifically on the nature of the relationship between the two. Nietzsche sees these concepts as necessarily connected, and strives to present them as unified rather than distinct. He views religion as a tool with which individuals can cultivate useful beliefs regarding how they should conduct themselves in the world. Religion cultivates these beliefs through its representation of the divine/human relationship; although, of course, different religions can represent this relationship in wildly different ways. With this concern in focus, we can see that Nietzsche's praise for the Greek religion in *The Birth of Tragedy* and his criticisms of Judeo-Christianity in his later works provide a single, consistent account. Religions that represent the human and the divine as unified earn Nietzsche's approval, while those that alienate the two concepts become the subject of his polemics. We should therefore not understand Nietzsche as an opponent of religion writ large, but rather as an opponent of any ideology (religious or otherwise) that would alienate these two concepts.

With Nietzsche's views on religion thus articulated, I will then argue that we can use his account to motivate a positive theory of religious community. While Nietzsche is often read as a radical egoist, we will see that this is a misrepresentation of his ideological commitments. In fact, his work demonstrates an understanding that the well-being of the individual and of the group are mutually constituted. Nietzsche's desire for the fulfillment of human potential, therefore, is not merely an individualistic concern for the overman's own interests, but also for the progress of the group in which that individual lives and participates. I will argue that using Nietzsche to articulate a theory of community is therefore consistent, due to the distinctly communitarian commitments within his work.

Finally, with all of this laid out, I will conclude by demonstrating how Nietzsche takes various religious ideologies to impact the possibility of communal relationships. We have seen that the alienation of the human and the divine is a central concept in his religious thought; I will argue that we can track a second, related type of alienation in his work on the subject as well. Religious ideologies that alienate the human from the divine also alienate the individual from her community, by blocking the growth of thick trust among members of the group. Recall from Chapter One that thick trust develops when individuals take one another to be participating in a relationship as autonomous moral agents—to trust someone, I must have confidence that they are the author of their own moral choices, and are making such choices free from any sort of external coercion. Nietzsche's recurring interest in the relationship of the human and the divine stems from his commitment to the human ability to define for oneself how one ought to live one's life; no external god or other authority figure can determine this for the individual. However, by presenting the divine as something that is fundamentally distinct from the human being, religions such as



those within the Judeo-Christian tradition undermine the believer's ability to exercise her own capacity for conducting moral judgments. Followers of this tradition look outside of themselves for some objective meaning and purpose for their lives, and in doing so, they fail to exercise their capacity for individual agency. This creates conditions of thin trust, where individual behavior can only be trusted when the authority figure in question remains in place. The Judeo-Christian religious tradition (indeed, any religion that alienates the human from the divine) therefore creates conditions where people cannot place a meaningful degree of thick trust in one another.<sup>69</sup>

In sum, by tracking these two related forms of religious alienation, Nietzsche is not merely seeking to critique Judeo-Christian ideology. He also aims to show how religious belief can provide a foundation for human social relationships. We therefore ought to understand Nietzsche's philosophy of religion as laying out what he takes to be required for the growth of a durable religious community in which all of its members can flourish.

## 2.2 Is God Dead? Nietzsche's Work on Religion

Nietzsche's infamous declaration of the death of God has earned him recognition as one of western philosophy's most devout atheists. The ideological impact of this claim cannot be overstated; some have gone so far as to argue that Nietzsche's atheism is a fundamental part of his wider philosophical project, and that his rejection of the Christian God cannot be separated from the rest of his thought.<sup>70</sup> However, it is ironic that history often remembers Nietzsche as an opponent of religion, when almost all of his major works

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<sup>69</sup> Of course, Judaism and Christianity are two distinct religious faiths – I am using the language of “Judeo-Christianity” in this chapter not to reduce one tradition to the other, but merely to be consistent with Nietzsche's own terminology, as he often speaks of the two in tandem.

<sup>70</sup> See George A. Morgan Jr., *What Nietzsche Means* (Harvard University Press, 1941), p. 36.

are filled with discussions of the divine. Beginning with *The Birth of Tragedy* and continuing all the way through his posthumously published work, themes of the human/divine relationship run quite obviously through Nietzsche's thought. These themes are far more complex than the simple statement that "God is dead" reveals, and it is intellectually dishonest to understand Nietzsche merely as a devout atheist.

Walter Kaufmann points out that by saying God is dead, Nietzsche implies that he once took God to be alive and well. We should of course be cautious to note that the "God" Nietzsche describes is not a deity that he believes to literally exist, but rather a manmade concept that has historically been useful for the purpose of human progress. Kauffman emphasizes this point, and argues that we should not understand Nietzsche to be dealing in literal matters of metaphysical or theological truth, but rather in matters of human culture, which he takes religious beliefs to impact.<sup>71</sup> Kaufmann's view is that we should read Nietzsche as an agnostic rather than an atheist; several recent accounts have gone even farther in their appreciation of Nietzsche's (eternally?) recurring concern with the divine. Some have even declared him to be "god-obsessed" in his continuous search to identify the role that religious belief plays in human life.<sup>72</sup> Regardless of the extent to which one takes him to be sympathetic to the practice, however, we should be clear that Nietzsche never aims to be a theorist of religion for its own sake. We do not see him taking a stance as to whether religious claims should be considered literally true; indeed, he is largely uninterested in examining any specific theological matters. Instead, Nietzsche is primarily

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<sup>71</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), p. 77. One should be reminded of our distinction between indicative and imperative beliefs – while Kaufmann does not use this language, he clearly attributes to Nietzsche a commitment to religion as a source of imperative belief.

<sup>72</sup> Weaver Santaniello, in *Nietzsche and the Gods*, ed. Santaniello (Albany: State University of York Press, 2001), p. xiii.

concerned with the evolutionary progress of the human species, and with the fulfillment of our highest potential qua human beings. It is this concern with the concrete world, according to Lawrence Hatab, that motivates Nietzsche's infamous polemic against Judeo-Christianity; therein he does not seek to offer a critique of religion qua religion at all, but rather a critique of particular religious notions that attempt to transcend the lived experience of humanity.<sup>73</sup> Nietzsche therefore takes a similar view on religion to that provided in Chapter 1 of this project. He sees religion as a practice that represents abstract truths, and influences particular imperative beliefs about how one should conduct oneself—beliefs that can be helpful or harmful, even if they do not constitute literal metaphysical truth. In other words, what matters most for Nietzsche is not whether one is religious, but how the religious beliefs that one holds can lead one to understand one's own abilities and responsibilities.

A careful reading of his work on religion confirms this interpretation. Specifically, Nietzsche is concerned with how religious beliefs lead the faithful to understand the relationship between the divine and the human. Nietzsche's view is that, when a religion unifies these two concepts, the believer is empowered to overcome nihilism by embracing her own capacity to define purpose and value. Meanwhile, religions that represent the divine as something fundamentally distinct from the human being discourage this process, and lead to the stagnation of human potential. Nietzsche is therefore not interested in whether religious myths themselves constitute literal truth, but whether they *represent* more abstract truths accurately. For him, religious beliefs that depict the powerful (i.e. the

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<sup>73</sup> Lawrence J. Hatab, "Apollo and Dionysus: Nietzschean Expressions of the Sacred," in *Nietzsche and the Gods*, ed. Santaniello, p. 48.

divine) nature of humanity are useful tools for informing how the human being should conduct herself in the world.<sup>74</sup>

To show this, the following section will work through what I take to be three key moments in Nietzsche's religious thought.<sup>75</sup> My goal is to show that Nietzsche's views on religion are ideologically consistent across his body of work, even if the content of his writing on the subject varies widely. We will begin with *The Birth of Tragedy*, where Nietzsche praises the Greek religion and culture, and goes so far as to claim that this religion serves a function that is essential for the well-being of the Greek people. Second, we will review his critique of Judeo-Christianity in *Beyond Good and Evil* and the *Genealogy of Morals*, where a sharp contrast appears between his appraisal of that tradition and his former comments on Greek religion. Finally, we will observe the evolution of his thought in *The Antichrist*; this text is often taken as definitive evidence of Nietzsche's atheism, but I will show that it presents a much more nuanced account of religion and the divine. As I conduct this review, I will argue that we ought to draw two conclusions: 1. That Nietzsche is not opposed to religious belief in general, but merely to particular *kinds* of religious beliefs that splinter the concepts of divinity and humanity; and 2. That Nietzsche sees instrumental value in religions that represent these concepts as unified rather than distinct. We should therefore think of Nietzsche's overarching goal as being, as William Lloyd Newell describes it, a retrieval of the divinity in man.<sup>76</sup> Nietzsche does not

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<sup>74</sup> Nietzsche therefore aligns with the position of William James, who describes religious beliefs as teleological instruments for accomplishing a given practical purpose. See William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," *Mind*, 4, no. 15 (1879).

<sup>75</sup> I have selected these three moments because of their historical positions within the Nietzschean canon, with the goal of demonstrating that Nietzsche's views remain largely consistent across his entire body of work. Of course, we could look to other of his texts as well—but this project does not aim to be a comprehensive review of everything Nietzsche ever wrote about religion.

<sup>76</sup> William Lloyd Newell, *The Secular Magi* (Pilgrim Press, 1986), p. 141.

seek to eradicate the divine as a concept, but rather to demonstrate that we ought to define the divine in terms of the distinctly human.

### 2.2.1 The Role of Religion in *The Birth of Tragedy*

Nietzsche's first major treatment of religion is in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Prima facie, it appears that Nietzsche is speaking of art more than religion in this text; however, he tends to move fluidly between discussions of the two, as he takes them to serve a similar purpose and employ similar methods. Indeed, for him there is little distinction between the tragedy as an art form and as a religious experience.<sup>77</sup> His utilization of religious language in the figures of Apollo and Dionysus demonstrates that for Nietzsche, art has a definite religious quality, and vice versa. We should therefore understand his comments on Greek art to also apply to the Greek religion.<sup>78</sup> In this text, Nietzsche's primary task is to articulate how a group of people can most effectively cope with the harsh realities of human existence. Nietzsche follows Schopenhauer by claiming that life necessarily produces suffering, and that each fleeting moment of individual happiness will inevitably be swallowed by the ultimacy of one's death.<sup>79</sup> In a break with Schopenhauer's infamous pessimism, however, Nietzsche takes a more optimistic approach; his task is to define a way in which human beings can overcome nihilism by creating their own meaning in a meaningless world. Since life must go on even in the face of impending death, the individual who chooses to continue living must determine the best way to process life's negative elements.

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<sup>77</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 7.

<sup>78</sup> See Hatab, "Apollo and Dionysus: Nietzschean Expressions of the Sacred," p. 53.

<sup>79</sup> See Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1966).

Nietzsche takes Apollonian and Dionysian art as two distinct attempts at coping with the depressing reality of existence. However, neither attempt can be successful on its own. Apollonian art reframes human experience in such a way as to draw one's attention to qualities of strength over qualities of weakness. Such art does not merely depict real life, but also glorifies it. For example, Apollonian art may represent a violent military battle as a praiseworthy act of heroism and valor, rather than as a moment of great tragedy.<sup>80</sup> Nietzsche understands the Apollonian as an individualizing force that draws boundaries between particular beings—it depicts a given person or group in as much of a glorified state as possible.<sup>81</sup> However, this boundary-drawing is also the primary shortcoming of Apollonian art: it presents the glorious tragedies of life and death as things that only happen to *others*, which always remain external to the individual observing the representation. One may find temporary solace in a piece of art that depicts death as an act of heroism, but it is never one's *own* death that is captured by that art. By drawing such a definite boundary between individual human experiences, such art therefore ultimately fails at the task of providing comfort in the face of one's own inevitable mortality.

In contrast to the clearly delineated Apollonian, Dionysian art (which Nietzsche typically identifies with music) is formless; whereas the Apollonian particularized life and death, the Dionysian transcends this particularity. In allowing the individual to overcome her own finitude, Dionysian art also raises her to a level of consciousness that transcends her individual sense of mortality.<sup>82</sup> However, the Dionysian on its own is not also without

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<sup>80</sup> *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 28.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>82</sup> See Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 21.

its shortcomings. A pure Dionysian state entails a frantic abandonment of all particularity, what Nietzsche calls a “shattering of the individual,” and a destruction of all Apollonian boundaries and structure.<sup>83</sup> Nietzsche likens the pure Dionysian impulse to a state of barbarism, one which he takes to be incompatible with civilized life. It amounts to an abandonment of one’s particular existence, which for Nietzsche is an unsustainable way of thinking—our goal should be to cope with reality, not to leave it behind. For this reason, while the Dionysian may provide us with some temporary solace in the face of a painful world, we cannot live our lives in the continuous grip of a pure Dionysian frenzy.<sup>84</sup>

Therefore, neither the Apollonian nor the Dionysian on its own sufficiently manages the negativity of the human experience. The Apollonian is too mired in its own particularity, while the Dionysian is too detached from concrete existence. It is for this reason that Nietzsche praises the Greek tragedy: he considers it the first art form to successfully unify the Apollonian and Dionysian in a way that satisfies the emotional needs of the audience. The tragedy provides a space in which the members of the audience can experience Dionysian transcendence for themselves, through identifying with particular Apollonian stories and characters. The tragedy’s modified Dionysian element, safely confined by the Apollonian, allows the members of the audience to satisfy their need to transcend rigid individuality in a way that keeps them grounded in the present world, and therefore poses no risk to society.<sup>85</sup> Meanwhile, the tragedy’s format encourages the viewer

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<sup>83</sup> *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 51.

<sup>84</sup> Walter Kaufmann notes that despite the ambiguity which arises from Nietzsche’s later use of the character of Dionysus, it is actually the Apollonian that he takes to be of primary importance in the *Birth of Tragedy*. He sees the Dionysian fever as a necessary negative element of a dialectical relationship between the two elements. This demonstrates Nietzsche’s primary concern with concrete human existence, rather than an unknowable noumenal realm. See *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 106.

<sup>85</sup> See *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 123.

to see herself represented in the characters on stage, breaking down the barrier between individuals that ordinarily characterizes the Apollonian. In this way, the two forces dialectically work to overcome one another's shortcomings. This allows the audience to experience Dionysian transcendence, and all of the coping power that comes with it, in a way that is compatible with the existence of civil life.

Nietzsche explicitly writes that the Greek religion and the tragedy serve the same function for those who engage with them.<sup>86</sup> In the Greek pantheon, the gods are depicted in glorified anthropomorphic terms; far from the abstract concept of an Aristotelian Prime Mover, the Greek gods feature distinctly human qualities and conduct themselves in distinctly human fashion. They participate in relationships (both with other deities and with humans), experience a wide range of emotions, and frequently make mistakes. None of their imperfections detract from their divinity, however; in fact, the Greek gods are a prime example of Apollonian representation, as the fullness of their conduct is meant to be understood in terms of their divine glory. They are worthy of praise precisely *because* of their anthropomorphic traits—they represent power and strength to the utmost degree even in their imperfections, and they function as ideals that human beings can seek to emulate.<sup>87</sup> At this point we can begin to see the central idea that I will argue drives all of Nietzsche's work on religion: the belief that we should understand the human and the divine as two unified concepts. We will return to this shortly. For now, we can note that by presenting gods that are simultaneously anthropomorphic and divine, and divine *because* of their anthropomorphic qualities, the Greek religion effectively synthesizes the Apollonian and

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 23.



the Dionysian. This works to check the progress of nihilism among the Greek people, by encouraging them to recognize their own inherent divine capabilities.

At this point, it should be apparent that Nietzsche takes a primarily teleological view of religious belief: he understands such beliefs to fulfill some practical purpose in the lives of those who hold them, to provide them with some needed benefit. It is important to note that he does not link this benefit to the literal truth value of any particular religious claims. In fact, Nietzsche believes that both art and religion provide their benefits through the use of mythological imagery (as opposed to rational facts). Art and religion provide methods for one to temporarily transcend the negativity of the world, through a brief engagement with fictional accounts. Nietzsche in fact notes that religion fails to serve its purpose when it begins to make attempts at objectively and rationally describing reality, instead of focusing on the mythological.<sup>88</sup> He criticizes this Socratic point of view, which confines everything to the world of the rational; he argues that such an approach fails to achieve the benefits provided by myth, and ultimately ends in the death of art.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, Nietzsche aligns with the position of Chapter 1 of this project: we ought to understand religion as a primarily social phenomenon, and to speak of religious belief in terms of the imperative rather than the indicative. Nietzsche would agree that taking a purely epistemological model of religion, which measures its value in terms of its ability to communicate literal metaphysical truths, misunderstands the role of religion in the lives of those who embrace it. We should keep this orientation in mind as we move into Nietzsche's criticisms of Judeo-Christianity; we will see that he condemns that tradition not because he

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 23

takes its historical claims to be literally false, but because it fails to achieve the nihilism-defying purpose that he outlines for religious belief.

## 2.2.2 The Slave Revolt: *Beyond Good & Evil* and *Genealogy of Morals*

Nietzsche appears to drastically change his tune on religion when he begins to write on Judeo-Christianity. Whereas the *Birth of Tragedy* presented an account that was largely amenable to religious practice, Nietzsche's middle period takes a far more critical position on the subject. In particular, his numerous references to the false ideas conveyed in Judeo-Christianity have led many to misinterpret his views during this period. Contrary to popular interpretations, I will show that the falsehoods Nietzsche criticizes in Judeo-Christianity do not concern whether these religions accurately describe any particular deity; rather, Nietzsche takes these religions to inaccurately represent the relationship of the human and the divine as abstract concepts. This inaccurate representation can lead the religious individual to cultivate beliefs that fail to fulfill their desired social function.

The Judeo-Christian tradition becomes the target of an extended polemic in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Therein, Nietzsche describes the Christian faith as the sacrifice of all one's freedom and pride—and as a result of this, he condemns it as self-mutilation and subjection.<sup>90</sup> Nietzsche holds that, by encouraging qualities such as submissiveness and humility, Judeo-Christianity has preserved lowly traits in humankind that should have been allowed to fade into our species' past—and certainly should not have been presented as ideals for future generations to emulate.<sup>91</sup> We begin to see Nietzsche developing his

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<sup>90</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Tampa, Florida: Millennium Publications, 2014), p. 28.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

account of master and slave morality in this text; we will wait to examine this matter until his more developed version in the *Genealogy of Morals*. However, it's worth pointing out that despite serving as the foundation of Nietzsche's war with the Christian God, *Beyond Good and Evil* also provides some nuance regarding Nietzsche's views on religion writ large. We can see clear evidence in this text that the real target of Nietzsche's polemic is not religion per se, but rather a particular way of doing religion—one which the Nietzsche of the *Birth* would also condemn. Despite having just criticized Judeo-Christianity at length, he goes on to write that some form of religion can have a multiplicity of uses for the philosopher who rises above the mindset of the herd:

The philosopher...will use religion for his disciplining and educating work, just as he will use the contemporary political and economic conditions. The selecting and disciplining influence—destructive, as well as creative and fashioning—which can be exercised by means of religion is manifold and varied, according to the sort of people placed under its spell and protection. For those who are strong and independent, destined and trained to command...religion is an additional means for overcoming resistance in the exercise of authority.<sup>92</sup>

For Nietzsche, the philosopher represents the overman, the one who rejects the widespread slave morality and chooses to undertake higher pursuits. It is through the actions of such individuals that humanity can progress as a species. To see Nietzsche suggesting that such a person can use religion to accomplish their purpose is important, as it stands in stark contrast to the view that religion is simply an outdated practice which the philosopher

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

should abandon. We see here an emphasis not on religion itself, but on the way that the individual practitioner *utilizes* the beliefs that she cultivates through religious engagement.

And a few lines down, Nietzsche even has some positive words for Christianity:

Religion, together with the religious significance of life, sheds sunshine over such perpetually harassed men, and makes even their own aspect endurable to them... There is perhaps nothing so admirable in Christianity and Buddhism as their art of teaching even the lowest to elevate themselves by piety to a seemingly higher order of things, and thereby to retain their satisfaction with the actual world in which they find it difficult enough to live.<sup>93</sup>

This seems to echo Nietzsche's view in the *Birth*: religious belief can help its followers to cope with an unpleasant existence. At this point he seems to believe that this can be the case even for Christianity, although he will shift to a fully negative view of this tradition over time. The key idea here is that, in some cases, religious belief can encourage an acceptance of one's practical situation, rather than a renunciation of it in favor of an idealized afterlife. Such a belief can empower the one who holds it to navigate situations in her life that would otherwise be overwhelming. This denotes a practical benefit to religious belief, one which has little to do with the truth value of any particular religious claims.

