

But still.

Even given these continuities one must be struck by the sheer explosiveness of the thought in this century. Hegel embeds God within history about as literally as one could take that idea, and then Marx ignites the political, economic, and social revolution that forever changes that history. The infamous naturalist Charles Darwin (1809–82) drops the evolutionary bomb that perhaps does more than any other thinker or thought in all history to undermine the hold that theism has on the public consciousness. And Kierkegaard goes further, far further, than any of his traditional theist predecessors might have done – for no sooner had medieval and early modern thinkers acknowledged God's ultimate incomprehensibility than they set about working out the many explicit comprehensible doctrines about God that have comprised much of this book, whereas Kierkegaard vociferously rejects that intellectual process entirely in favor of a personal one, and intimate one, and one that quite explicitly requires embracing the absurd. That may sound appealing in some respects, but keep in mind what it entails: to give up on reason altogether in this way may be to give up on the thing that makes us most truly human.

And then there is Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). There has been nothing and nobody like him, before or since. He too offers a “naturalistic” account of the origin of religious belief, one that strikingly anticipates the revolutionary insights of thinkers like Freud and others in the following century. He too is willing to draw, explicitly, the atheistic conclusions of that account, again paving the way for others. But he does all this, as he himself liked to say, *with a hammer*. That – along with his famous slogan that “God is dead” and the convenient fact that he himself died, quite literally of insanity, in 1900 – makes him the perfect thinker with whom to conclude our discussion of the nineteenth century.

## G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831)

### The autobiographer

*History is the story of God's coming to know Himself,  
through human consciousness*

Every era has a spirit, according to Hegel, the spirit of the times. The ancient Far East, the Greeks, the Romans, and even modern Europe – they each have their own, an attitude or a worldview that can be seen in their artwork, their religions, and their philosophies. Moreover, these evolving spirits have succeeded each other over the course of history in a very orderly, rational way. There's a clear progression, a direction; and it's one that culminates in the modern era.

World history is constituted in fact by the increasingly explicit manifestation of *Absolute Spirit*, or God. This may best be seen in the development, over millennia, of human beings' religious consciousness.

In its most ancient forms religion was directed towards nature; natural objects – light, plants, animals – were treated as godly and worthy of worship. But as humans developed they began to create artifacts of divinity (such as statues of gods) to replace the natural objects. This became religion as art, well exemplified by the ancient Greeks. At the same time, human beings shifted their focus from nature to the human community, the state; the gods came to represent the state rather than represent the sun, the moon, etc. Now conceived as human in

form they were imagined to speak and so we saw the origin of hymns; and they naturally reflected human concerns and behaviors as expressed in the rise of literary forms such as epic, tragedy, and comedy.

But this purely secular conception of religion, representing the divine Spirit in the arts, could not last. In time humans saw that their artworks were mere human productions; divinity was instead to be conceived not as an object but as a *subject*, as a consciousness, as a self-consciousness, as human not just in form but in *spirit* as well. And thus arose Christianity, in which God became a human being, in which His pure Spirit manifested itself in human spirit. Indeed God, as pure Spirit or mind, is *God* only in His knowing of Himself; what God *is* in other words is a self-knower. And since our spirit is the worldly manifestation of *His* Spirit our knowledge of God just is *His* way of knowing Himself and thus *being* Himself. God could not fully manifest Himself unless human beings had the proper awareness of God; and it took epochs of history before they reached that awareness, in the form of Christianity.

But even that awareness was not fully developed at first; being so grounded in our material nature we still required very concrete representations of divinity, such as in the stories of the Bible. These stories – the creation of the world, the Fall of human beings, and so on – do of course contain deep truths, for example about the way reason informs reality and the way we can become alienated from the world around us. But they don't express those truths in the clearest, most explicit – most *rational* – way. That is the job of philosophy.

And so religion reaches its highest point – and God manifests Himself most fully – in the works of the religious philosophers who have reached the fullest conception of divinity. God is fully God only insofar as the philosophers of the modern era properly come to understand Him. It has taken a

long time for us, and therefore for Him, to get here. History is the story of His journey. History is, in effect, the autobiography of God.

## RELATED CHAPTERS

56 Feuerbach, 58 Marx, 59 Kierkegaard, 66 Whitehead, 71 Heidegger.