In the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche provides a more developed account of master and slave morality. Nietzsche understands human history as a continuous struggle between some version of a noble master class and a lowly slave class, which feature

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

opposite characteristics.<sup>94</sup> A system of master morality defines as “good” those traits that the master class possesses: strength, beauty, power, and the like.<sup>95</sup> These traits are presented as ideals towards which all of humanity, including the slave class, ought to strive. However, recognizing that it does not possess these noble qualities, the slave class develops resentment, and it attempts to undermine master morality by enacting a slave revolt.<sup>96</sup> As a product of this revolt, the Judeo-Christian religious tradition makes a surreptitious attempt to undermine the superior master morality. In these faiths, mankind is not encouraged to cultivate the power and strength exhibited by the master class. Instead, certain “wretched” qualities of the slave class are exalted. These religions declare that the good are those who are kind and meek, those who turn the other cheek and forgive their offenders even when they show no remorse. Meanwhile, the qualities of the master class are condemned by these religions, and given a status not only as “bad” but as morally evil. This ideology employs uniquely religious imagery in order to give additional credibility to its claims<sup>97</sup> —and given the proliferation of Judeo-Christian morality in Western society, it has been wildly successful in doing so, even among those who do not practice these religions themselves. Nietzsche’s position, of course, is that a new moral revolt is needed to liberate the human race from these inferior religious notions.

To understand how this connects to the human/divine relationship, we can contrast Nietzsche’s account here with that in *The Birth of Tragedy*. We saw in the *Birth* that the Greek gods represented the same ideals as those that would later be described in terms of

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<sup>94</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* (Tampa, Florida: Millennium Publications, 2014), p. 14.

<sup>95</sup> Nietzsche takes this goodness to be objective, in the sense that these qualities objectively contribute to the flourishing of the human race.

<sup>96</sup> *Genealogy of Morals*, p. 23.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-33.

master morality. Those gods were worthy of worship not simply because they were divine (in the sense that they were elevated beyond humanity), but because they exemplified those qualities that also promote the flourishing of the human being. The Greek religion did not encourage the individual to look beyond the distinctly human for examples of how she ought to conduct herself—she should seek to cultivate those same human qualities that were represented to the utmost in the behavior of the gods. However, while the Greek religion thereby depicted the human and the divine as two essentially unified concepts, Nietzsche sees Judeo-Christianity as splintering the two. By rejecting master morality, Judeo-Christianity also rejects those qualities that promote the flourishing of the human being. It proposes a God who requires his followers to debase and humiliate themselves, and to reject their own will to power as something morally evil. What benefits the human being, therefore, is fundamentally opposed to the will of the divine (as these religions conceive of it). Those who would seek to do the will of God, then, must choose between their own best interests as humans and the commands of a deity that is and must remain necessarily distinct from the human experience.

Nietzsche describes the Christian worldview as objectively false—not because he rejects the possibility of a historical Jesus, but because he takes the tradition itself to cultivate false beliefs regarding how human happiness can be achieved. In the *Birth*, Nietzsche likewise understood religion's role to be one of helping people to cultivate beliefs, which in turn would help them to continue functioning in a world void of objective meaning. This teleological understanding of religious belief remains evident in the *Genealogy*. The two forms of religion produce opposite outcomes, however; the Greek religion empowers its followers to reject nihilism by embracing their own lived experience

qua human beings, while Judeo-Christianity claims that without a god that exists beyond the human world, life has no meaning. The latter religions define truth in terms of a god that must remain fundamentally distinct from those who worship him—humans are proud and cruel and evil, while God is humble and kind and good. For Nietzsche, therefore, those who choose to embrace the Judeo-Christian slave morality are embracing falsehoods regarding what promotes the flourishing of the human being. He believes that these individuals are essentially lying to themselves, rather than accepting the reality that master morality best represents that which leads to human happiness.<sup>98</sup> By defining the will of God as something necessarily opposed to the ideals of master morality, slave morality cultivates inaccurate beliefs, at both the individual and societal level, regarding how human beings ought to live their lives. Therefore, while the Greek religion served a positive function in the lives of those who followed it, Nietzsche sees Judeo-Christianity as a negative practice which has the potential to stifle the progress of the human being.

With all of this in mind, we can see that Nietzsche's view of religion remains consistent from *The Birth of Tragedy* through his most well-known religious criticisms. Nietzsche sees religious practice as a way of cultivating beliefs regarding the relationship of the human and the divine. Religions that present these concepts as unified (i.e. religions that promote divine traits as those that also lead to the flourishing of the human being) serve a useful function in the lives of the faithful, because they empower them to navigate a complex and often difficult world. Religion meanwhile becomes problematic when it alienates the human and the divine, and thereby encourages false beliefs regarding how human beings ought to conduct themselves. It is my view that Nietzsche maintains this

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

position throughout his remaining work. To show this, I will now briefly turn to some of his comments in *The Antichrist*. This text is often taken to provide definitive evidence of Nietzsche's radical atheism, but I will show that his goal therein is not to attack religion writ large. Rather, he remains adamant that problems with religion stem primarily from ideologies that cultivate improper beliefs regarding the human/divine relationship.

### 2.2.3 Religion & Divinity in *The Antichrist*

Nietzsche's posthumously published comments on the Judeo-Christian faith are consistent with his previous remarks on the subject. In his later life, Nietzsche continues to hold that these religions are grounded upon a false understanding of reality, and that because of this, they are hostile to those qualities that promote the flourishing of the human being. In the *Antichrist*, he writes early on that we should define morality as a set of conditions that benefit the life and growth of a group of people.<sup>99</sup> Of course, he still holds that it is specifically *master* morality—what he takes to be the true morality—which accurately describes how one can best secure these benefits for oneself. Meanwhile, the Christian faith “had its roots in hatred for the natural, for reality”<sup>100</sup>; in the Christian God Nietzsche sees “a declaration of war against life, nature, and the will to life.”<sup>101</sup> By embracing a Christian understanding of morality, the religious individual assumes erroneous beliefs about what will best serve her own interests—and in doing so, denies the reality of what it means to be human. In Nietzsche's view, this religion institutes a moral

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<sup>99</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo & The Antichrist* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2004p. 110. There is a distinctly communitarian emphasis in this statement, which will be important shortly.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.



system that does nothing to promote the well-being of those who follow it. To the contrary, it actively works against its adherents' best interests by keeping them in a state of mediocrity.

However, it is particularly interesting how, despite Nietzsche's repeated polemics against religion in this text, *The Antichrist* does not imply a radical atheism. Moments also appear where we can glimpse a concept of a god towards which Nietzsche feels more favorable, and a practical use for religious belief of which he approves. He accuses Christianity not of manufacturing a deity outright, but of "falsifying" the concepts of God and morality—in the sense that this tradition inaccurately represents those matters, not that it makes them up entirely.<sup>102</sup> In the same passage he criticizes priests whom he takes to "abuse" the name of God, which suggests that he understands a way of utilizing religious imagery that would not be abusive. Referring to himself and other such free spirits, he later writes that "what differentiates us is not that we find no God—but that we do not feel that what has been revered as God is 'godlike.'" <sup>103</sup> And even more clearly, he writes that the God created by the New Testament Christians is "a negation of God." Here we have undeniable evidence that for Nietzsche, divinity is not a concept that we ought to reject altogether. Rather, it is a quality that is diametrically opposed to how Judeo-Christianity understands the concept. This suggests that for Nietzsche, the notion of the divine is not something that humanity ought to abandon outright, but rather one that should be understood in terms of a particular set of qualities—those that align with the most noble traits in humanity, rather than those that require a rejection of them.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

In this text we can once again recognize Nietzsche's view that religion is a representational tool, which can be utilized to cultivate beliefs that fulfill some desired function. He writes that Christianity has been progressively watered down by the various historical peoples who have taken it up. In other words, Christianity itself does not pull beliefs out of thin air; rather, it has been used to justify beliefs about humanity that an inferior group of people already held, prior to the religion's organization.<sup>104</sup> Belief in the principles of this religion produces a psychology of the faithful which solidifies a profound mental sickness, of both the individual and the society that embrace it. Nietzsche repeatedly describes Christianity as a religion of pity, the ideologies of which ultimately lead to nihilism.<sup>105</sup> With the language of nihilism reappearing, one cannot help but be reminded of his task in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In that text, Nietzsche's goal was to articulate a way in which a group of people could avoid falling victim to a radical pessimism regarding the meaninglessness of existence. To do this means to embrace those ideals that he later identifies with his system of master morality. Meanwhile, the Nietzsche of *The Antichrist* identifies Christians as people who, by rejecting the will to power through the exercise of Christian morality, have willfully also rejected their own ability to define what makes a meaningful life. Such a religious orientation does not merely impact the individual; it institutes ideals that harm the entire human species by stifling its evolutionary potential.

Nietzsche's comments in *The Antichrist* demonstrate that while God may be dead, the divine is alive and well. Nietzsche is opposed to Christian ideologies not because they are false in a literal, metaphysical sense, but because they institute erroneous beliefs

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 109 & 122..

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

regarding what benefits the human being. We should not understand the divine in terms of an alien god that demands us to renounce those qualities that promote our best interests as humans. Rather, the divine is a quality that always already belongs to us. Religion becomes problematic when it robs us of this notion of the divine and implies that we should hold something beyond us in higher esteem than we do ourselves.

#### 2.2.4 Nietzsche's Religious Writings: A Consistent Account of the Human/Divine Relationship

Now that we have examined multiple moments from Nietzsche's accounts of religion, it should be clear that the theme of the human/divine relationship runs consistently through his work. *The Birth of Tragedy* claimed that the Greek religion was successful due to its mythical representation of anthropomorphic gods. The Greek pantheon united the concepts of humanity and divinity, and allowed believers to see themselves in the gods whom they worshipped. These gods were considered praiseworthy because of their distinctly humanlike qualities, which were deified in Apollonian fashion. Meanwhile, in Judeo-Christianity, the concepts of the human and the divine are alienated from one another. Those qualities that promote the flourishing of the human being—strength, power, and the like—are not only discouraged in these religions, but declared to be antagonistic to the will of God. The deity of these religions is distinguished from the religious practitioner, because the person of God is depicted in a way that reinforces the inferior slave morality, which Nietzsche takes to contribute to the mediocrity of humanity. It is because of this that Nietzsche's posthumously published work takes Christianity to be opposed to life itself: for him, it is a religion of falsehood, which presents notions that will hold humanity back as things that will carry us forward. Nietzsche's early commitment to what he comes to

define as the qualities of master morality therefore remains visible throughout his remaining work. Nietzsche is not criticizing Judeo-Christianity because its followers continue to believe in a literal, metaphysical God that has long been dead. He instead criticizes this tradition because it follows what he takes to be an outdated way of thinking about God, a form of thinking which refuses to recognize that the all-too-human qualities in oneself are the ones that are actually worthy of praise. Nietzsche is therefore providing a consistent account of various religions as sources of teleological beliefs, which can either help or harm the ones who hold them in the long run.

### 2.3 Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion as a Theory of Community

We have identified a central type of alienation in Nietzsche's work on religion: the alienation of the human from the divine. On its own, this account is not particularly novel; a number of Nietzsche scholars have defended a similar interpretation of his views. However, I am not merely interested in conducting a conceptual analysis of Nietzsche's theory of the divine. This is a project in social philosophy, which is centrally concerned with the possibility of a collaborative religious community—i.e. a religious community that overcomes alienation of the individual from the group. We have seen the central problem with much religious practice as Nietzsche defines it: religions go wrong when they alienate the believer from that which she worships. This form of alienation is distinct from the kind of communal alienation discussed in Chapter 1 of this project. However, I take these forms of alienation to be necessarily connected, and I suspect that Nietzsche does so as well. In other words, my position is that Nietzsche criticizes religious ideologies that alienate the human from the divine because he takes such alienation to impact human social life, in which he holds a fundamental interest. To make this point, however, it is first

important to establish that Nietzsche does, in fact, hold such an interest in the social. We must establish this because it is a minority position; most accounts of Nietzsche's work take him to be an egoist, an individualist, or some combination of the two.<sup>106</sup> We can demonstrate, however, that Nietzsche is not merely interested in the flourishing of the individual. Neither is he suggesting that particular groups ought to be elevated over others due to some innate superiority on their part. Rather, he is interested in securing those conditions that promote the evolution of the human race writ large. He understands religious belief as a tool that can either accomplish or hinder this goal, not merely at the individual level, but also within social groups. Therefore, in order to justify why I have chosen to use Nietzsche to motivate a theory of collaborative religious community, this section will argue against an individualistic reading of his work. I will demonstrate that an interest in human social life can be followed through all of the comments on religion that we have previously analyzed.

### 2.3.1 Religious Community in *The Birth of Tragedy*

*The Birth of Tragedy* is Nietzsche's most obviously communitarian work. In this text, Schopenhauer's influence on the young Nietzsche is prominently visible. Nietzsche at this point shares Schopenhauer's view that religion has two primary functions. As already shown, its first function is to help its followers to cope with their own pessimism. However, it also functions to provide a group of people with a central community ethos.<sup>107</sup> For

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<sup>106</sup> In *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion*, Julian Young differentiates two accounts of Nietzsche as individualist. The first takes him to seek the well-being of the individual at the expense of the group; the second takes him to privilege certain superior groups over others. Young ultimately rejects both of these accounts. See Young, pp. 2-3.

<sup>107</sup> See Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*

Schopenhauer (as for Nietzsche), in order to promote social stability, a group of people requires a single conception of morality around which it can unify. Religion is, of course, not the only way in which such a system of morality can be instituted among a group, but it is historically a common (and highly effective) way of doing so. Regardless of how it is provided, this shared understanding of morality is essential for community life; Nietzsche understands community as a common enterprise united around a shared conception of the good life. We can think of religion's role, then, as drawing a group of people into relation with one another by instituting a particular set of moral principles, which members of the group then take up as personal beliefs. Without such shared principles, Nietzsche believes that a community is subject to degradation. After all, how can a social group be considered a community if its members disagree on life's most fundamental issues?

Religion is uniquely able to institute these shared moral principles through its utilization of mythological thinking. Julian Young argues that Nietzsche's communitarian sympathies in the *Birth* can be traced back to his own intellectual roots in the Volkish tradition.<sup>108</sup> This intellectual movement, represented not only in Nietzsche but also in Schelling, Fichte, and others, arose in response to the alienated rationalism of the Enlightenment. When reason was elevated as the defining human faculty, ideas that had historically been accepted—including the existence of God—were seriously called into question for the first time, on the grounds that their literal truth could not be demonstrated. Of course, Nietzsche sees the metaphorical death of God as a grand opportunity for the progress of humanity; however, Young argues that Nietzsche believes such progress can

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<sup>108</sup> Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 3-5 & 201-215.

only occur in a communitarian context, one which extreme rationalism undermines.<sup>109</sup> Nietzsche's criticism of Socratic thinking in the *Birth* supports Young's interpretation. For Nietzsche, attempts to understand the world in terms of pure rationality cultivate a nihilistic worldview which blocks the possibility of flourishing within human life. Such attempts stifle the spirit of artistic myth and strip life of its Dionysian element. Nietzsche himself claims that such a Socratic mode of thinking ought to be abandoned—Young sees this prescription as a direct product of the Volkish influence on Nietzsche's thinking. Young follows Thomas Rohkrämer in arguing that the primary ideological thread in such thinking is the belief in a necessary return to a type of communal faith, which can unify a social group around a central set of beliefs.<sup>110</sup> To be clear, this is not a faith in any particular deity (and for Nietzsche, certainly not in the Judeo-Christian God). Rather, it is a return to the mythological *style* of thinking of the pre-Socratic Greeks, which recognized that much of human life cannot be explained in terms of the purely rational.<sup>111</sup>

Therefore, the Nietzsche of the *Birth* calls for a communal turn away from excessively rationalistic thinking, and a return to the spirit of myth exemplified in the Greek tragedy. In doing so, a social group can cultivate a set of shared moral values, around which the group can organize – and which can provide the foundation for durable community relationships.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>111</sup> I argued in Chapter 1 that the most prominent members of the New Atheist movement subscribe to a similar model of rationality as defended by Enlightenment-era thinkers. Because of this, Nietzsche's work provides us with a useful response to our contemporary religious critics.

### 2.3.2 The Social Orientation of Nietzschean Master & Slave Morality

The *Birth* is often treated as an anomaly. It is commonly accepted that Nietzsche simply changes his tune after this text, rejecting his previous position regarding religion's positive social potential, and that the rest of his work is a continuous progression towards an ever-greater degree of both atheism and individualism. However, we can see that Nietzsche in his middle period retains both his interest in human social life generally speaking, and his view on religion as a source of community morality. His religious criticisms in *Beyond Good and Evil* and the *Genealogy* can be understood in light of his position in the *Birth*; in the later texts, he is simply describing the absence of the positive community ethos which he had previously discussed. His disdain for Judeo-Christianity is not simply that these religions produce individuals whose lives are steeped in mediocrity. Rather, his primary position is that the Judeo-Christian slave morality has instituted erroneous beliefs at the group level, beliefs which prevent the possibility of *groups* flourishing. Therefore, we can understand his account of master and slave morality as issuing from a commitment to the possibility of healthy social life, and not merely to the well-being of particular individuals.

First, we can see in the *Genealogy* that Nietzsche does not advocate for a radical individualism; he writes about the benefits of belonging to a community. From Nietzsche:

Man lives in a community, man enjoys the advantages of a community (and what advantages! We occasionally underestimate them nowadays), man lives protected,



spared, in peace and trust, secure from certain injuries and enmities, to which the man outside the community, the “peaceless” man is exposed[.]<sup>112</sup>

Nietzsche unfortunately does not go into greater detail regarding what specific advantages he recognizes for community life. Here he mainly seems to echo the classic account of the social contract, as he goes on to describe the process by which a community holds accountable those who would seek to impose their own individualism against its socially-held ideals. We can infer from his account of master and slave morality that, if one belongs to a community, then perhaps one enjoys a level of social security that reduces the likelihood of group conflicts. This could, in theory, position one in such a way as to free up her time and energy for more important pursuits. Despite his commitment to the primacy of one’s own will to power, nowhere does Nietzsche seem to suggest that the *ubermensch* will be more successful in undertaking his task if he does so alone. Therefore, while he does not provide an extensive account here of his views on community, it should be clear that Nietzsche is not advocating for a life of radical individualism in this text.

To understand Nietzsche’s views on community more clearly, we must first understand his views on morality. Indeed, Nietzsche’s account of morality not only *can* be understood in terms of the social—I argue that it *must* be understood in these terms. We saw in the *Birth* that Nietzsche takes a central conception of morality to be essential to the unity of a social group. It is a shared system of morality that not only brings a group together, but also informs them of how to best direct their own conduct. For the Greeks, their shared morality was largely akin to what Nietzsche would later call master morality:

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<sup>112</sup> *Genealogy of Morals*, p. 51.

the gods were considered worthy of worship due to their qualities of exceptional beauty and strength. Nietzsche saw this conception of morality as a useful community ethos for the Greek people, because it presented moral ideals that he took to benefit those who followed them. This ethos, of course, directly contradicts the new slave morality that would be instituted in Judeo-Christianity. We have seen that Nietzsche takes the Judeo-Christian morality to be fundamentally opposed to the human, in the sense that it requires its adherents to conduct themselves in ways that directly violate their own interests qua human beings. The whole point of a system of morality, for Nietzsche, is to define how a group of human beings ought to live, in order to fulfill their highest potential. His criticism of these religions, therefore, should be understood as a criticism of a faulty community ethos—one which misunderstands what it means to be a flourishing human being. By imposing the inferior slave morality upon a historical moment, Judeo-Christianity has oriented generations of people towards erroneous beliefs regarding the best way to live a human life. These religions do not merely institute these beliefs at the individual level, but broadly, in such a way as to compromise the progress of the entire human race. The entire point of religion is to institute, at the community level, an ideology regarding what constitutes a group's best interests, and Judeo-Christianity directly violates that purpose.

We can go a bit farther on this point: in the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche makes it clear that he understands moral beliefs to be primarily of a social (rather than an individual) nature. In other words, the beliefs that one holds regarding what is “good” and “bad/evil” are typically the product of one's position within a given social context—and not the product of some prior individual experience with a given deity. Both the master and slave class first define goodness not in terms of any religious ideology or human authority figure,

but rather in terms of their own pre-existing personal qualities. Of course, as the qualities of these two groups are opposed to one another, this leads to conflict when the groups encounter each other. Nietzsche writes that “the idea of political superiority always resolves itself into the idea of psychological superiority”<sup>113</sup>; what he means here is that resentment (as a personal psychological experience) develops in response to conflicts at the group level. Slave morality itself is a set of beliefs that a group cultivates in response to occupying an inferior position in society. The key point here is that for Nietzsche, moral beliefs are not merely a foundation for community relationships—those beliefs themselves are also socially constituted. This highlights the primacy of the social in Nietzsche’s account, and calls into question those who would take him to be a radical individualist.

We should understand Nietzsche, therefore, as being committed to socially-disseminated ideologies that promote the well-being of the human qua human. Importantly, Nietzsche’s interest in human social life is not confined to an interest in any particular group of people. As with so many other issues, Nietzsche often allows himself to be misconstrued on this point; in both *Beyond Good and Evil* and the *Genealogy*, he contributes to this interpretation with his repeated fixation on the European race specifically.<sup>114</sup> These comments, of course, are often used to justify Nietzsche’s later connection to Nazism, by suggesting that Nietzsche takes the European race to be innately superior to other groups of people. However, Nietzsche here is not taking a genetically reductive position regarding some inborn superiority of any particular group. *Beyond Good and Evil* demonstrates that for Nietzsche, human life is primarily an expression of the will

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<sup>113</sup> *Genealogy of Morals*, p. 18.

<sup>114</sup> See especially *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 37; *Genealogy of Morals*, p. 17.

to power, as both individuals and groups seek to impose their own wills upon others.<sup>115</sup> Nietzsche's view of morality is that it is not an inherent quality of the individual, but rather of actions—an action is objectively moral if it promotes the well-being of the human being. Nietzsche does not differentiate what constitutes human well-being for different races or nationalities. He likewise does not primarily differentiate between groups in terms of inborn qualities, but rather in terms of how historically successful those groups have been at imposing their own will to power upon others. His comments on the European race should therefore not be understood as meaning that there is a biological superiority to a given group of people; rather, that group has simply demonstrated great success in exercising its will to power.

### 2.3.3 Nietzsche's Social Views in *The Antichrist*

In the *Antichrist*, Nietzsche maintains the same position regarding religion, morality, and community as that outlined above. He reaffirms early in this text that we should understand morality as the conditions that benefit the life and growth of a group of people. His disdain for the Christian faith is that it promotes as objective truth a set of ideas that stifle the evolutionary progress of humanity. In describing Christianity as a profound sickness, Nietzsche's view is that this sickness is not confined to those individuals who practice that religion—it extends to the entire society that embraces its moral ideologies.

Given all of this, one would be amiss to understand Nietzsche merely as a radical individualist, whose concern lies with the solitary *ubermensch* in contrast to the needs of the herd. One would be similarly mistaken to take Nietzsche as only being interested in

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<sup>115</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 98.

particular social groups whom he believes to be genetically superior. Nietzsche's religious philosophy seeks to articulate an account of morality that can secure the flourishing of the human race, not merely of a few individuals. Morality itself is a necessarily communitarian enterprise, for moral concepts are themselves socially constituted, and what is moral must be understood in terms of what benefits a group of people. Beliefs cultivated through religious commitments do not only impact the individual who holds them, but also the social groups in which that individual participates. With all of this articulated, we can conclude that Nietzsche's philosophy belongs in a positive account of religious community such as this one. Nietzsche's goal is to determine how we can cultivate the kinds of moral beliefs that will allow us – all of us – to reach our greatest human potential.

#### 2.4 Social Alienation in Nietzsche's Religious Writings: Religious Moral Autonomy & The Possibility of Thick Trust

With the alienation of the human and the divine demonstrated throughout Nietzsche's religious writings, and with the social orientation of Nietzsche's philosophy defended, I will now bring his views into conversation with the positions established in Chapter 1 of this project. We have already shown that Nietzsche is fundamentally concerned with the alienation of the human from the divine; given this, I believe that we can also track a second, related type of alienation in his work. For Nietzsche, Judeo-Christianity does not stop at alienating the human and the divine; it goes farther by alienating the individual from her community. It does so by interfering with our first necessary condition for the growth of thick trust: that of perceived moral autonomy among members of the group. In this section, I will briefly revisit this condition for the growth of

thick trust, and then argue that Judeo-Christianity as depicted by Nietzsche creates a social environment in which this condition cannot be satisfied.

Recall that our first condition was as follows: in order for thick trust to develop within a group, all parties must take each other to be participating in their relationships as autonomous moral agents. In other words, when it comes to moral decision-making, individuals must understand each other to be acting freely, without an external entity coercing them to make a particular choice. They must in this sense take each other to possess moral autonomy.<sup>116</sup> Thick trust requires that individuals be able to hold themselves accountable to a standardized expectation of conduct, even when they could feasibly get away with violating that expectation.

It is clear from our previous discussion that Nietzsche sees moral autonomy to be an essential element of religious belief and practice. His view that religion exists to provide a central community ethos, i.e. a shared concept of morality, demonstrates an important connection between the moral and the religious. However, different religions can shape their adherents' views on morality in a wide variety of ways, which can in turn yield a variety of results for the possibility of thick trust.

Nietzsche's praise for the Greek religion in the *Birth* should be read in light of how that religion encourages the moral autonomy of its followers. The Greek religion does not treat morality as something that is unknowable by the human being; followers of that religion understand themselves to be already divine, and are thus empowered to play a role in crafting their own community ethos. In doing so, members of such a religious

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<sup>116</sup> A longer discussion of how Nietzsche understands moral autonomy (and how his account of the subject conflicts with Kant's) is presented in Chapter 3 of this project.

community come to serve as their own standard for morality – they can determine for themselves what will promote their flourishing qua human beings, and mutually choose to pursue it. The possibility of moral autonomy is secured in such a religion because there is no alien deity who defines for the agent how she ought to live her life. In other words, there is no external standard for morality in such a religion, apart from the human being herself; members of the group serve as their own autonomous authority regarding what is moral. In a context where the individual serves as her own moral authority, others can reasonably place their trust in that individual. Such an individual does not perform moral conduct out of fear of punishment, but rather out of a personal commitment to her own autonomous moral code.

Meanwhile, Nietzsche's primary criticism of religions such as Judeo-Christianity concerns those religions' negation of their followers' moral autonomy. To be morally autonomous simply means to have the ability to set one's own standards for moral conduct. However, by presenting the divine and the human as two fundamentally opposed concepts, and situating moral authority with the divine exclusively, a religion claims that it is an alien god (and not the human believer) who ultimately determines what is moral. In Judeo-Christianity, it is God alone who has access to the universal laws of right and wrong – human beings must direct their conduct in light of God's commandments, not in light of their own personal moral values. Within this context, the believer has little input regarding the types of actions that she ought to perform. We should recall that, for Nietzsche, those who pursue the slave morality of Judeo-Christianity are pursuing an ideology which is inherently heteronomous to the agent, and which is opposed to the flourishing of the human race qua human beings. Because these religiously-imposed moral standards are

heteronomous, they are insufficient for grounding relationships of thick trust. In order to inspire thick trust in others, one's moral conduct must originate with the individual herself; it cannot be imposed upon her by an external entity. If morality entails merely following rules imposed by an authority figure, then members of a group cannot trust one another to follow those rules in the absence of the figure in question. Morality then becomes a matter of simply avoiding punishment, not of determining for oneself how one ought to live. We saw in Chapter One that such a self-interested approach alienates the individual from other members of the group, and precludes the possibility of meaningful trust relationships.

Religions like Judeo-Christianity (as Nietzsche describes the tradition) therefore cannot provide us with what we need to establish a collaborative religious community. These faiths call into question the individual's ability to determine what is moral; they instead locate morality with a god that remains fundamentally distinct from those who worship him. Additionally, in such religions, the commands of God often require the faithful to perform actions that directly violate their best interests qua human beings. As this way of doing religion alienates the human from the divine, it undermines the individual's capacity for moral autonomy—and in doing so, prevents her from cultivating durable community relationships.

## 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has focused largely on alienation between the religious individual and that which she worships. For Nietzsche, to be human means to be capable of moral self-direction; the individual human being must decide for herself what is meaningful, and towards what end she will direct her life. He believes that humanity has a responsibility to



strive towards our fullest potential qua human beings—a potential to embrace our own will to power and exercise to the utmost our all-too-human qualities of power and strength. Religions like Judeo-Christianity posit an alien deity as an exclusive source of meaning and truth, and present a moral ideology that is fundamentally opposed to that which objectively benefits the human being. This promotes the stagnation of human potential, as believers look beyond themselves for answers regarding how to live their lives. Such religious practice not only alienates humanity from the divine; it also alienates believers from one another by undermining the possibility of genuine community relationships.

A succinct way of describing this problem is to define it in terms of religious heteronomy. Of course, this chapter is certainly not the first place where such a problem has been taken up. One of the more well-known treatments of this problem is in Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Of course, from a historical perspective, Kant's work cannot engage with Nietzsche's; however, Kant's task is to address some of the same concerns about religion that Nietzsche would also later articulate. In the *Religion*, Kant seeks to rationalize religious practice by emphasizing the moral autonomy of the believer—that is, by designating the individual believer as one who can access and interpret religious truth. By doing so, Kant attempts to turn religion into a universalizable practice in which the rational subject is able to determine what is morally right simply through the exercise of her own reason. Prima facie, Kant's solution appears palatable, for it emphasizes the believer's autonomy and therefore seems to avoid the sorts of problems that we see highlighted in Nietzsche's account. It also, at least at first glance, meets our first criterion for the growth of thick trust. However, for our purposes, Kant's view of religion remains inadequate for the task of establishing a collaborative community; this is

because, while religion in Nietzsche often fails to satisfy our first condition for thick trust, religion in Kant fails to satisfy our second. The following chapter will consider Kant's *Religion* at length and conclude that, while such a religion has the potential to solve the problem of religious heteronomy, it also creates new ones, and therefore cannot set the stage for a collaborative community.

## CHAPTER 3. THE PRACTICAL SHORTCOMINGS OF KANT'S RATIONAL RELIGION

### 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter was primarily concerned with the subject of religious moral autonomy. Nietzsche believes that a religion can cultivate the moral autonomy of the believer by emphasizing the inherent divinity of the human being – that is, by situating moral authority with the religious individual. Many historical religions have failed to accomplish this, however, instead depicting the divine and the human as necessarily distinct from one another. In doing so, these religions place moral authority in the hands of an entity beyond the human agent, a practice which undermines the possibility of thick trust in communal relationships. One can conclude, then, that a collaborative religious community must be one in which the moral autonomy of the believer is prioritized.

For Nietzsche, religious moral autonomy is possible; he takes the Greek religion as an exemplar of autonomous religious practice. Nietzsche claims this religion represents the divine in a way that deifies and therefore empowers the human being, breaking down the barrier that other religions (such as Judeo-Christianity) would impose between the two. If Nietzsche were correct, then perhaps we could look to the Greek religion as a standard for a collaborative religious community. However, upon closer examination, we can see that this religion does not successfully overcome divine/human alienation in the way that Nietzsche claims it does. While the Greek religion represents the divine in largely anthropomorphic terms, the Greek gods still maintain qualities that are beyond those of even the most powerful human being. Zeus may take on the appearance of a man, but men can never become Zeus. Therefore, the practice of this religion still sustains a degree of alienation between the human and the divine, because while the believer can identify with

the gods concerning their shared human traits, she can never truly know what it is like to be a god. The gods remain separate from the believer, not merely because they are distinct individuals, but also because they are a distinct type of entity. The mythological device, by virtue of being representational, therefore ultimately perpetuates the problem that it attempts to overcome. This calls into question whether such a religion can genuinely cultivate the moral autonomy of the human being.

There is another issue with Nietzsche's account of religion as well. Despite his (already!) lengthy criticisms of it, Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil* that Christianity, even with all of its alienating tendencies, can still have a certain teleological value for those who do not become mired in its questionable theological claims.<sup>117</sup> This suggests that the ideological content of a religious tradition is less important than the individual who interprets that content. In other words, it seems that what a person takes away from a religion is primarily determined by the person rather than the religion itself. If religion's goal were simply to function at the individual level, i.e. to develop the individual's moral conscience and worldview, then perhaps Nietzsche's choice to center the believer (rather than the content of the representation) would make sense. But we also saw that for Nietzsche, religion's main function is to provide a central community ethos around which a group of people can unify. If this is the case, then the way Nietzsche describes Christianity in *Beyond Good and Evil* seems to conflict with that function. How can a religion unite a community around a given set of principles, if the members of that community can all interpret the claims of that religion differently? If religion is merely a matter of individual interpretation, then any religion can mean anything at all, and religious

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<sup>117</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 35-37.

principles come to mean little more than the most arbitrary personal opinion. While this may encourage the believer to look to herself for the answers to life's biggest questions, it does little to create a social context in which people can reasonably predict the behavior of others. In other words, the possibility of thick trust within this sort of religious context seems questionable.

There is therefore a gap between what Nietzsche wants out of religious practice, and what he describes it as actually being able to give us. What is needed here is a way of doing religion that secures the moral autonomy of the believer more effectively than the Greek religion does. We need a model of religion that does not point the believer towards anthropomorphic gods (and in doing so, solidifies structures of alienation), but rather to her own autonomous judgments of what constitutes moral conduct. Furthermore, if a religion is to ground relationships of thick trust, it seems that there needs to be some objective foundation for the religion's belief system. The ideology in question ought to be based upon universally agreeable principles, rather than vague tenets which can be interpreted differently by different sorts of people.

Because of this, for the purpose of fostering social relationships, I take Kant's account in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* to be preferable to Nietzsche's model of religion. Kant takes great care to center the believer's autonomy in his account, as his entire practical philosophy is grounded upon the possibility of individual autonomy. Additionally, Kant does not make religion a matter of subjective interpretation—he believes that all historical religions are grounded upon universal truths which are accessible to, and verifiable by, every rational agent. In my view, Kant's rational religion preserves the autonomy of the believer in a way that supports the development of communal life,

while also successfully overcoming the alienation between divine and human that is a necessary element of religious representation. Such a religion therefore does a better job than Nietzsche's of satisfying our first condition for the growth of thick trust.<sup>118</sup>

However, while it is necessary, the mutual perception of moral autonomy alone is not sufficient to establish thick trust among members of a community. We saw in Chapter 1 that reason alone cannot ground community relationships, and that post-Enlightenment accounts which privilege reason often discount the reality that human experience is not purely rational. It is because of this that I articulated a second necessary condition for the growth of thick trust: members of a community must define rationality in terms of the practical, and not merely the theoretical. And unfortunately, while Kant's account of rational religion does an excellent job of satisfying our first condition, it fails to satisfy the second. Kant attempts to surmount the problems of representational religion altogether by treating religious imagery as a set of ideological training wheels, as a tool which can be cast aside once one no longer needs it. He holds that the historical elements of religious practice are not of particular import, because he is primarily interested in the ideological similarities of religions rather than their cultural and temporal differences. Kant's proposal is that in the kingdom of ends, historical religion will fade away altogether, leaving behind pure rational religion.<sup>119</sup> However, this approach mistakenly treats religion as if it were merely an epistemological endeavor, one which would strive to cultivate indicative beliefs regarding the nature of the moral law. Kant therefore ends up making the same sort of error

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<sup>118</sup> Of course, Nietzsche would vehemently disagree with this assessment, on the grounds that Kant's view of autonomy is itself alienating. While a lengthy comparison of Kant and Nietzsche's accounts of autonomy is beyond the scope of this project, I will address this disagreement in section 3.3.

<sup>119</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge, 1998), 6:121.

as the critics we saw in Chapter 1 of this project, who judged religion by its metaphysical accuracy rather than its practical utility. Because of this, for the purpose of creating a collaborative community, Kant's rational religion solves one type of problem but creates another.

So, this chapter will show that Kant's model of religion brings us closer to a collaborative religious community than Nietzsche's does, but still ultimately falls short of it. Our order of events will be as follows: first, I will demonstrate what Kant takes religion's purpose to be, according to his account in the *Religion*. We will see that, like Nietzsche, Kant initially claims that religion serves a teleological function in human social life. Kant's view is that historical religious imagery represents universal moral truths in a way that is amenable to practical reason, and serves to cultivate beliefs regarding the possibility of moral conduct. We will see that for Kant, the topics of religion and autonomy are necessarily intertwined, as the purpose of religious practice is to illuminate the believer's capacity for moral autonomy. I will argue that, by distinguishing between rational and historical religion, Kant preserves the autonomy of the believer while overcoming the religious alienation between the divine and the human that Nietzsche criticizes—and does so in a way that is more effective than any solution Nietzsche provides. In doing so, Kant's account satisfies our first condition for thick trust more effectively than Nietzsche's does.

However, while Kant's ultimate move away from representational religious practice works to preserve the believer's autonomy, it also creates a new problem—one which prevents his model of religion from grounding a collaborative community. Many Kant scholars have contended that by privileging rational religion, Kant strips away everything that is uniquely *religious* about religion; I will echo this point, although I will

suggest that the problem is not so much the loss of the religious as the loss of the practical, generally speaking. I will argue that Kant mistakenly treats religion as a source of indicative beliefs regarding the moral law, when he instead ought to treat the practice as a source of imperative beliefs that can have social utility regardless of their literal truth value. By holding religion to Enlightenment standards of rationality, Kant betrays a limited definition of the rational, and in doing so underestimates the primacy of the practical in human social life. Therefore, this chapter will conclude that Kantian rational religion on its own is not sufficient to ground a durable community, because it fails to satisfy our second necessary condition for thick trust.

### 3.2 Kant on the Function of Religion

Kant's work on religion is extensive, and to understand it properly requires some familiarity with his practical philosophy. While this is not a dissertation primarily on Kant, we should begin with a cursory review of his work on the subject, so that we can understand the role that he takes religion to play in human life. We will see that, in short, Kant believes that the function of historical religion is to represent the universal moral law in a way that is amenable to practical reason, with the goal of illuminating the individual's pre-existing capacity for moral autonomy. For Kant, this awareness of one's own capacity for goodness is a necessary condition for the foundation of the ethical community.

#### 3.2.1 Rational vs. Historical Religion: Kant on Religious Objectivity

Kant and Nietzsche agree on at least one point: both believe that historical religious practice is primarily a representational endeavor. Like Nietzsche, Kant believes that no single religion's historical claims should be understood as literal truth. Kant's view is that



religions tell stories in order to help practical reason to grasp abstract concepts, which may be difficult to understand on a purely theoretical level.<sup>120</sup> While these stories may be objectively dubious, this is not a problem, for their purpose is mythical rather than literal. It does not matter whether Jehovah or Zeus actually exists (for example), but merely what those concepts represent to those who engage with them. Both Nietzsche and Kant would say that stories of all-powerful gods can help human beings come to some understanding of divinity as a concept. However, one way that we can differentiate between Kant and Nietzsche's accounts is by noting their different views on religious objectivity. I argued in this chapter's introduction that Nietzsche makes religion a matter of pure subjective interpretation, where there is no ultimate truth to be found within religious ideology—religion can mean anything at all, depending upon the person interpreting its representations. For Nietzsche, the function of religion (at least, its ideal function) is to illuminate for the individual her own capacity to decide what constitutes a meaningful life. However, Nietzsche holds that this meaning is entirely up to the individual to determine; there is no objective standard for value beyond the will of the subject.<sup>121</sup> In contrast, while Kant likewise acknowledges the great variety in historical religious representations, he believes that there are certain objective truths to be found across all religions, and that particular religions should be understood as an attempt to represent these universal truths. Kant's view is that historical religions themselves ought to be judged according to how accurately they align with this objective standard.<sup>122</sup> Religion for Kant, then, is not about

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<sup>120</sup> See *Religion*, 6:109; & Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge, 1996), 5:42.

<sup>121</sup> See *Genealogy of Morals*, pp. 14-16.

<sup>122</sup> *Religion*, 6:107-9.

creating value in a meaningless world, but rather about using religious representations to locate pre-existing values. Nietzsche treats religion as something purely subjective, while Kant sees it as having both subjective and objective elements.

Kant's position is best demonstrated by his distinction between historical religion and rational religion. The former is what one likely thinks of when hearing the term "religion"; historical religion refers to any particular religious tradition that is practiced in a given place and time. Such a religion is defined both by its theological commitments, and by its traditions and rites in which believers participate—it therefore has both theoretical and practical features. Meanwhile, Kantian rational religion is purely theoretical, and is a bit more abstract. For Kant, a rational religion is a "religion" the content of which is informed solely by the testimony of human reason. It is an intellectual exercise, but not necessarily a practical one. To be a rational religion, it must be universalizable in the sense that its claims to truth are not dependent upon historical events or particular tenets of theology. It is necessary that these claims can be discerned by any rational agent at any point in time.<sup>123</sup> Specifically, the content of rational religious belief is informed solely by the moral law, and the primary goal of rational religious practice is promoting universalizable moral statutes. There is indeed no difference for Kant between the tenets of rational religion and the dictates of the categorical imperative.<sup>124</sup>

Importantly, this distinction between rational and historical religion is not a dichotomy—historical religion can (and for Kant, ought to) be grounded in rational religion. One can think of rational religion as an idea or concept, for which historical

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<sup>123</sup> *Religion*, 6:103.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 6:13.

religion provides a practical representation. Because Kant largely equates rational religion and the moral law, he contends that rational religious principles on their own may be difficult for practical reason to grasp. Kant writes that human beings have a “peculiar need for something the senses can hold onto”<sup>125</sup>; the historical elements within a particular religion, such as its traditional imagery and rites, can serve as representational vehicles for universal truths which may otherwise remain obscure. For instance, Kant claims that the Biblical story of mankind’s fall from grace represents the evil that occurs when a human being sets conditional incentives as her supreme maxim instead of the moral law.<sup>126</sup> However, as mentioned at the outset of this section, one must bear in mind that universal truth cannot be limited to the form of mere particularities. Truth can be represented in any number of religions, not just one. Kant’s claim that morality has no need of religion means that universal truths represented by religious practice would hold true even in the absence of all historical religions, and that no single tradition has a monopoly on truth.<sup>127</sup> In other words, the moral necessarily precedes the religious. Kant’s claim also means that, while historical religions serve an important representational purpose, they can never represent rational truths with one hundred percent accuracy. He writes that “the distinguishing mark of the true church is its universality”<sup>128</sup>; for Kant, the historical elements of any particular religion make it necessarily non-universalizable, because historical facts cannot be discerned through reason alone. Kant is primarily interested in universal moral truths, not in the imperfect vehicles through which they are conveyed to the believer. He therefore

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 6:109.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 6:41-42.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 6:4.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 6:115.

takes rational religion to be of primary value, with historical religion serving a lesser supportive function.<sup>129</sup>

### 3.2.2 The Teleological Function of Belief

We can see from the above discussion that Kant takes religion and morality to be necessarily connected—not because any particular religion can exclusively determine what is moral, but because rational religion and the moral law are one and the same. Historical religion, meanwhile, serves to establish beliefs regarding the moral law and one’s relationship to it. These beliefs impact the way in which the individual navigates her life, and influence her continued pursuance of the moral law. We can therefore see that, like Nietzsche, Kant takes one of religion’s most important functions to be the cultivation of beliefs, which serve a teleological function in the lives of those who hold them.

The function of religious belief in Kant’s system is to inspire and encourage a commitment to moral conduct over the course of one’s life. For Kant, necessity implies possibility; we are only obligated to do that which we are able to do. Possibility here refers not only to the overarching metaphysical possibility of something, but also to the agent’s perception of its possibility. This means that, when it comes to the task of fulfilling our duty to the moral law, two things are required: we must *actually* be capable of setting the moral law as our supreme maxim, but we also must *believe* that we possess this capability. It is only after one comes to believe that moral conduct is possible that she can begin to

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<sup>129</sup> We shall see shortly that this creates a tension between rational and historical religion, one which presents problems for the possibility of a collaborative religious community.

pursue it. Religion for Kant is therefore primarily a matter of cultivating beliefs—not in any particular faith’s gods or tenets, but in the possibility of goodness itself.

There are two ways in which religion can establish beliefs regarding the possibility of becoming moral. First, Kant argues in the second *Critique* that moral conduct is only possible if the subject believes that virtue and happiness will ultimately be aligned. From the categorical imperative, we have a duty to promote the highest good, which would be made manifest in a world where performing virtuous conduct necessarily leads to happiness.<sup>130</sup> Kant’s commitment that necessity implies possibility leads him to conclude that such an ideal world must indeed be possible. However, despite being the two elements of the highest good, virtue and happiness often oppose one another. Kant writes in the second *Critique*:

[M]axims of virtue and those of one’s own happiness are quite heterogenous with respect to their supreme practical principle; and, even though they belong to one highest good, so as to make it possible, yet they are so far from coinciding that they greatly restrict and infringe upon each other in the same subject.<sup>131</sup>

In other words, we can see in the world around us that behaving virtuously does not always lead to happiness. Nature is not so structured as to necessarily promote the highest good on its own. A person who attempts to follow the moral law thus has no initial guarantee that she will ever achieve the highest good.<sup>132</sup> Therefore, in order to secure the possibility of Kant’s ideal world, we must postulate the existence of an all-powerful being which can

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<sup>130</sup> See *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:124-125; & Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 450.

<sup>131</sup> *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:112.

<sup>132</sup> See also *Critique of Judgment*, 452.

ultimately unite duty and happiness, by ensuring that happiness necessarily follows from doing one's duty.<sup>133</sup> For all purposes, this being would be God. Postulating the existence of God allows one to believe in the possibility of the highest good, which in turn allows the subject to direct her maxims towards that good.

So, religion can establish a belief in the possibility of a sort of ultimate happy ending, in which one's duty aligns with the highest good. This belief empowers the agent to fulfill her own moral obligations. Religion can establish a second sort of belief as well: the belief that the individual *herself* remains capable of continuous moral improvement, even in the face of her own moral shortcomings. One of Kant's central claims in the *Religion* is that every human being possesses propensities to both good and evil; while we all have an inextirpable moral predisposition, the concurrent evil within us can obscure our insight into the possibility of our own goodness.<sup>134</sup> Because of these simultaneous propensities, while we all have the capacity to become virtuous, we may occasionally find ourselves blinded to that capacity in the face of repeated moral failures. These failures can, over time, dishearten even the most resilient individual. Such a person may come to believe that she is fundamentally incapable of doing good, and therefore cease any further attempts at moral conduct. This leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which the propensity for evil "determines" the ultimate nature of one's choices.<sup>135</sup> For the purpose of morality, what is needed is for the agent to attain self-consciousness of her own propensity for good—that

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<sup>133</sup> See *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:125; *Critique of Judgment*, 450; *Religion*, 6:5.

<sup>134</sup> *Religion*, 6:50.

<sup>135</sup> "Determines" here, of course, does not mean that the propensity for evil outright removes the agent's ability to choose goodness. Kant is committed to the view that no individual can ever lose her autonomy (see *Religion*, 6:41). Rather, the propensity for evil in the case above simply leads to continuous evil conduct.

is, she must come to recognize and believe in her own ability to give the moral law to herself and to act in accordance with it, despite temptations she may face to do otherwise.

While Kant believes that all rational agents are theoretically capable of coming to this self-recognition solely through the power of their reason, the task can nonetheless be made more manageable through the use of practical representations. It is at this point that rational religion, with its synthesis of universal truths and phenomenal content, can be useful. Although such particular representations can only do an imperfect job of representing universal truth (since they are always merely particular), they can nonetheless enable practical reason to cognize that truth in a way that it may otherwise struggle to do. By looking to religious myths that defend the individual's inextirpable capacity for goodness, one can cultivate a belief in *her own* goodness—a belief that can encourage her to continue the task of striving towards virtue, even as she does so imperfectly. In Book II of the *Religion*, Kant discusses a representation of, or prototype for, virtue. He takes virtue to be best represented in the person of Jesus Christ, and he believes that Christ can serve a pivotal function in the moral transformation (or “salvation”) of the human being. However, for Kant, the role that Christ plays in human salvation is not what is described in the traditional Christian story. Kant does not treat Christ's death as an event that institutes a literal metaphysical reorientation of guilt from one party to another. Rather, he presents it as a hopeful allegory which suggests that even the most corrupted will can be transformed through continuous effort.<sup>136</sup> As the prototype of virtue, Christ is the perfect embodiment of a person oriented towards the moral law. He is fully human, with a corporeal form that is subject to the same struggles and temptations that afflict every other human. In the face

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<sup>136</sup> *Religion*, 6:66; see also *Critique of Judgment*, 451.

of every temptation, however, he never strays; he allows the moral law alone to guide everything that he does. Christ's embodiment in human form demonstrates to the individual that while it may at times be extraordinarily difficult, it is possible after all for a human to become virtuous.<sup>137</sup> By recognizing this capacity for virtue in Christ, and by extension in oneself as a similarly constituted being, Kant claims that one places a practical "faith" in Christ. Through this practical faith, the believer becomes conscious of her own moral disposition. In other words, she comes to believe that she too can be virtuous, if she just follows Christ's example. She can then seek to emulate Christ in the face of her own temptations, and if she does so, she is justified in hoping herself to be a person who is pleasing unto God—a person who is virtuous.<sup>138</sup> In this sense, then, the believer's faith in Christ "saves" her, not in the sense that it gives her admission into a literal afterlife, but in the sense that it provides her with a belief which inspires her to continue fulfilling her duty to the moral law.

### 3.2.3 Religion's Role in the Ethical Community

We can see from our discussion thus far that for Kant, belief plays a pivotal role in the possibility of moral conduct. This emphasis on the power of belief is something that we also saw in Nietzsche's work on religion. A further similarity between Kant and Nietzsche is that neither of them takes belief to function merely at the individual level; they both claim that beliefs provide a central ideological structure around which a community can organize. For Kant, shared moral beliefs are the foundation of the ideal ethical

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<sup>137</sup> One potentially contentious point here is that Kant does not treat Christ's moral perfection as a function of his being a perfect god incarnate; in order for him to function as a prototype for virtue, Christ's moral toolkit must be identical to that of any other rational being. See *Religion*, 6:63-4.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 6:62.



community. Kant holds that human life is necessarily social; the highest human good (that is, the unification of duty and happiness) cannot be realized by an individual will, and rational agents must come together in an ethical community or kingdom of ends in order to achieve it. This is largely due to the prevalence of temptation—Kant holds that one’s own efforts at moral conduct always run the risk of failure if one is not surrounded by likeminded others who are also committed to the moral law above all else.<sup>139</sup> In other words, centralized beliefs are essential for both individual and group moral progress. And just as religion could cultivate a belief in the possibility of individual morality, Kant believes it can also provide representations useful in the life of a community.

Kant holds that individuals who wish to come together in an ethical community must have a single unifying principle that unites them in their efforts. This unifying principle, rationally speaking, must be the moral law. Such a community must be founded upon laws that are universalizable for every member of the group, and each individual ought to be considered a law-giving agent—law-giving not merely for herself, but for every other member (insofar as the laws she gives are rationally universalizable).<sup>140</sup> However, treating each member of the group as an individual lawgiver for others is impractical, because it is impossible for one to know the hearts of other people. Therefore, Kant believes that the ethical community requires a practical representation of a centralized ethical lawgiver, who knows the hearts of the people and makes laws that align with the will of the group.<sup>141</sup> Only a supreme noumenal being, a god, can serve as this lawgiver.<sup>142</sup> The

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<sup>139</sup> *Religion*, 6:94.

<sup>140</sup> See *Groundwork*, 4:433-4.

<sup>141</sup> *Religion*, 6:98

<sup>142</sup> It may seem here that Kant is positing an objective entity that must dictate the moral law, which would be heteronomous to the subject; however, this is not the case. The members of the ethical community are not subservient to any particular god, but to the autonomously-given moral law; the centralized lawgiver is

important thing to keep in mind here is that, for the ethical community, the supreme lawgiver is merely an image—such a community is not dogmatically united under the banner of any particular religion or god, but rather under the common goal of pursuing the moral law. The religious imagery of a god who posits that law can be of use, but that use remains necessarily representational. By establishing an ethical community oriented towards the will of some represented deity, moral agents can better discern universalizable moral truths and direct their wills towards actions that will benefit the community overall.

Historical religion's function in human social life therefore always remains a representational one. Indeed, Kant is adamant that no particular historical religion can ground the ethical community, since the claims of such a religion would not be universalizable.<sup>143</sup> What matters here is not that the members of the community share a belief in a single historical faith, but rather that they believe in the possibility of their own moral progress. Rational religion's emphasis on universalizable truths (rather than historical facts) necessarily points one towards the recognition of the moral law—and towards those truths that hold for all rational agents, not merely for oneself.

It should be clear from our discussion so far that, just as Nietzsche does, Kant affirms that religion is a matter of cultivating useful beliefs. Those beliefs do not concern whether any particular god literally exists, but rather how one ought to conduct oneself in the world. Kant and Nietzsche's primary disagreement does not concern the social function of religious belief, but rather what they take certain religious beliefs to produce in those

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not a being that literally exists, but rather a representation of that law. No god is imparting exclusive moral knowledge to human beings here. Rather, this figurative "god" provides a single representation of the will of the community, which is simply the amalgamation of individuals' autonomous and universalizable wills.

<sup>143</sup> *Religion*, 6:115.

who take them up. Such beliefs have real consequences for the possibility of communal relationships. We will see in the following section that both Kant and Nietzsche hope to secure the moral autonomy of the individual through religious practice, but that their accounts vary widely on what exactly constitutes such autonomy.

### 3.3 Autonomy in Religious Practice: Kant & Nietzsche's Conflicting Accounts

#### 3.3.1 Kantian vs. Nietzschean Autonomy

We have already seen that, for Nietzsche, religion's ideal function should be to represent the reality that what is human is also necessarily divine, with the goal of demonstrating the individual's capacity for moral autonomy. Kant also sees religion as being necessarily bound up with the autonomy of the believer. For Kant, insofar as historical religion illuminates the moral law, it also illuminates the individual's relationship *to* that law; in other words, historical religion can demonstrate the individual's capacity for moral self-governance. For Kant, to be autonomous means to recognize the universal law within oneself, and to embrace one's capacity to hold oneself accountable to that law. While all human beings have the ability to do this, we do not start off with this orientation towards the moral law. Our attempts at goodness often begin heteronomously, with us identifying "goodness" as the improvement of particular actions or mores.<sup>144</sup> These attempts are misguided, and will ultimately always be thwarted by the human propensity for evil. Kant speaks extensively in the *Religion* about what he calls a revolution in the disposition of the human being, which he takes to be required before an agent can begin

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<sup>144</sup> For more from Kant on the improvement of mores, see *Religion*, 6:48.

pursuing genuinely moral conduct.<sup>145</sup> Anyone who seeks to become morally good must undergo an internal transformation that enables her to attain virtue. What Kant means by this dispositional revolution is a recognition of one's status as an autonomous subject—and through its representational imagery, religious practice can illuminate this status to practical reason. Religious practice for Kant, then, is a process by which the individual rises to consciousness of her status as a law-giving subject.

One of the primary differences between Kant and Nietzsche is that the two have radically different definitions of autonomy. Kant takes the universal law to be an objective truth, but to also be a subjective phenomenon that is produced by the autonomous will of each rational agent. Nietzsche, however, disagrees with this assessment, and considers Kant's account of morality to be riddled with heteronomy. In what is clearly a reference to Kantian ideas, Nietzsche writes in *The Antichrist* that

a virtue must be *our* discovery, *our* most personal self-defense and necessity: in every other sense it is merely a danger. What our life does not call for *harms* it: a virtue, which is merely a feeling of respect for the concept of "virtue," as Kant would have it, is harmful. "Virtue," "duty," "good-in-itself," good in the character of impersonality and universality – chimeras in which the decline, the final exhaustion of life, the Koenigsbergian Chinadom is expressed.<sup>146</sup>

For Nietzsche, one cannot universally define what constitutes goodness—it is the responsibility of each individual to make such a determination for herself. Nietzsche therefore rejects the German idealist commitment to reason as a universal moral standard.

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<sup>145</sup> *Religion*, 6:47-48.

<sup>146</sup> *The Antichrist*, p. 110.

Indeed, he believes that despite their emphasis on the human subject, the German idealists elevate reason to the status of a heteronomous authority. Nietzsche would therefore claim that Kant's view of reason precludes the possibility of individual moral autonomy, because it holds the agent accountable to something external to herself.

A lengthy discussion of Kantian versus Nietzschean autonomy is beyond the scope of this project. However, it's worth noting that Kant does not see the moral law as constraining the freedom of the agent; in contrast, he claims that human beings are most free when they choose to limit their actions to those that align with the moral law.<sup>147</sup> This freedom in limitation is possible because Kant sees the moral law as something that is not external to us, but rather an essential element of our own reason. No one and nothing else can impose the moral law upon us; it is a product of our own spontaneous rational activity.<sup>148</sup> To give the moral law to oneself, which is to limit one's maxim-making on a voluntary basis, is to set oneself free of those maxims that are heteronomously given. In other words, Kant equates autonomy and freedom.<sup>149</sup> Acting in accordance with the autonomously given moral law also ensures the highest degree of human well-being. To be free is not simply to obey whatever potentially self-destructive inclination that happens to cross one's mind (a state that Kant calls negative freedom in the second *Critique*), but to choose to live in accordance with the moral law as given to oneself, thereby fulfilling one's highest potential as a rational agent. Thus, Kant says that it is by choosing to rein in her will that the individual becomes a free, autonomous subject.

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<sup>147</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge,) A752, B780; *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:29.

<sup>148</sup> *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:33; *Groundwork*, 4:433.

<sup>149</sup> See *Groundwork*, 4:447

While our task here is not to wade into the minutiae of Kant and Nietzsche's disagreement on this subject, the way in which we define autonomy is still quite important. This project has established a degree of moral autonomy as a necessary condition for the growth of thick trust within a group; therefore, determining what exactly constitutes such autonomy is necessary to articulate the possibility of a collaborative community. I have already argued that Nietzschean autonomy can satisfy this condition, but what about Kantian autonomy? Does the objectivity that Kant posits in the moral law undermine the individual's ability to serve as her own moral standard? And how does it affect her ability to form relationships of thick trust with others? In the following section, I will explore these questions. We will see that as far as the religious community is concerned, Kantian rational religion not only satisfies our first condition for thick trust—it can do so more effectively than any type of religious practice that Nietzsche proposes.

### 3.3.2 Moral Autonomy in the Religious Community: The Initial Adequacy of Both Kant & Nietzsche's Accounts

I have stated our first condition for the growth of thick trust as follows: in order to establish thick trust, members of a group must take each other to be participating in their relationships as autonomous moral agents. Insofar as individuals believe each other to be able to hold themselves accountable to a given set of moral principles, those individuals can trust one another, even in the absence of coercive authority figures. It is intentional that I have used the language of *taking one another to be autonomous* as opposed to something like “members of a group must participate in their relationships as autonomous moral agents.” This choice of language was made in light of a position that itself sounds quite Kantian: trust is built upon practical appearances, rather than upon unknowable

metaphysical realities. Autonomy is a slippery concept that is quite difficult to discuss in a definitive manner; in practical social relationships, however, it hardly matters whether individuals hold strong theoretical positions regarding the nature of autonomy. It may be the case that none of us are truly autonomous in a literal sense, but in a social context, it still appears that we have the freedom to make choices. It is this social perception of moral freedom that enables thick trust among individuals.<sup>150</sup> This is true even if it is difficult to nail down a theoretical definition of what exactly constitutes autonomy.

On this rather thin definition of autonomy, both Kant and Nietzsche's accounts initially provide us with what we need for thick trust to develop within a religious group. It is less important whether a religious practice objectively provides one with the highest possible degree of metaphysical freedom, and more important whether those around the believer simply understand her to be acting with moral autonomy. We have already seen that, for Nietzsche, the most useful religious practice is that which centers the individual; an entity beyond the subject cannot dictate what is moral for that subject. This means that, in the kinds of religious practice that Nietzsche praises, the believer serves as the ultimate standard regarding the morality of her conduct. This primacy of the believer's judgment allows others to understand her to serve as her own moral authority—in other words, to be acting with moral autonomy. Kant's account also centers the autonomy of the believer (albeit with a different definition of autonomy than Nietzsche's). When one is practicing a religion rationally, one must examine the claims of that religion in light of one's own reason. Since Kant takes the moral law to be something within oneself, which the agent's reason actually produces, he considers rational religious practice to be inherently

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<sup>150</sup> See Adler & Heckscher, "Towards Collaborative Community, pp. 19-21.

autonomous.<sup>151</sup> Such practice cannot entail blindly following the commands of a god or religious leader; it requires one to be an active participant in one's own faith, and to critically assess religious "truths" in light of the testimony of one's own reason. This is a continuous and active process; Kant repeatedly condemns those religions that encourage their followers to be mere passive recipients of religious teachings.<sup>152</sup> Therefore, in the eyes of her community, the individual who practices religion in a rational fashion is thoughtfully examining religious claims, and autonomously choosing to accept or reject them only after reflecting upon them. This is a level of subjective reflection that I argue crosses the autonomy threshold required for thick trust, because it entails that a person holds herself accountable to a self-imposed moral standard instead of merely accepting the commands of an objective entity.

So, concerning the perceived autonomy of oneself and others, Nietzsche and Kant both describe religion in a way that is theoretically able to satisfy our first condition for thick trust. However, while both accounts present this possibility, I believe that Kant's has the ability to be more effective at doing so. While both Kant and Nietzsche seek to establish the moral self-direction of the human being, I suggested earlier in this chapter that Nietzsche's model of religion has two problems: it preserves a degree of alienation between the human and the divine, and it lacks the objectivity necessary to provide a central community ethos. Both of these problems undermine the possibility of a collaborative religious community. Meanwhile, Kant's move away from historical religion and towards the rational demonstrates an attempt to transcend the need for religious representation

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<sup>151</sup> *Religion*, 6:110.

<sup>152</sup> See *Ibid.*, 6:115-23.



altogether. In pure rational religion, the believer enjoys a greater degree of perceived moral authority—and therefore, can better satisfy our first condition for thick trust.

### 3.3.3 The Communal Shortcomings of the Greek Religion

Nietzsche is not the militant atheist that history often remembers him to be. He began his career with a defense of certain religious practices, and spent the rest of his productive life considering the various roles – both positive and negative – that religion can play in human social life. He holds that religious faith can be socially useful insofar as it cultivates certain beliefs concerning one’s moral and existential responsibilities. For the purposes of establishing a durable community, however, there are at least two problems with how Nietzsche speaks of religion. First, the central belief that the Greek religion attempts to cultivate – that the human being is inherently divine, and can serve as the master of her own destiny – is limited by the form of religious representation. This limitation undermines the possibility of moral autonomy for the religious individual, both metaphysically and practically. Second, Nietzsche’s attempt to situate morality primarily with the will of the individual prevents the development of the kinds of centralized principles necessary for relationships of thick trust. Therefore, while it is theoretically possible to generate relationships of thick trust in Nietzsche’s ideal religion (i.e. the Greek religion), it will be quite difficult for that religion to foster the kind of community relationships that this project is seeking.

Nietzsche’s praise for the Greek religion in the *Birth* is largely due to the fact that this religion’s deities are exceptionally anthropomorphic. Unlike the Judeo-Christian god, which is an abstract entity that is a fundamentally different sort of thing than those who worship him, the Greek gods have a number of humanlike qualities. For Nietzsche, as this

religion deifies what appears human, it bridges the divide that other faiths (such as Judeo-Christianity) place between the believer and that which she worships. One is not required to reject one's own humanity in order to emulate the gods—instead, one can directly identify with them based on shared qualities, and can embrace one's own humanity as a result. I have argued that Nietzsche hopes for such religious practice to overcome the alienation he perceives between most religions' accounts of divinity and humanity. However, while the Greek religion certainly does close the human/divine gap more effectively than those religions which worship more abstract gods, it does not fully eliminate that gap. Zeus (for example) does have a number of humanlike qualities—but at his core, Zeus is still not human. He remains both a distinct entity (in the sense that he is Zeus, and no one else) and a distinct *type* of entity (in the sense that he is essentially a god, and not a human). While those who worship Zeus can identify with his anthropomorphic traits, and even seek to emulate those traits which they share, a division remains between them, since those individuals can never truly know what it is like to be a god. (Heracles understood this problem all too well!) The issue here is that, while the representations of the Greek gods are far more accessible to the human being than, for instance, those of Judaism, they are still just that—representations. As Hegel frequently notes, representations are inherently alienating, since they preserve a distinction between subject and object.<sup>153</sup> This presents a problem, because Nietzsche seeks to ground moral autonomy upon the inherent divinity of the human being. Nietzsche holds that we are able to serve as the masters of our own destinies because there is no moral authority higher than that of the human subject. However, Nietzsche's proposal for religion – that is, that religion should

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<sup>153</sup> Hegel specifically discusses representation in the context of religion in the seventh chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

represent the divine in anthropomorphic terms in order to establish a belief in one's own moral authority—does not actually demonstrate that the individual has such authority. Since even the anthropomorphized Greek gods are still represented as entities that remain fundamentally separate from the human being, it is possible that their divinity is not a product of their anthropomorphic traits, but rather some non-human element of their constitution—something which those who worship them could never attain. Therefore, a degree of alienation between the human and the divine remains in the Greek religion, with negative consequences for the possibility of moral autonomy.

This is the case regardless of whether one is seeking to establish the overarching *metaphysical* possibility of autonomy, or merely the social *perception* of it. Regarding the latter: in a religious community that presents anthropomorphic gods as standards for human beings to emulate, it is no secret to believers that a gap remains between themselves and their gods. Thick trust requires that members of the group understand each other as holding themselves accountable to given moral standards. However, there is nothing about worshipping an anthropomorphic god that suggests one is exercising this level of moral autonomy. Due to the alienation problem described above, it is unclear whether one enjoys the same existential authority as a god, and the reality can be that one is simply following the commandments of a god, instead of critically assessing those commands for herself. All of this can make it difficult for others to feel like they can trust one as a moral agent. It is still very possible that the religious individual is acting upon heteronomous moral motivations. Therefore, while I have argued that we only need the social perception of moral autonomy to establish thick trust (rather than actual metaphysical autonomy), it is questionable whether the Greek religion gives us even this.

A second problem for the religious community arises with how Nietzsche understands moral objectivity. I have already pointed out that in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche describes religion as something that reflects the kinds of people who take it up. On this view, there is no objective truth to be found within religion—religion is whatever the individual takes it to be. Nietzsche sees no problem with this; in fact, he is eager to place moral value in the hands of the human subject, and to escape any sort of objective system for defining such value.<sup>154</sup> However, while this may establish a sort of radical moral autonomy for the individual, one must ask how thick trust can develop in the face of such subjectivity. Community relationships require confidence in one's own ability to predict the behavior of others. Nietzsche's ideal religion goes so far in its attempt to establish the individual as her own source of moral authority, that it actually hinders the possibility of thick trust between members of a group. For Nietzsche, the individual should be the final word on all of her decisions—no outside entities can determine what constitutes a meaningful life. However, in a context where each person subjectively determines her own values, we are presented with a situation in which individuals can struggle to reasonably anticipate one another's behavior. Without some source of moral objectivity, the community can fall into chaos, in which people make wildly different decisions, all of which can be equally justified. Because of this, while Nietzsche's account of autonomy does technically meet our first criterion for thick trust (that is, it secures the perception of the individual as the final moral authority on her decisions), the radical subjectivity that he posits in that account undermines the possibility of durable communal relationships.

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<sup>154</sup> See *Genealogy of Morals*, pp. 14-16.

Our takeaway from all of this should be that, while Nietzsche describes religion in a way that *can* establish the moral autonomy of the believer, his account does so in such a way as to make relationships of thick trust difficult to attain. For this reason, I take Nietzsche's account to be unreliable for the purpose of establishing a collaborative religious community. In contrast, the following section will show how Kant's account avoids the aforementioned problems, and thereby brings us closer to the sort of religious community that we seek.

### 3.3.4 The Superiority of Kant's Model

Nietzsche's fatal error is that he goes too far in his attempts to secure the moral authority of the human being. Community relationships do not merely require that one is the master of her own decisions; they also require a type of stability, in which others can develop confidence in their assessments of one's future behavior. We must therefore navigate a tension between the religious subject and objective communal principles. My position is that Kant is successful in navigating this tension. By moving beyond the use of religious representations, and by locating both subjective and objective elements within religion, Kant provides us with a way of doing religion that better satisfies our first condition for thick trust.

While Nietzsche certainly does not propose that every human being ought to be religious, his early work defends the use of religion as a representational practice. His declaration that God is dead does not demand a radical, literal commitment to atheism on the part of the human race, but rather a move away from *alienating* religious ideologies. However, any sort of representational imagery carries with it the possibility of alienation.

On the other hand, Kant's distinction between rational and historical religion seeks to ultimately move beyond the form of religious representation altogether. Kant holds that it is rational religion, not historical religion, which is of primary importance; the latter is a temporary concession to practical reason in order to establish the former. However, Kant's hope is that in the kingdom of ends, the need for historical religion will fade away altogether, leaving pure rational religion behind:

It is therefore a necessary consequence of the physical and, at the same time, the moral predisposition in us [...] that in the end religion will gradually be freed of all empirical grounds of determination, of all the statutes that rest on history and unite human beings provisionally for the promotion of the good through the intermediary of an ecclesiastical faith. Thus at last the pure faith of religion will rule over all, "so that God may be all in all."<sup>155</sup>

Kant takes historical religion to always include elements of untruth, since particular religious tenets cannot be universalized. Because of this, he argues that such particular elements of religion do not have a final place within the ethical community. For Kant, as religious individuals move away from historical religion and towards rational religion, they also move to a more accurate understanding of the moral law (and by extension, of their own autonomy in relation to it). Such individuals no longer look to gods as representations of divinity—they instead look to the universal law, which is necessarily a product of their own reason. This move beyond the representational emphasizes the believer as subject, and

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<sup>155</sup> *Religion*, 6:121.

in doing so, bridges the human/divine gap more effectively than any religious solution that Nietzsche provides.

Second, while Nietzsche goes too far in his attempt to secure the moral autonomy of the human subject, Kant balances subjectivity with the degree of objectivity required for durable communal relationships. Kant demands that those who practice rationally-grounded faiths must examine religious claims in light of their own reason. They are not to accept the word of a god or authority figure at face value; their reason must testify as to the validity of those claims, and they must be willing to reject them if they violate the moral law. It is critical to keep in mind here that, for Kant, the moral law is something that each individual gives to herself freely—he holds that we are most free (in other words, most autonomous) when we hold ourselves accountable to it. While Nietzsche would disagree on this point, I take Kant's emphasis on the testimony of the individual's *own* reason to give us a sufficient degree of autonomy as to satisfy our first condition for thick trust in the context of social relationships. Those who practice rational religion retain the perception of moral autonomy, while also making decisions in light of universally accessible principles—principles which are objective enough to justify predictions about how others will conduct themselves. Because of this balance between the subjective and objective, I take Kant's rational religion to satisfy our condition of perceived moral autonomy more effectively than any religion proposed by Nietzsche does.

Trust is a matter of degrees—it can exist to a greater or lesser extent in a given context. While both Nietzsche and Kant describe religions that can theoretically secure the moral autonomy of the believer and therefore establish thick trust within a community, I suspect that there is a differing degree of trust created in these two accounts. Nietzsche's

use of religious representation sustains a form of alienation between the divine and the human—the very phenomenon that he hopes to overcome in religious practice. Kant’s use of rational religion, which moves beyond the representational form, surmounts this alienation. However, while Kant’s account does a better job of satisfying our first condition for thick trust, this does not mean that Kantian rational religion provides us with everything needed to establish a collaborative religious community. The following section will show that Kant’s distinction between rational and historical religion ultimately devalues the latter, in a way that compromises his ability to meet our second criterion for thick trust.

#### 3.4 Kant’s Underestimation of Historical Religion

Kant sees a certain tension between rational and historical religion. He believes that elements of pure rational religion can be found to varying degrees in a number of historical faiths, insofar as those faiths represent some aspects of the moral law; however, historical faiths can never be considered fully rational, as religious traditions also depend upon the contingent contexts in which they function.<sup>156</sup> Because of its limitation to reason alone, a rational religion cannot require, for example, that all believers place their faith in a messiah who lived during a particular historical moment, because the particularity of this messiah would prevent a vast majority of rational beings from obtaining essential religious knowledge. Rational religion instead treats religious traditions and practices as symbolic activities that represent universal truths to practical reason. Those traditions and practices themselves, while useful as representations, are not valuable for their own sake, but are subservient to reason. Any historical faith must be judged by the criteria of rationality, with

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<sup>156</sup> *Religion*, 6:115.



the moral law (and not religious doctrine) being the ultimate governing authority. And any religious practices which would obscure the moral law, or represent it inaccurately, ought to be cast aside altogether.

We have seen that Kant's distinction between rational and historical religion allows him to subvert the issue of representation that plagued Nietzsche's account. However, once its representational elements have been stripped away, nothing particularly "religious" remains in Kant's rational religion. Among Kant scholars, this is one of the most frequent sticking points regarding the *Religion*. It is often argued that Kant reduces religion to morality, as he believes that rational religion is founded entirely upon the universal truths of the moral law.<sup>157</sup> If rational religion merely symbolizes the moral law, and the moral law is freely accessible to all rational agents, then religion is simply not necessary for the task of becoming moral. One could respond that while religion in particular is not required for morality, *some* practical representation of the moral law is—after all, human beings do have that peculiar need for something the senses can hold onto. However, despite his own admission to this point, we saw above that Kant believes human beings will ultimately transcend the need for historical religion.<sup>158</sup> While the Kant of the second *Critique* emphasizes the role of practical reason in human life, by the time of the *Religion*, it seems that he is less committed to the ultimate importance of the practical. For Kant, historical religion (even in the most rational form possible) is a necessary concession that allows imperfect phenomenal beings to initially cognize the moral law—a concession that, given the opportunity, ought to be set aside. It is pure rational religion, with its universalizable

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<sup>157</sup> For instance, see Ernst Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 382; & Keith Ward, *The Development of Kant's View of Ethics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972).

<sup>158</sup> *Religion*, 6:121.

moral truths, that ought to govern the ethical community, without all of a historical faith's empirical trappings. Kant therefore treats historical religion like a set of ideological training wheels, which can be set aside once one's relationship to the moral law has been adequately understood. Kant's vision for the ideal ethical community is one grounded upon universal moral principles, and historical religion's eventual place in that community is not a secure one.

Kant's relationship with historical religion is therefore contentious. In his view, the *Religion* represents an attempt to save Christianity from the Enlightenment attitudes of his day, which rejected religious belief altogether as mere superstition.<sup>159</sup> He clearly sees benefit in religion insofar as it can illuminate universal truths to the believer—so, he hopes to defend religion's place in his current historical moment, against those who would say it should be immediately cast aside. However, while Kant succeeds in demonstrating that we can interpret certain religious claims in accordance with the categorical imperative, he nonetheless fails to clearly demonstrate what we ought to do with historical religion moving forward. Kant acknowledges that despite its benefits, historical religion also carries risks: it can be misinterpreted, or even manipulated to serve purposes that do not align with the moral law.<sup>160</sup> Religion can represent truths to practical reason and can be useful insofar as it does so, but this representational work can be just as easily accomplished through secular imagery, which does not run as great a risk of being misinterpreted or manipulated. If our goal is illuminating the moral autonomy of the individual, then, it seems unnecessarily risky to do so through avenues that can easily slip into heteronomy, as

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<sup>159</sup> James DiCenso, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: A Commentary*

<sup>160</sup> Kant calls this sort of manipulated religion statutory religion. See *Religion*, 6:108 & 6:176.

historical religious practice can. While Kant himself expresses this very concern, a number of accounts have argued that he does not provide an adequate defense of religion qua religion.<sup>161</sup>

I believe that we can defend historical religious practice in terms of its teleological social function; however, doing so highlights a failure in Kant's assessment of religion. Kant acknowledges that historical religion cannot have a monopoly on truth. He likewise acknowledges that morality precedes historical religion, and that the former has no need of the latter. In this way, he recognizes that historical religion is a representational endeavor, and that religious stories should not typically be taken as literal facts. To use the language that we have utilized throughout this project, it seems that Kant in one sense recognizes historical religion to be a poor source of indicative beliefs, since its claims cannot be demonstrably verified and are often downright dubious. However, I argue that by presenting historical religion as a method through which one cognizes universal truths, Kant still holds religion to an indicative standard, and in doing so, makes the same sort of error as the New Atheist critics discussed in Chapter 1 of this project. Recall that those critics condemned religious practice on the grounds that it encourages metaphysical beliefs which are literally inaccurate. For Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, our goal as rational human beings should be to seek out what is true, and to reject any ideologies which lead us away from the truth. While Kant acknowledges that historical religious practices are representational rather than literal in nature, he also judges religion in terms of its ability to communicate universal truths. Kant believes that historical religion is valuable insofar

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<sup>161</sup> See Gordon Michalson, *The Historical Dimensions of a Rational Faith: The Role of History in Kant's Thought* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1977)

as it cultivates *accurate* beliefs regarding the moral law and one's relationship to it. Those religious practices that inaccurately represent universal truths become the target of his criticism, and he suggests that only those historical religions that are rationally grounded can be of genuine use for the human being.<sup>162</sup> And since all historical religious practice – even that which is rationally grounded – still retains a degree of untruth by virtue of being representational, Kant envisions an ethical community where historical religion has no role to play. In this way, Kant devalues historical religious practice, in favor of rational “religious” truths.<sup>163</sup> Kant's error is ultimately the same as that of the New Atheists: he judges religion in terms of whether it cultivates indicative beliefs, and rejects it altogether in those cases where it fails to do so (which, in Kant's view, is actually all cases).

This position is erroneous because it misrepresents the role that religion plays in human social life. I have argued throughout this project that the function of religion is to cultivate imperative beliefs, which can be useful for navigating a given practical context. Beliefs can often serve this purpose regardless of whether they are literally “accurate.” For example, the belief in an afterlife where one will be reunited with deceased loved ones can help a grieving individual to continue fulfilling her social obligations without being overwhelmed by her loss.<sup>164</sup> Kant initially recognizes this—he describes historical religion as a concession to practical reason, which enables the believer to cognize otherwise obscure moral truths. However, by ultimately rejecting those “untrue” historical religious practices, Kant fails to appreciate the reality that religion is a necessarily practical endeavor. As we

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<sup>162</sup> *Religion*, 6:103.

<sup>163</sup> I say “religious” here because it is unclear from Kant's account why we should even use the term “religion” to describe rational religion. If all of the historical elements of religious practice are stripped away, we are left with nothing but the moral law, which Kant himself admits has no need of religion. Therefore, it is questionable why Kant even describes these universal truths in terms of religion.

<sup>164</sup> This argument is made by Stephen Asma in *Why We Need Religion*, pp. 30-35.

saw in Chapter 1, religious communities provide their practitioners with a host of benefits which are primarily social in nature, many of which can be attained even in the absence of religious belief. Kant's attempt to rationalize religion strips away those practical benefits, and leaves us with a "religion" the religiosity of which is highly questionable.

Because of all this, Kant's rational religion fails to meet our second necessary condition for the growth of thick trust: members of a community must define rationality in terms of the practical and not merely the theoretical. Kant does not see significant value in historical religious practices beyond their ability to accurately represent universal truths. He speaks as if we must ultimately choose between the rational and the practical, as if the two are necessarily at odds with one another. However, in the life of a community, rituals and practices can be extremely important for the purposes of establishing trust, even if those rituals seem to serve no rational function. By observing others' commitment to their personal faith, members of a community can develop confidence in their ability to predict one another's behavior—in other words, to place thick trust in one another. Kant's proposal for religion would strip away these practices, leaving a purely theoretical "religion" that seeks out the moral law, but devalues the practical elements of human life. Kant's dichotomy between the rational and the practical reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of human life—especially human social life, where the line between these two is often blurred.

In some ways, Kant's rational religion brings us closer to the possibility of a collaborative religious community than Nietzsche's religion does. Rational religion provides its followers with beliefs regarding their own autonomy, while also establishing sufficiently objective standards to allow people to reasonably anticipate others' behavior.

This satisfies our first condition for the growth of thick trust, in a way that Nietzsche's account of Greek religion does not. However, because Kant ultimately separates rational and historical religion, he alienates religious belief from the realm in which it primarily ought to function. We cannot separate belief from the practical contexts in which it is exercised. I argue that there is no point of "rational" religion without the historical practices that carry its tenets, and religious practice can provide social benefits even in the absence of rational grounding. Kant's defense of religion, therefore, does not provide us with the conditions necessary to establish a collaborative religious community. Such a community cannot be merely theoretical, but must also be practical—not merely as a transitional phase, but necessarily so.

### 3.5 Conclusion

Kant and Nietzsche agree on a fundamental point: preserving the individual's moral autonomy should be the goal of religious practice. Despite their differences on what exactly constitutes such autonomy, both provide us with accounts that theoretically secure the possibility of communal relationships in a religious context. However, both accounts also present problems. Nietzsche's attempt to center the believer as the sole source of moral authority moves towards a radically subjective definition of autonomy; this raises the question of just how much members of a group can reasonably trust one another. Meanwhile, while Kant balances the believer's autonomy with a community's need for objective values, he also devalues those practical elements that make religion such a powerful force in human life. We are therefore left with a difficult question: how can religious practice satisfy both of our conditions for thick trust, when thus far attempts to meet one condition have violated the other? The closing chapter of this project will attempt

to answer this question. My view is that Hegel succeeded where both Kant and Nietzsche failed: he provides an account of how religion can ground a durable community, while respecting both the moral autonomy of the believer and the inherent rationality of the practical.

## CHAPTER 4. HEGEL & THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

### 4.1 Introduction

Up to this point, we have reviewed the work of Nietzsche and Kant, both of whom discuss at length the social aspects of religion. In light of their work on the subject, I have argued that both support my view that religion should be understood as a social phenomenon (i.e. as a form of community oriented around commonly-held imperative beliefs), and not merely as an epistemological one (i.e. as a source of indicative beliefs). Our task in this project goes beyond this, however; we are not merely interested in defining religion in terms of the social, but also determining whether a certain *type* of social relation can develop within a religious context. That type of relation is a collaborative community, i.e. a community that features a high degree of thick trust among its members. And while Kant and Nietzsche both recognize religion as a social phenomenon, they do not describe any religion that satisfies the conditions necessary to establish this type of community. Rather, both present religion as something that is inherently alienating – a practice which not only separates the individual from that which she worships, but also separates individuals from one another. We have seen throughout this project that such alienation stifles the growth of mutual thick trust, and therefore prevents stable communities from developing.

Kant attempts to overcome this sort of alienation by placing moral authority in the hands of the religious subject (rather than linking it to the commandments of some deity or religious authority figure). While it satisfies our first condition for the growth of thick trust, however, Kant's solution creates a new problem for the religious community: it devalues concrete religious practices, and leaves behind a rational "religion" that is hardly



recognizable as such. Kant recognizes that religion can be a source of socially-useful beliefs, but he ultimately makes the mistake of assessing those beliefs in terms of their literal truth value. While his motivations are quite different from those of the New Atheists (Kant actually takes himself to be defending religion), Kant's solution is therefore not unlike theirs: he recognizes that religion has been historically useful, but claims that historical practices should eventually be transcended and replaced with a higher form of knowledge – one which is not distorted by the contingent.

Kant rightly understands religious practice as a way of cultivating beliefs, some of which can be useful in one's daily life. However, his primary failure in the *Religion* is that he does not distinguish between different types of belief. We've been referring to two broad categories of belief in this project: indicative and imperative. While indicative beliefs ought to be judged in terms of their literal truth value, imperative beliefs can be socially useful even if they cannot be demonstrably proven. Kant takes religion to be useful for cultivating indicative beliefs regarding the moral law and what it requires of us – for him, its goal is to teach us the truth about some aspect of reality. Because of this, he argues that anything which is not universalizable in religion must eventually be transcended, since the moral law does not change with context. I've argued that we should rather understand religion as a source of imperative beliefs, which can provide social benefits to the one who holds them even if their truth status is questionable. Unlike Kant's model, this view does not require us to rationalize religion, but rather to ask if it successfully cultivates beliefs which fulfill their desired social function. That function, I have argued, is the foundation of a collaborative community oriented towards the well-being of all its members.

My view is that Hegel successfully articulates the possibility of such a community where Kant fails (and Nietzsche would later fail). Hegel is fundamentally interested in both religion and human social life, and from his earliest work recognizes a necessary connection between the two. His early discussion of folk religion, while heavily influenced by a Kantian understanding of the phenomenon, also begins to recognize the role of practical, non-rational beliefs in the lives of individuals. However, like Kant, Hegel initially understands religious beliefs to be primarily indicative in nature, and this leads him to an early view that religion is a representative practice which should eventually be transcended. It is not until his mature work in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* that Hegel finally recognizes the value of imperative religious beliefs, even if those beliefs do not constitute literal truth. Hegel's ultimate position on historical religion is that the practice is a particular response to the given conditions of one's life. Given this, a religion should be judged not by its ability to communicate literal truths, but rather by its ability to satisfy the practical social needs of those who practice it. In other words, we should evaluate any particular religion in terms of the community relationships that it fosters.

This chapter will be structured as follows: I will begin with a discussion of Hegel's early theological writings, where he outlines his vision for folk religion and defines the role that such a religion could play in human life. I will argue that Hegel's account in this text reflects an early, underdeveloped appreciation for imperative beliefs, but ultimately retains a Kantian commitment to religious beliefs as primarily indicative. I will then turn to the seventh chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which Hegel further embraces a view that religious belief is indicative in nature. This view leads him, as it led Kant, to claim that historical religion ought to be understood as an incomplete source of knowledge, one which

ought to eventually be set aside in pursuit of the rational. We will then contrast these accounts with his views in the 1827 *Lectures*.<sup>165</sup> Therein, Hegel is far more amenable to religious experience as a source of knowledge; he no longer claims that religious practices should be rationally transcended, but rather deems them sufficient for the needs of those who find them practically useful. I will argue that Hegel has shifted to a new understanding of religion in this text, one which treats religious belief as primarily imperative in nature.

With Hegel's position thus mapped out, this chapter will conclude by bringing his work into conversation with the rest of this project. I will argue that Hegel provides us with a blueprint for a religious community which satisfies both of our conditions for thick trust. Such a religion preserves the moral autonomy of the individual who practices it, by situating moral authority with her as a rational agent. However, it also recognizes that many elements of human life are non-rational, and that theoretical solutions alone fail in these areas. I will argue that Hegel describes a way of doing religion which synthesizes the interests of the individual and the group, overcoming the alienation that is inherent in traditional forms of community – and it does this without stripping religious practice of everything that makes it uniquely religious. In doing so, Hegel articulates the possibility of a collaborative religious community.

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<sup>165</sup> I will exclusively refer to the 1827 version of the *Lectures* in this project, since this is the most complete and developed version of the text.

## 4.2 Hegel's Philosophy of Religion

### 4.2.1 Berne Period

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the young Hegel briefly attended seminary in Berne, which led him to compose a number of essays on the philosophy of religion. These early writings lack the systematic scope that is characteristic of Hegel's more well-known work, but they provide important insights into the sorts of problems that he found compelling. (They are also far more readable!) For example, in the Tübingen Essay, we see Hegel musing upon the unstable social conditions of his historical moment, and considering whether some form of religion could unite the otherwise fragmentary German nation-state. In this essay, Hegel is less interested in religion qua religion; it is a desire for social unity, and not religion for its own sake, that is the primary concern of this essay.<sup>166</sup> He claims that his tenuous social context is at least partially due to a breakdown of religious belief among the German people. This is a breakdown characterized not by outright apostasy, but rather a fall into certain ways of doing religion that Hegel deems problematic. In other words, the German people have not rejected religion altogether, but have begun practicing it in a way that does not serve the social needs of the group. While Hegel is not using the language of subjectivity and relationality at this point in his thought, we can clearly see the beginning of these ideas in his religious criticisms. He is starting to suspect that allegiance to a certain type of religion is blocking believers' capacity for relating to each other as practically-oriented rational subjects.<sup>167</sup> He sees in the German people a newfound individualism, in

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<sup>166</sup> For more on the social underpinnings of Hegel's early religious thought, see Thomas Lewis, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel* (New York: Oxford, 2011), pp. 25-44.

<sup>167</sup> See especially GWF Hegel, "The Positivity of the Christian Religion," in *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), pp. 67-68.

which each person understands her own interests to be alienated from those of the group.<sup>168</sup> However, while such a criticism could easily lead one to reject religious practice altogether, Hegel proposes a different solution. He suggests that what is needed is a different way of doing religion: a folk religion, which overcomes this social alienation by drawing the believer into meaningful relationships with others in a community. His task in these early essays is to articulate a way of doing religion that accomplishes this purpose.

Importantly, Hegel's folk religion is not affiliated with any single religious tradition; he does not think that the German people will be united simply by converting to some particular faith. Rather, we can think of folk religion as a religious orientation towards one's social context. It is a way of taking up rational, socially-disseminated religious beliefs and using those beliefs to navigate one's particular social moment. Folk religion is a primary example of what Hegel calls subjective religion; in contrast to an objective religion, which focuses primarily on providing historical facts and instilling systematic belief, a subjective religion seeks to engage the affective interest of the practitioner.<sup>169</sup> Hegel places a much greater value upon subjective religion than upon the objective form of the practice:

Everything depends on subjective religion; this is what has inherent and true worth. Let the theologians squabble all they like over what belongs to objective religion, over its dogmas and their precise determination: the fact is that every religion is based on a few fundamental principles which, although set forth in the different religions in varying degrees of purity, however modified or adulterated, are

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<sup>168</sup> See Lewis, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel*, esp. pp. 17-25.

<sup>169</sup> To use our more familiar terminology, we can say that objective religion is primarily concerned with indicative beliefs, while subjective religion is oriented towards the development of imperative beliefs.

nonetheless the basis of all the faith and hope that religion is capable of offering us.<sup>170</sup>

What matters in a subjective religion is not the religion's unique conception of God or immortality (for example), but how those concepts influence the lives and behaviors of the people who take them up. In other words, different people within a community may choose to practice subjective folk religion differently, and no singular tradition can be defined as "the" folk religion; however, folk religious practice must be something that is equally accessible to all. A folk religion is therefore an abstract yet inclusive religious orientation that can be taken up by an entire population, regardless of their particular theological commitments.

Rather than linking it to any particular faith, Hegel outlines three broad principles for folk religion: 1. It must be a practice based in universal reason, 2. It must engage not merely with reason, but also with the imagination and the heart of those who practice it, and 3. It must be concerned with the practical needs of life.<sup>171</sup> These three criteria demonstrate an early understanding on Hegel's part of different types of religious belief, and the different functions that such beliefs can perform in human life. We'll examine each of them in turn.

At this point Hegel has not yet formulated his now-famous criticisms of Kant, and regarding religion in particular, the young Hegel remains committed to certain Kantian views. This is clear from his first principle of folk religious practice, which states that folk

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<sup>170</sup> GWF Hegel, "Tübingen Essay," in *Three Essays*, ed. and trans. Peter Fuss and John Dobbins (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), p. 35.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

religion must be grounded upon universal reason. In several of his early essays, Hegel launches a polemic against the Christian church. His criticisms are based not upon theological grounds, but upon rational ones. Hegel argues that Christianity is a religion which drives a wedge between its practitioners and their community – and that this is in large part due to the religion’s gross irrationality. Many of Christianity’s theological tenets run contrary to reason, and the religion’s claims to truth rely on either dubious historical “events” or an outright appeal to miracles.<sup>172</sup> In other words, Christianity often requires a suspension of rational disbelief on the part of the faithful, and an acceptance that events took place which no reasonable person would believe actually occurred.

As Kant did, Hegel takes issue with this way of doing religion. He echoes Kant’s claims in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, arguing that the principles of a folk religion must be universally accessible to all rational agents. Indeed, this first principle of folk religion is largely synonymous with Kant’s idea of rational religion. Reason itself should testify as to the accuracy of folk religious principles. Just as Kant criticized those statutory religions that had no rational basis for their claims, so Hegel condemns religious practices that stand in contrast to the dictates of reason. This is largely due to a mutual commitment on Kant and Hegel’s part to believers’ autonomy; both are critical of religious practices in which only a select few officials mete out religious knowledge to the faithful masses.<sup>173</sup> Such religious practice is exclusive, as it is inaccessible to the general public. As Kant does, Hegel notes a practical need for such a rational religion as well, as it is not realistic to expect a group of people to suspend disbelief and embrace blatantly irrational

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<sup>172</sup> Hegel, “The Positivity of the Christian Religion,” pp. 78-80.

<sup>173</sup> Kant discusses this issue in terms of statutory religious practice in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:108.

claims indefinitely.<sup>174</sup> Folk religion, therefore, cannot require that its practitioners ignore the testimony of their reason, or base their beliefs solely upon particular historical events that cannot be verified.

However, while Hegel is clearly influenced by Kant's concept of rational religion, he highlights an important point that Kant fails to recognize: religion, even if it is rationally grounded, cannot be purely theoretical. We have seen that Kant's ultimate vision involves a kingdom of ends where rational agents no longer need historical religion as a practical illustration of the moral law, where the need for such a religion ultimately passes away. The young Hegel does not share Kant's confidence on this point. For Hegel, the historical situatedness of the human being is something with which we can never dispense. He actually draws from Kant's moral philosophy to point out that the human constitution is such that we often require practical as well as theoretical motivations for behavior. The young Hegel chalks this up to the human imagination and heart, which he takes to drive the majority of decisions that one makes. While humans are rational agents, we are also creatures led by a whole host of motivations and concerns which stretch beyond the merely theoretical. Kant appreciated this reality in terms of human moral motivations, but he failed to consistently carry this view into his work on religion, leading him to imagine an ideal religious community led by pure reason. Hegel meanwhile recognizes the concrete situation of actual religious communities—groups of people for whom theoretical motivations on their own may seem alien and irrelevant. We see the beginnings here of

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<sup>174</sup> Tübingen Essay, p. 45.



how Hegel will ultimately engage with all of Kant's philosophy: Hegel is seeking to resolve the alienation that the Kantian dichotomy of ideal and real creates.

Through all of this, Hegel demonstrates why folk religion cannot be merely theoretical: in a practical context, theoretical knowledge on its own is not enough. In order to remain compelling to human beings, a religion must also engage the imagination and the heart.<sup>175</sup> One of the primary purposes that Hegel imagines for folk religion is that such religious practice should inspire believers to behave in such a way that benefits their entire community (and therefore also themselves). Such behavior corresponds to that sort of universalizable action that Kant's categorical imperative prescribes. But as Hegel makes clear, it is typically not enough to tell a person what her rational duty is, and then expect her to follow it out of a sense of duty alone. Hegel writes that "it is altogether unlikely that humankind, or even a single individual, will ever in this world be able to dispense entirely with non-moral promptings."<sup>176</sup> In other words, while an ideal community motivated purely by reason may sound appealing, it is just that: an ideal. For real-world purposes, folk religion must be engaging, inspirational, and motivating—it must be "blended into the fabric of human feelings, bonded with what moves us to act."<sup>177</sup> In this way, such a religion can influence human behavior to a greater extent than a merely rational religion ever could.

Finally, Hegel's third requirement is that folk religion must be concerned with the practical needs of life. In some ways, this requirement echoes the one above, as it reminds us that religion cannot be a merely theoretical endeavor. But there are unique points

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

captured by this third condition as well. One of Kant and Hegel's shared criticisms of certain religions is that the traditions in question require people to set the concerns of their daily lives aside, and to devote themselves entirely to their faith. For example, we can imagine a monk or nun, who renounces ordinary human life in order to dedicate all of their time and energy to their religious activities. For Hegel, it is not realistic to expect this sort of all-consuming religious commitment from the majority of individuals, since most people cannot reasonably renounce their practical obligations.<sup>178</sup> Therefore, if folk religion is to be something widely practiced, it must fit into the lives of ordinary people. Another way that we can put this is to say that folk religion cannot be something that alienates the believer from her own lived experience.<sup>179</sup> Many religions devalue the earthly lives of the faithful, pointing them to instead invest their energies in a world beyond their present one. Hegel sees this religious tendency as alienating the individual not only from her current situation, but also from others in her life. Instead, folk religion should provide believers with the intellectual and emotional tools necessary to navigate their daily lives. It ought to speak to the concrete issues with which a people concern themselves, and it should never require them to separate themselves from the real world in order to practice their faith.

With these three principles in mind, Hegel's folk religion is well on its way to setting the stage for durable social relationships. Hegel hopes that, by representing universalizable moral principles, such a religion will demonstrate the interconnectedness of the group – that is, to demonstrate that the interests of the individual and her community are mutually constituted. Additionally, Hegel's folk religion respects the practitioner as an

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>179</sup> In the same passage referenced above, Hegel describes this as a religion "putting a wall between doctrine and life."

autonomous moral agent, as it requires her to try its claims in the court of her own reason (rather than to defer to the commandments of a deity). Despite the clear influence that Kant has on his thought, Hegel succeeds here where Kant does not, as he recognizes that religion deals with matters of the imagination and heart which reason alone may struggle to compel. However, at this point in his work, Hegel does not provide us with everything necessary to establish a collaborative religious community. The primary issue is that Hegel continues to treat religion as a source of indicative beliefs (rather than imperative beliefs), and to analyze the phenomenon in terms of its literal truth value. In doing so, he does not sufficiently value the role of the non-rational in the lives of human beings. Hegel holds that religion's primary function in human life is to provide a centralized set of principles around which a community can organize – what Schopenhauer called a community ethos. However, for Hegel, such a set of principles already objectively exists: it is the mandates of the universal moral law. Folk religion's social purpose is simply to represent that law, and to bring people to consciousness of it, so that they can engage with one another in a way that aligns with that law.<sup>180</sup> Folk religion, therefore, is an educational tool, one which ought to be evaluated in terms of whether it cultivates an accurate understanding of the moral law in those who practice it. If folk religious practice does not yield such an understanding, then Hegel would not consider it to be socially useful. This view therefore links a religion's social utility to the literal truth value of its claims – a connection that was debunked in the first chapter of this project.

Hegel's early work on religion successfully establishes that the phenomenon is social in nature, and not merely epistemological. However, his failure to recognize the

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

potential social utility in imperative religious beliefs leads him to propose a folk religion which does not provide everything this project seeks. Hegel eventually moves beyond such an indicative understanding of religion – but not before he solidifies that position in the *Phenomenology*.

#### 4.2.2 The *Phenomenology of Spirit*

In the *Phenomenology*, religion (especially historical religion) is certainly not Hegel's primary focus, but the concept still plays an important role in his project. As it did during the Berne period, religion in the *Phenomenology* works as an intermediary in the interest of Hegel's actual concern: human social life. As each self-conscious subject draws into a greater degree of relation to the universal, she recognizes that the universal is something which every particular partially constitutes, and in which all things participate. As Hegel equates the universal with God, he therefore sees God and human social life as being inextricably linked; God is made manifest through the relation of human beings to one another. Because of this, we can say that the Absolute itself is socially constituted.

The overarching story of the *Phenomenology* is that of Spirit's manifestation in the world. For Hegel, the terms "Spirit" and "God" are often used interchangeably; however, we should bear in mind that Hegel is not advocating for any particular religion's conception of a deity. The term "God" here refers to the Absolute, which is the logical ground of all things, or a thinking that contains all possible thought.<sup>181</sup> To reduce God to any single religion's conception of a deity would be a mistake, as universal Spirit cannot be reduced

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<sup>181</sup> See Daniel Jamros, *The Human Shape of God: Religion in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Paragon House, 1994), p. 9. Jamros here draws on Hegel's definition of God in the *Logic*, as the *Phenomenology* was written as an introduction to Hegel's system in that text.

to finite predicates. God or Spirit should instead be understood as a unifying force that reconciles the universal and each particular; to truly know God is to reach the point of absolute knowing, where one recognizes the universal and the particular as a unity that maintains its distinctions. In order for the subject to progress to the level of absolute knowing, a capacity for relation between the universal and the particular must first be demonstrated. Historical religious practice is an attempt on the part of the individual believer to relate to the God that she worships, and to cultivate a fuller understanding of the universal.

Obviously, a “thinking that contains all possible thought” is an abstract concept, one which is difficult to wrap one’s head around. Because of this, Hegel states that human subjects must come to knowledge of the Absolute in stages – beginning with ideas that we can understand, and building up to an increasingly sophisticated degree of thought. Religion’s function in this text is to provide us with such understandable ideas, which represent the Absolute in language that is more familiar to us. Religion employs what Hegel calls picture-thinking, which is the use of specific, particular images to represent more abstract truths.<sup>182</sup> For example, a religion may describe a deity in terms of a benevolent father, in order to represent some element of the relation between the Absolute and the religious subject. This paternal language is, of course, not meant to be understood literally; all religious language is representational, as an attempt to help the faithful better understand the mysteries of an infinite being. The point of all this is to represent a universal spirit in

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<sup>182</sup> GWF Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 411.

which believers can perceive enough of their own likeness in order to enter into relation with that universal.<sup>183</sup>

Hegel describes three broad categories of religion in this text: natural religion, religion in the form of art, and revealed religion. All of these reflect some important reality about the nature of the Absolute; however, all do so incompletely. In natural religion, the divine is associated with some natural phenomenon, such as light, plants, or animals; these immediate substances are taken as absolute being, which remains separate from the human subject.<sup>184</sup> “God” in such a religion appears as an entity that stands over and against humanity as something merely objective to it. This fails to demonstrate the reality that the Absolute is something which participates in a continuous, active unity with the human subject (and indeed with all things). Meanwhile, in religion in the form of art, divinity is no longer recognized in natural objects, but in products of human construction. Such a religion is thoroughly representational; gods are depicted in various artistic media, yet those who create that art recognize it to be a mere image built by the power of humans. Thus, in the religion of art, the human self is treated as absolute being, with humanity elevated not only as subject but as the author of divinity itself. This eliminates the distinction between the human and the divine that was present in natural religion, but in doing so, reduces the divine to a product of the human. Such a religion treats the Absolute as if it were a mere particularity, without appreciating its necessary simultaneous universality. Hegel claims that a unity of these two concepts – i.e. Absolute as universal

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<sup>183</sup> Relation between two beings is only possible when they perceive some element of themselves in one another. See Emil L. Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 54.

<sup>184</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 419.

and Absolute as particularity – is only successfully represented in the revealed religion, which he associates with the Christianity of his day.<sup>185</sup> Hegel takes the incarnation of Christ, as both fully human and fully divine, to demonstrate the unity of the Absolute's apparently conflicting natures.<sup>186</sup> Because it successfully represents the nature of these opposites, Hegel claims that the revealed religion provides the superior mode of religious picture-thinking.

Like Kant, the Hegel of the *Phenomenology* continues to see religion as an educational tool, one which can help the practical subject to understand that which she may otherwise struggle to grasp. And like Kant, Hegel here sees historical religious practice as an intermediary, something which has transient value but should ultimately be transcended. Hegel writes:

So far as Spirit in religion *pictures* itself to itself, it is indeed consciousness, and the reality enclosed within religion is the shape and the guise of its picture-thinking. But, in this picture-thinking, reality does not receive its perfect due, viz. to be not merely a guise but an independent free existence; and conversely, because it lacks perfection within itself it is a *specific* shape which does not attain to what it ought to show forth, viz. Spirit that is conscious of itself.<sup>187</sup>

Although the revealed religion successfully represents the apparent opposites in the nature of the divine, it is still just that – a representation. Picture-thinking is a practically useful

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<sup>185</sup> While an in-depth comparison of the two moments is beyond the scope of this project, it's interesting to note that Hegel's appraisal of Christianity has dramatically shifted between his Berne period and this text. His early works understand Christianity as a fully alienating religion, due in large part to its reliance on historical events and irrational claims. Hegel's move towards understanding religion as representational in the *Phenomenology* may explain his changing views on the tradition.

<sup>186</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 458-459.

<sup>187</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 412.

activity, but it is necessarily limited, since it never describes things as they actually are. In order to truly understand the nature of the Absolute, then, one must move beyond mere representations and into the realm of pure thought.<sup>188</sup> One does this by moving from a religious mode of thinking to a philosophical one. For Hegel, philosophy and religion share the same content (i.e. the nature of the Absolute), but those who participate in them cognize this content differently. Unlike religion, philosophy employs pure thinking, which expresses Spirit as it is in its essence. Since it trades in thought alone, philosophy does not make use of limited representational imagery as religion does. Compared to religion, philosophy is of course a more sophisticated and therefore complex mode of thought, a quality which makes it more difficult to practice. However, at this point Hegel contends that moving from religious to philosophical thinking is necessary if one is to attain a genuine understanding of the Absolute's nature.

This is the moment in Hegel's thought where he most clearly evaluates religion in terms of its ability to create indicative (rather than imperative) beliefs. As he did in his Berne period, he takes religion to be something that is pedagogically useful, which can disseminate certain truths about some aspect of reality. However, if we think back to Hegel's three criteria for a folk religion, it seems that he has largely abandoned the second and third in favor of the first. Nowhere in this text does Hegel consider the imagination and the heart of the human subject. His only mention of the practical is to concede that human beings have a temporary need to be educated through representational imagery. Instead,

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<sup>188</sup> Thomas Lewis uses the language of alienation to describe the religious relationship of the finite and the infinite. The representational form is inherently alienating, and therefore erodes the possibility of genuine relation between the two. See "Religion and demythologization in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*," in *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: A Critical Guide*, ed. Moyar and Quante (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 192.



Hegel judges the *Phenomenology's* three broad categories of religion in terms of how accurately they represent the nature of the Absolute. Natural religion and religion in the form of art are inferior because they fail altogether to represent some truth about the divine; the revealed religion is superior in this regard, but still comes up short because the truths it conveys about the Absolute are representational rather than literal in nature. Hegel here presents an account that favors the rational at the expense of the practical. Picture-thinking is not enough; if one does not understand the Absolute as it is in and for itself, then one simply does not understand the Absolute. In other words, if I do not rise to the level of philosophical thinking, then I do not truly understand reality. Hegel sees this as religion's sole value: its ability to bring the human subject closer to an accurate, literal understanding of God (as he defines the term). Nowhere in this text does he acknowledge that representational beliefs about the Absolute can be practically useful for their own sake, even if the one who holds them never rises above a representational level of understanding. Rather, he treats religion as a mere step along the way towards absolute knowledge, which ought to be the subject's ultimate goal. This view draws a barrier between lived human experience and the realm of pure thought – creating a distinction of real versus ideal that echoes Kant's noumenal/phenomenal divide.

While the Hegel of the *Phenomenology* recognizes that the Absolute features both universal and particular elements, and that the Absolute is made manifest in the social activity of particular human beings, he fails to recognize the social utility of certain beliefs regarding the Absolute. Commonly-held beliefs, disseminated through religious practice, can bring a group into meaningful relation with one another, even if those beliefs do not reflect literal truths about reality. Such beliefs can serve this unifying function because they

appeal to the practical needs of human life, in a way that the theoretical alone may not. Instead of stating this fact, however, Hegel here proposes a journey of thought which is oriented solely towards an Enlightenment-era definition of the rational. Fortunately for us, however, this is not his final position on the subject. His work in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* reflects a shifting understanding of the role of religious belief. This shift creates new possibilities for relationships within religious communities.

#### 4.2.3 The *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*

The scope of Hegel's *Lectures on Religion* is enormous. The work is both ontological and epistemological, as Hegel discusses the nature of God (and therefore, the nature of reality itself) as well as how human beings can gain knowledge of this ultimate being. He also undertakes the massive task of analyzing all major world faiths, which despite its limitations (not the least of which is some glaring ignorance about certain cultures), nonetheless reflects a commitment on Hegel's part to finding epistemological value in *all* particular human experiences. However, when the *Lectures* are properly contextualized, it becomes quite clear that the social is still Hegel's primary interest in this text.<sup>189</sup> Hegel defines God in a way that treats religion as a simultaneously rational and practical endeavor, and the very existence of God is connected to human social life. This unique understanding of God (for which Hegel has been called everything from a pantheist to an atheist<sup>190</sup>) highlights Hegel's commitment to finding ways in which individuals can practice meaningful community relationships. The structure of his account of religion has

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<sup>189</sup> Lewis, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel*, p. 97.

<sup>190</sup> For more on Hegel's unusual mode of theism (and why traditional definitions of atheism and pantheism are both mischaracterizations of his thought), see Raymond Keith Williamson, *Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).

not changed significantly from that of the *Phenomenology*, but his shifting understanding of how religious belief works in a social context creates new possibilities for relationships within the particular religious community. Because of this shift, this text provides us with the necessary tools to overcome the religious alienation which has plagued us throughout this project.

Much of Hegel's religious ontology remains the same from the *Phenomenology* forward. Hegel retains his earlier definition of God as Spirit or the Absolute, while making his understanding of the term more explicit in this text. Contrary to most religious accounts, he does not define God as an anthropomorphic, alien deity which created the world and remains separate from it; his God is an abstract, ultimate universal spirit which is made manifest in the movement of world history.<sup>191</sup> God is therefore not to be found in some noumenal realm beyond the physical world, but within life itself—although we should be careful not to reduce God to the physical either. As he did in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel continues to think of religion in three broad categories: in this text, those categories have become the concept of religion, determinate religion, and consummate religion. Unlike in the *Phenomenology*, however, Hegel is not here describing three distinct categories of historical religious practice, but rather the entire scope of religious possibility. The concept of religion concerns the theoretical aspect of the endeavor, but avoids any discussion of actual historical faiths; because of this, it remains vague, and separated from any actual religious experience.<sup>192</sup> Determinate religion refers to any particular religious tradition practiced at a given time and place – Hegel's view is that such religions often become so

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<sup>191</sup> GWF Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: One-Volume Edition, The Lectures of 1827*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), p. 76, 115, 419.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

mired in their own particularities that they lose sight of their theoretical foundations, in favor of statutory historical traditions.<sup>193</sup> In the consummate religion, however, a unity of the theoretical and the practical is achieved, through proper representation of the Absolute and the human subject's relationship to it.<sup>194</sup> The consummate religion is grounded upon rational, universal truths; however, this religion is not merely a theoretical exercise. It requires active, consistent participation of the believer within her own particular historical context. The follower of the consummate religion is required to rationally take up religious principles and to then apply those principles to her own life. Hegel refers to this as the "witness of spirit," i.e. the testimony of the individual believer's own heart, which confirms that the claims of the consummate religion are indeed true.<sup>195</sup> Engagement with such a religion is therefore not merely an intellectual endeavor, but also a way of life. Due to its theoretical and practical elements, it is within the practice of the consummate religion where believers can best come to understand the nature of the Absolute.

Given Hegel's definition of the term, we must keep in mind that relating to the Absolute does not mean to have a personal relationship with some particular god; it means to participate in a community, the life of which partially constitutes the divine. Hegel does not elevate Christianity to the status of consummate religion because he sees some special value in the person of Jesus Christ. Rather, it is the Christian concept of the holy spirit which Hegel believes best represents the Absolute's relation to human beings.<sup>196</sup> While

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., pp. 203-204.

<sup>194</sup> Hegel identifies this religion as Christianity, although he is careful to emphasize that Christianity need not be the only historical form which such a religion takes. Some have read earlier versions of this project as the author claiming that everyone simply ought to convert to Christianity – this is a dishonest, overly literal, and frankly foolish misrepresentation of my views.

<sup>195</sup> *Lectures*, p. 397.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., pp. 425-432.

Christ as simultaneously human and divine offers an important representation of the Absolute's nature, Christ himself is still a particular entity. Affiliating the divine with a single entity (whether that be the person of Christ, or some objective conception of God the father who created the world and stands opposed to it) alienates the human subject from the divine. Hegel understands what Nietzsche would also later point out: when the human and divine are divided in this way, there is no capacity for meaningful relation between the two. In light of this, Hegel claims that the death of Christ presents the ideological turning point of historical religion. Upon Christ's death, his divine spirit was no longer limited to his own person, but was disseminated to those who followed him.<sup>197</sup> Whereas the spirit of God was formerly associated with a single individual, that spirit came to be understood as present in all things, and to be accessible to everyone. Worship in the early Christian church took on a necessarily communal quality following the death of Christ, reflecting the growing understanding that the divine spirit was best revealed in the social activity of human beings. For Hegel, it is the living movement of the religious community, and not any individual's faith in a particular god, which makes the Absolute manifest in the lives of believers.

To put this a different way, Hegel sees the amalgamation of all concrete religious practices as partially composing the universal. By coming together with others in a religious context, individuals do not merely worship the divine as something beyond themselves, but also directly participate in it. God is not an objective deity, but rather the universal spirit that the sum of all life itself constitutes. Because the divine is made manifest through the movement of world history (which in itself is necessarily practical), then,

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 418.

religion itself cannot be a merely theoretical endeavor– it also has a necessarily practical element. It is this point which primarily separates Hegel’s account of religion in the *Lectures* from that in the *Phenomenology*. Hegel shifts from an overly rationalistic understanding of the Absolute, one which privileges indicative beliefs and pure thought, to an appreciation for the practical elements of the Absolute that reason alone cannot grasp.

We have already seen that, in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel takes religious picture-thinking to be inferior to the pure thought of philosophy. In that text he calls for a move beyond religion into philosophical thought, claiming that only the latter can provide knowledge of the Absolute as it exists in and for itself. However, in the *Lectures* his tune changes; we see Hegel claiming that it is religion, and not philosophy, which offers a uniquely useful form of knowledge. Whereas the *Phenomenology* proposed that religion should be transformed into philosophy, the *Lectures* understand religion to already be a form of philosophy – and not merely to share the same content.<sup>198</sup> Specifically, religion is a practically-oriented form of philosophy, one which does not rely upon thought alone to provide knowledge. Philosophy is an abstract, rationalizing process, one which seeks to remove itself from any practical concerns; while this led the rationally-oriented Hegel to consider it superior in the *Phenomenology*, he now seems to take its purely theoretical nature as a weakness. Hegel no longer considers the elements of historical religion to obscure the nature of the Absolute, because he believes that it is those historical elements which actually *constitute* the Absolute (although always merely in part).

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

One weakness that Hegel formerly perceived in religious thought was its immediacy. Seeking truth in and for itself in the immediate is a risky process, because what is presented immediately has not yet been analyzed by reason.<sup>199</sup> In the *Lectures*, Hegel still agrees with his view from the *Phenomenology* that religion and the intellect cannot be opposed to one another, and that a focus on immediate religious experience alone would not be sufficient to provide knowledge of the Absolute.<sup>200</sup> However, as the *Lectures* progress, we find that there is actually no such thing as pure religious immediacy. We cannot understand God as an abstract object of cognition, as we can only understand him through our relation to him.<sup>201</sup> A thought receives its content through religious representation. However, any immediacy in that representation is necessarily already mediated by the one who thinks, and cognition of God begins in the practice of determinate religion – not in the realm of pure thought.<sup>202</sup> Therefore, Hegel contends that engaging in any sort of religious thinking is already a version of philosophy, one which imparts sufficient knowledge of the nature of the Absolute. The immediate knowledge that God exists, given by the witness of one's own spirit, becomes an acceptable form of truth regarding the absolute:

The witness of spirit can be present in manifold and various ways; it is not required that for all of humanity the truth be brought forth in a philosophical way. [...] That sympathy of which we have spoken earlier, where the spirit or the soul cries out,

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<sup>199</sup> See *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 474-475.

<sup>200</sup> *Lectures*, p. 71.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 412.

“yes, that is the truth”—that sympathy is so immediate a form of certainty that it can be as secure for one person as thinking is for another.<sup>203</sup>

Whereas Hegel’s earlier work proposed that one ought to move past religious thinking in pursuit of philosophy, he now does not think such an intellectual development is necessary for the majority of human subjects. Hegel does not think that a religious community needs to orient itself philosophically, i.e. to separate itself from the practical in pursuit of pure knowledge of the divine. Rather, Hegel believes that it is in that practical communal activity that the nature of the divine is truly revealed. Religious practice is therefore something that is necessarily social – and a religion is successful insofar as it demonstrates the necessary relation of the Absolute and those who worship it.

My view is that Hegel’s shifting view on religious immediacy is in light of two commitments on his part: first, that because the Absolute is made manifest through the movement of history, which is itself necessarily practical, seeking knowledge of the Absolute that is purely theoretical would fail to accurately understand an essential part of its nature; and second, that the practical condition of the human being is such that participating in pure philosophical thought is not feasible for many individuals. This second point is of particular importance for our purposes. While a meaningful discussion of the subject was absent from the seventh chapter of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel returns in the *Lectures* to one of his early concerns from his Berne period: the necessarily practical, non-rational elements of human life. We see in this text that religion is primarily concerned with the things that (according to Hegel) all of us find most important: matters of morality,

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 184.



mortality, and the purpose of life. While these are things that can be considered in pure thought, they are also practical issues with which all of us must concern ourselves – and thought alone cannot provide us with solutions to these sorts of problems. Because it deals in these important matters, religion has an emotional power over those who practice it that philosophy on its own does not:

All the griefs of this bank and shoal of life vanish away in this aether, whether in the feeling of devotion or of hope. All of it drops into the past. In religion all cares pass away, for in it one finds oneself fortunate. All harshness of fate passes into a dream. [...] Such is the universal content of religion among human beings[.]<sup>204</sup>

As an abstract activity, philosophical thought seeks to remove itself from these practical matters; but in doing so, it runs the risk of appearing distant from those things that individuals find most important. From the above passage, Thomas Lewis notes that most people tend to encounter religion prior to philosophy (even if they are not religious themselves), and that religion's claims do not initially need to be validated by philosophical thought to be compelling.<sup>205</sup> One can certainly rationalize about religion, but there are many religious individuals who do not, and feel no need to do so. One is reminded at this point of Hegel's claim in *Berne*, that in order to be socially useful, a religion must engage not only the reason but also the imagination and the heart of those who practice it. What Hegel once took to be religion's weakness – that is, its ability to address the non-rational – he now recognizes to be one of its strengths.

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>205</sup> Lewis, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel*, p. 108.

To be abundantly clear, Hegel is not advocating for a grossly irrational sort of religious practice, in which believers throw reason to the wind and accept that which is glaringly false simply because it makes them feel better about some aspect of their lives. He has repeatedly made it clear that a religion which stands in contrast to reason will not be sustainable long-term, especially as society shifts towards Enlightenment ideas of investigative thought. Recall his early commitment that a religion must be grounded in the rational; his increasing appreciation for practically-derived knowledge has not led him away from this position. Hegel is not arguing for a religion of pure faith or feeling—rather, his point is simply that these things can provide a unique and valuable sort of knowledge, despite any overly rationalistic views that would claim otherwise. A balance must therefore be struck: the religious individual should reject those practices that she knows to be blatantly irrational, while also avoiding using reason as her sole criterion for what is valuable in religious practice. Reason is an important source of truth, but it is not the only possible source.

Hegel's emphasis on the practical in this text reveals a newfound appreciation for a different sort of religious belief. An individual religious experience is necessarily bound up with its practical context: the situation in which the believer lives, the particular faith that she practices, and the imagery that she associates with the divine. Such an experience is far from universalizable – but despite this, its value is actually to be found in its particularity, in what it represents to the individual who experiences it. The Hegel of the *Lectures* does not think that the particularity of such an experience renders it an inferior form of knowledge. He rather takes religious belief to be something that is necessary practical, and something that cannot always be analyzed in terms of a universal standard.

This revelation on Hegel's part reflects an appreciation for religious beliefs which are primarily imperative in nature. It has been suggested, perhaps most famously by Feuerbach, that Hegel makes the same sort of error that I have attributed to Kant in this project: namely, that he defends religion by robbing it of any uniquely religious content.<sup>206</sup> While this is a fair criticism of his position in the *Phenomenology*, the *Lectures*' commitment to subjective religious experience as a source of authoritative knowledge makes this text far more amenable to particular religious practices than Kant ever is. The content of religious thought is not merely a representation; it is mediated knowledge, and therefore ought to be held in the same regard as pure philosophical thought. The Absolute *is* the particular, at least in part; therefore, one cannot set the particular aside without ignoring an important element of the Absolute's identity.

By the time of the *Lectures*, Hegel is no longer treating religion merely as an educational tool for the dissemination of literal truths about reality. He also sees religious experience as providing a form of authoritative knowledge regarding the nature of the Absolute. Hegel recognizes that not only is human life necessarily practical, but that the Absolute is made manifest in this practical activity. Importantly, this activity is also necessarily a social one – which brings us back to the subject of the religious community.

#### 4.3 Hegelian Religion as a Collaborative Community

With Hegel's views on religion thus articulated, we will now bring them into conversation with the rest of this project. Because Hegel understands the Absolute to be

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<sup>206</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (London: Trubner & Co., Ludgate Hill, 1881), p. viii.

made manifest in the movement of human social life, his philosophy of religion (and arguably, his entire philosophical system) is necessarily bound up with the social. Hegel is concerned to demonstrate a critical point: that the universal and the particular are not fully distinct entities, but rather two unique elements of a singular whole. His interest in the unification of these apparent opposites provides us with what we have sought throughout this entire project: a way of understanding community that unites the interests of the individual and the group. Hegel's philosophy successfully describes a way of doing religion that meets both of our necessary conditions for the growth of thick trust within a community. To show how this is the case, we'll work through both of those conditions.

#### 4.3.1 Hegelian Religion & Moral Autonomy

Because Hegel and Kant share a similar commitment to the moral authority of the religious subject, Hegel succeeds as Kant did in satisfying our first condition. Hegel's earliest work in Berne emphasizes that the practice of folk religion must be something that is freely chosen by the individual, rather than mandated at the group level. Despite folk religion's potential for enormous civic and social benefits, the young Hegel is adamant that no society should be able to impose faith in any sort of religious doctrine upon its members.<sup>207</sup> This is for at least two reasons: first, it is the individual's responsibility to try any religious claims in the court of her own reason before accepting them, as it is one's reason which serves as the standard for universal truth. Second, since folk religion concerns not only the rational but also the emotional side of the individual, it is necessarily a deeply personal endeavor. Only the individual can know what religious imagery has the ability to

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<sup>207</sup> Tübingen Essay, p. 33; Positivity of the Christian Religion, p. 107.

speak to her own imagination and heart – religious commitment can manifest differently for different individuals, despite sharing the same rational root.<sup>208</sup> Just as Kant’s Copernican turn placed the human subject at the center of her perceptual experience, so Hegel’s folk religion’s emphasis on human freedom places the believer at the center of her religious practice.<sup>209</sup> This allows her to determine for herself what particular religious practices are most compelling, and to hold herself accountable to what her reason demands of her. In this way, such religious practice allows the agent to develop her own capacity for autonomous moral decision-making.

This commitment to the moral authority of the religious practitioner carries through the remainder of Hegel’s work on the subject. In both the *Phenomenology* and the *Lectures*, Hegel elevates Christianity to a place of relative honor, naming it the pinnacle of historical religious practice – but as we have already seen, this is not because he sees any literal accuracy in its historical claims. Rather, Hegel praises this particular faith because the person of Christ represents divinity embodied within the human subject. Natural religion and religion in the form of art both treat the divine as something that is necessarily one-sided: it is either completely separate from the human subject, or completely reducible to it. It is only within a religion like Christianity, one which properly represents the two opposing sides of the Absolute’s nature, that the human subject can properly understand her own relation to the divine. The Christian story retains a concept of divinity that religion in the form of art does not, but it makes that divinity accessible to the human being in a

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<sup>208</sup> Hegel notes the famous quote from *Nathan the Wise*: “What makes me a Christian in your eyes makes you a Jew in mine.” See *Tübingen Essay*, p. 38.

<sup>209</sup> Thomas Lewis associates folk religion with the freedom of the human subject in *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel*, p. 33.

way that natural religion never could. Through this form of representation, the individual becomes aware of a necessary truth: divinity is not something that is merely mundane, or something that she can never access, but rather a powerful quality that she already possesses within herself as a rational agent. When planning her own conduct, she need not rely upon the commands of a deity, or defer to the wisdom of some religious authority figure; rather, she can refer to her own inherent authority on the subject, and allow her own reason to guide her decisions.

Hegel's model of religion therefore avoids a problem raised not only by him, but also by Kant and Nietzsche: the problem of religious heteronomy. We have considered this problem at length in Chapters 2 and 3, and have shown that when a religion places moral authority in the hands of an agent beyond the religious subject, it creates alienation between the individual and that which she worships. Such religious practice has social consequences: it not only separates the believer from her God, but also undermines others' ability to trust her. As Kant's rational religion did, Hegel's religion centers the believer as a source of moral authority, and places responsibility for her conduct solely upon herself. Such an individual holds herself accountable to her own rationally-derived code of moral conduct – and because of this, others are justified in trusting her, even in the absence of coercive religious authority figures. In this way, Hegel's model for religious practice satisfies our first condition for thick trust. A collaborative religious community, therefore, cannot rely upon the commands of a few authority figures, but must allow the individual to determine for herself what is moral.

#### 4.3.2 Hegel on the Primacy of the Practical

Much of this chapter has been devoted to demonstrating Hegel's evolving view on the role of the practical in religion. With all of this having already been worked out, one piece of the puzzle remains: we must demonstrate how Hegel's emphasis on the practical can work to cultivate relationships of thick trust in a religious community. By placing value in imperative beliefs (rather than beliefs which are merely indicative in nature), Hegel recognizes the social utility of a wide variety of religious experiences. This allows him to widen his definition of what should be considered "rational" in a religious context, and to preserve religion's ability to speak to those needs of human life that are not merely theoretical in nature.

Hegel famously writes that the real is rational, and the rational is real.<sup>210</sup> This view places him at odds with Kant, who understands reality to be composed not only of knowable practical conditions but also an unknowable noumenal realm. For Kant, it is the noumenal which is truly "real" – but because human beings are necessarily practically situated, this reality is largely unknowable to us (aside from what we can glean through the activity of our reason). We have already seen that for the mature Hegel, preserving such a distinction of opposites is intolerable; he believes that the Absolute is not located within some realm beyond the physical, but is rather composed of all things, which necessarily includes the here and now. Hegel did not begin his career with this position, however. The *Philosophy of Right* was published over a decade after the *Phenomenology*, and his thought evolved greatly during the period between these two works. The young Hegel was heavily influenced by Kant, and imported many of Kant's views into his own work; we have seen

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<sup>210</sup> *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. xxix.

several examples of this in his early philosophy of religion. Hegel's initial commitment to philosophy as superior to religion reflects an early, largely Kantian view that there is a distinction between the rational and the real. By the time of his mature work, however, Hegel has abandoned this distinction.

Treating the real as rational is essential for cultivating durable social relationships. We saw in the first chapter of this project that what is "rational" in a given context is largely determined by the practical conditions of that context. What appears ridiculous to someone outside of a situation may be perfectly sensible to someone within it—in fact, it may be the only "rational" choice given the circumstances.<sup>211</sup> Within a community, if "reason" is limited to the sphere of individual understanding, then we risk creating a context where the decisions of those who have distinct experiences are dismissed as irrational. This mutual dismissal of one another's experiences blocks the possibility of trust relationships between individuals. One cannot universalize their own definition of what is "rational" if that definition dismisses the experience of another. For example, a woman may take herself to be perfectly rational in carrying pepper spray on a blind date, because experience (whether her own, or that of other women) has taught her that such a situation can be dangerous; a man who has never experienced such danger may take her action to be heavy-handed and unwarranted. Both of these individuals are determining what is "rational" in light of their own practical experiences – however, in our gentleman's case, some relevant information is missing from his own experience, leading him to mistakenly universalize his own definition of what is rational. If individuals dismiss one another's reactions to their own experiences in this way, then how could those individuals ever expect to develop trust in

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<sup>211</sup> For instance, Uma Narayan's account of veiling in some traditional Indian communities.



one another? Such a situation ultimately breaks down the capacity for relation between individuals who are influenced by widely different practical contexts, and creates communities that can only understand each other if they are all alike.

Within a religious context specifically, Hegel acknowledges that subjective religious experience is authoritative, and states that such experience need not be evaluated in terms of pure thought. What he means here is that the individual's experience of the Absolute is always already mediated by the subject having that experience, and that this act of mediation alone is sufficient to make that experience an authoritative source of knowledge. Of course, religious experiences almost never constitute literal truth; because of this, it is clear that Hegel is not taking religion as a source of indicative belief, but rather of imperative belief. Imperative beliefs are a mediated, rational response to a set of particular practical conditions; these beliefs can be useful within those conditions, even if they cannot be universalized beyond the context in which they were generated. The Hegel of the *Lectures* is advocating for a religious community which respects the individual as the authority on her own practical experiences, and validates the choices that she makes in light of those experiences as rational.

We have seen that Kant sought to rationalize religion, in order to defend it against those who considered it an outdated practice. As Kant's fellow German idealist, Hegel is certainly not advocating that we toss rationality aside in favor of religion. Rather, his mature understanding of religious belief as an authoritative source of knowledge reflects a broadening definition of what we ought to consider rational. For Kant, reason is within the individual, and ought not to take the particular into account; however, Hegel recognizes that the human being is necessarily situated in a particular context, and that this context

plays a massive role in how the individual interprets the world around her. Because of this, there is no such thing as an objective, universally “rational” position from which the human subject analyzes the world. We cannot have a religion of pure reason without a historical context to define what we consider to be rational in the first place.

Within a religious community, our second criterion for thick trust can be met in a simple way: members of the group should take their own experiences of the divine to be personally meaningful, but avoid treating those experiences as authoritative for others. Particularly within a diverse group of individuals, members of the community must accept a diverse set of experiences and beliefs regarding the Absolute. As long as those beliefs are not glaringly irrational, they should be accepted as largely authoritative for the one who holds them, even if they cannot be universalized. This means accepting that historical practice is an important element of religious commitment, and cannot be transcended in the way that Kant envisioned.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

Religious practice is typically associated with the formation of beliefs. However, in order to properly understand the role that religion plays in human life, it is critical to understand the *kinds* of beliefs that religion tends to cultivate. When one analyzes religion in terms of indicative belief alone, one misunderstands its purpose – and in doing so, misunderstands the powerful role that the practice plays in human social life. Hegel demonstrates that imperative beliefs can cultivate relationships of thick trust within a religious context – even if those beliefs do not concern literal matters of truth and falsehood.

A collaborative religious community is possible. While much religious practice that we see today is inherently alienating, this is not necessary; these structures of alienation can be overcome with careful effort and attention to two conditions. First, the religious community must avoid any conception of the divine which is necessarily distinct from the human being. It must be within the power of the individual to enter into relation with the divine, so that she can discern the divine will for herself – this task cannot be limited to a few who hold positions of religious authority. Second, the religious community must be careful in how it defines what is rational. Attempts to defend one's religion on purely theoretical grounds are misguided (as are attempts to attack the practice on the same grounds), for much of religion's purpose in human life is not primarily theoretical in nature. A religious community must be flexible, ever-evolving, and willing to respond to the practical needs of those who participate in it, even if those needs are beyond the realm of reason alone. Furthermore, such a community should broaden its definition of what is "rational," understanding that the rational choice in a given situation is largely determined by context. If these requirements are met, the community in question can foster relations of thick trust among its members, creating a social environment in which the interests of the individual and the group are revealed to be one and the same. Any particular religious group should be evaluated in terms of whether it meets these two conditions and successfully accomplishes this function.

## EPILOGUE

This project has sought to articulate the possibility of collaborative religious community. The final chapter ended on an optimistic note, concluding that such a community is indeed achievable, given the right set of conditions. However, we began with a practical observation: people across the globe are abandoning organized religion at an unprecedented rate. One may therefore ask: why point to the growing social irrelevance of religion, only to then argue for its potential social utility? And if religion can provide such a useful foundation for community relationships, why are so many people leaving it behind?

While this project ends with positive words for religion's social potential, it should in no way be taken as a broadly uncritical defense of religion. We have seen in the previous pages that there are all sorts of ways of doing religion that do not foster meaningful community relationships. I have criticized these at length on both theoretical and practical grounds. One should therefore not interpret this project as an attempt to place religion in rose-colored light. Rather, this project sought a novel vantage point from which to *critique* those religious practices that are indisputably harmful. It is certainly not controversial to say that, especially in our present day, religion has become a uniquely powerful source of interpersonal tension, social unrest, and even outright violence. The problem for the critic of religion, however, is that most critiques of the practice are made upon the grounds of its epistemological shortcomings – those atrocities committed by the faithful are typically chalked up to products of irrationality, as foolish people doing foolish things. However, such criticisms are as insufficient as they are dishonest. One can hold beliefs that are indisputably false, without being motivated to commit the sorts of violent extremism for

which religion has become infamous. Religious extremists do not commit acts of violence simply because they believe in a deity that does not literally exist; something else must take place to bring an individual to the point of performing such actions.

In defining religion as a social phenomenon, I have differentiated between two different kinds of belief, which serve distinct purposes in the lives of those who hold them. When religious beliefs are taken to be purely indicative in nature, i.e. as attempts to discern literal truths about reality, then of course those beliefs come up short. The problem with examining religion in terms of indicative belief, however, is that religious claims are unverifiable; while they certainly cannot be proven, they likewise cannot be definitively disproven. This is why the typical critiques of religion are simply not effective in conversations with those who hold deep-seated religious beliefs. The nature of religion means that it is all but impossible to reason a diehard believer out of their faith. Criticizing religion on purely epistemological grounds, then, accomplishes little of practical import. All this task does is reassure those who already find religion dubitable that they are in fact the “rational” party, while alienating them from those who find the dubious claims compelling.

However, I have argued that since religion is primarily a social practice (rather than a purely epistemological one), we should understand its primary function to be the formation of imperative beliefs that foster durable social relationships. And criticizing it on these grounds, i.e. whether the religion in question does in fact foster such relationships, can be a more productive task. I have sought to not only define religion as a social phenomenon, but to demonstrate its possibility as a *healthy* social phenomenon, so that we can be justified in criticizing those historical practices which fail to achieve this standard.

As Kant famously establishes, necessity implies possibility; if we are to critique religions that do not function as collaborative communities, we ought to demonstrate that such a community is actually possible within a religious context. If this were not the case, then religion writ large would simply have outlived any former social utility, and perhaps ought to be cast into the dustbin of history. However, we have seen that such a community is indeed possible. With this established, we can then examine particular religious practices from a new perspective – i.e. whether those practices foster communal connections among religious individuals. And in almost all of religion’s most well-documented failures, we can see an alienation of the individual from the group that drives the believer away from her faith community. Consider the sorts of religious violence that have become all too common: individuals often experience alienation from religion over issues such as LGBTQ rights, the morality of abortion, and the nature of such “sins” as addiction and suicide. We should set aside the question of whether these religious moral claims are objectively true (since, as we have already seen, these conversations are hardly productive in the first place); what matters here is the social aspect of these disagreements. Dogmatic religious ideologies set forth moral rules as objective truths to which the human being is held accountable. On these issues, religious tradition is treated as being of greater import than the individuals who participate in that tradition.<sup>212</sup> In these situations, neither of our conditions for the growth of thick trust are met. The believer’s moral autonomy is not preserved; she is rather subjected to an objective moral code, and told that she must follow that code out of fear of punishment. Such a religion can only produce relations of thin trust,

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<sup>212</sup> Kant calls such religions statutory religions, and claims that they are fundamentally opposed to rational religion, because they are not grounded in universal truths and fail to recognize the autonomy of the religious subject. See *Religion*, 6:108 & 6:176.

since it is based upon relations of force. Additionally, the practical context of the believer's situation is not considered; determining that a certain action is morally wrong in all instances, regardless of context, betrays a limited definition of rationality and a lack of appreciation for the practical situation of the human being. Because of this, in these circumstances, the potential for religious community is undermined, as the believer experiences herself as alienated from others within the faith. This is a failure of religion to fulfill its social function – and it can be demonstrated without ever having to wade into the issue of indicative belief.

One may still ask: what's the value of preserving religion, when we could simply stop being religious and avoid altogether the sorts of harms that it tends to perpetuate? Perhaps religion can give some individuals community, but if it also yields such harms, then isn't there a safer way to foster community relationships? This project is certainly not a prescription for faith; if one does not find meaningful community relationships within a religious context, even a healthy one, then one is justified in removing oneself from that community. However, while one's own religious experiences are valid, one must also contend with the reality that for billions of people across history, religion has been an immensely meaningful institution, one which has been instrumental in the organization of their personal and social lives. This is still the case for certain communities even in our increasingly secular age. Given the prevalence of religion across history, it is highly unlikely that the practice is something that humanity as a whole will eventually dispense with altogether. Demanding so would be presumptive. Rather than stipulating that people renounce those practical forms of life that have been fundamental in constructing their own

values and worldviews, we should rather point to a healthier way of organizing those forms of life, one which functions with the well-being of those who participate in them in mind.

It is important to note that what a collaborative religious community looks like in practice will vary depending upon the practical situation of those who participate in it. This project does not seek to (for example) say that one particular historical faith ought to be disseminated worldwide, due to some built-in superior ability of that faith to foster thick trust. While Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche all believed that certain historical religions did a better job than others of fulfilling religion's social function, they also recognized that no particular religion is universalizable. Rather, one's religious orientation (or lack thereof) must develop in response to the given conditions of one's own life. For those who find religion to be a meaningful source of community, what I am proposing is something akin to Hegelian folk religion: an individually-organized orientation towards one's particular social context.

In this way, I have argued for a way of doing religion that broadens the definition of what we tend to consider "rational." Religious beliefs should not be subjected to scientific standards of scrutiny, or dismissed merely on the grounds that they are not empirically verifiable. Rather, what is "rational" should be understood as a reasoned response to a given set of conditions, even if the same response would be irrational outside of those conditions. A potential objection to this project may go as follows: if religion need not be rational (in the Enlightenment sense of the term), then we run the risk of signing off on all manner of religious extremism. After all, if we are not holding religious claims to a standard of universal truth, then what's stopping a religious group from promoting any absurd ideologies that they like? My response to this is to once again suggest that we refer



back to Hegel's criteria for a folk religion. Two points are relevant here: first, Hegel claims that despite its practical orientation, a folk religion must still be grounded in reason. A folk religion cannot issue out of an ideology that is blatantly irrational. However (and this raises our second point), this is not because religion functions primarily in service of reason, but rather because the blatantly irrational does not function in service of human life. Communities are grounded upon relations of thick trust, which means that members of the group must have reasonable confidence in their ability to predict the behavior of others. If a religion encourages those who follow it to conduct themselves irrationally, then this erodes the possibility of trust, because one cannot reasonably predict behavior that is irrational. This in turn undermines the possibility of durable community relationships. I am not therefore suggesting that we throw the rational to the wind; rather, I am suggesting that we refrain from evaluating the "rationality" of religion merely in terms of whether its claims are definitively true. There is a difference, after all, between the demonstrably irrational and that which is beyond the scope of what human beings have historically defined as "rational."

In conclusion, religion is certainly not the only institution in which human beings can find a community. Perhaps my most fundamental disagreement with Hegel is that I do not believe that a wide-scale turn towards religion can fix mankind's problems. However, the practice has historically been a source of value and meaning for an untold number of individuals, and due to its prevalence, it is not something that we should expect to vanish altogether anytime soon. Instead of demanding that we should dispense with religion, or simply dismissing it as something that is fundamentally irrational and therefore beyond the scope of philosophical critique, we should instead see it as a human activity like any other,

which can succeed or fail at accomplishing a given purpose. Those of us who are committed to understanding human life ought to undertake an effort towards a good-faith understanding of religion – and instead of dismissing it, to define the ways in which it can be better.

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## VITA

### Institutions Attended

- Georgia Southern University: Bachelor of Arts, Philosophy, December 2015

### Positions Held

- University of Kentucky: Teaching Assistant, 2016-2022

### Honors & Awards

- College of Arts & Sciences Dean's Competitive Fellowship, University of Kentucky, March 2020
- College of Arts & Sciences Outstanding Teaching Assistant, University of Kentucky, April 2019
- Madeline Breckinridge Teaching Award, University of Kentucky, January 2017

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