

# Critique of Religion, Critique of Reason

## Criticising religion in the classroom

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### 1. Introduction

Religious education (RE) in Norwegian schools today is of a so-called integrative kind, meaning that the subject gathers all students, is multi-faith oriented, and its context is non-confessional.<sup>1</sup> Christianity still holds an important place in the curriculum and teaching of the subject, argued for by way of Norway's historical-cultural heritage, but much has changed since this was the all dominant focus of religious education in Norwegian schools.

Current guidelines for the school subject, which also includes ethics and philosophy, underline that the same pedagogical principles are to be employed for all topics. Furthermore, it is stated that all religions and world views shall be presented in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner.<sup>2</sup> In recent didactical discussions the question of what *critical* teaching about religions and world views is and should be has gained particular attention. To what extent and in what way should this compulsory school subject also involve a critique of religion in a more focused sense and thematise as *problematic* various beliefs or practises of religions and other world views?

My own work involves teaching religion, ethics and philosophy to students who are going to teach RE in school. What I should like to do here – with this question in mind – is to make an excursion into the field of philosophy of religion to see how this may help us in our reflections upon the relationship between critical teaching and the critique of religion in a more focused sense in the context of primary education. My aim will be to sort some perspectives that may prove helpful for a later, concrete working out in didactical terms.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Wanda Alberts, "The academic study of religions and integrative religious education in Europe," *British Journal of Religious Education* 32 (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Opplæringslova [the Norwegian Education Act], § 2.4.

## 2. What is Enlightenment?

### 2.1 *The Critique of Religion as An Anthropological Concern*

Before delving into our material proper, a highlighting of important perspectives from Hegel and Kant, I should like to bring in two considerations which have served as hermeneutical keys for my own orientation in the problematic at hand, hoping thereby to provide a relevant context also for further discussion. The first of these comes from Lutheran theologian Gerhard Ebeling who in 1960 presented a series of theses on the “necessity of theology” for an introductory course to the study of theology. One of these theses runs as follows: “Theology is necessary because man is by nature a fanatic.”<sup>3</sup>

The viewpoint is interesting because it establishes a connection between the critical reflection upon religion (in theology) and a necessary reflection upon the human being, as she or he is “by nature.” It seems fair to see the starting point suggested by Ebeling as a rather elegant formulation of what is also at the heart of Martin Luther’s and the German Reformation’s concerns. With Luther’s determined critique of religion by way of the Pauline dismantling of the Law – as a defect in humans’ basic orientation –, criticism of religion is at the same time cast as also a critique of human reasoning. This latter concern provides an important touchstone for the following discussion. It will be of interest to us here to see how far we can get on the question of the relation between the critique of religion and the critique of reason, and to what effect.

A second introductory consideration, not unrelated to the Lutheran one, is an observation of how in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant the critique of reason and the critique of religion always appear together and integrally linked. A part and parcel of Kant’s critical investigations of the various aspects of the orientation of human beings in the world is a continuous reflection upon and critical assessments of religion and religious beliefs. A critique of religion appears in all three of his critiques of human reason. Thus if the question “What is a human being?” may be seen as the point of convergence between Kant’s three other guiding questions, “What can I know?”, “What should I do?” and “What may I hope?”<sup>4</sup> then one must concede that a critique of religion figures as an integral and constitutive part of Kant’s anthropological considerations as a whole and not just as an external preparation for them.

### 2.2 *Enlightenment as Emergence From Unmündigkeit*

And it is indeed with Kant that I should like to start off our discussion, not only because of Kant’s interest in religion but also because he is a philosopher who

<sup>3</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1963), 424.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jean Greisch, *Le buisson ardent et les lumières de la raison. L’invention de la philosophie de la religion*. Vol. 1. (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 307.

has given us much to think about when it comes to the term critique. However, instead of going directly to his most famous critical endeavour, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I should like to take my starting point in another of his deservedly famous texts, his “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?” from 1784. In this shorter text, Kant gives to the readers of *Berlinische Monatsschrift* his own definition of what enlightenment is all about, and in doing so also makes religious matters a privileged arena for illustration.

In the classical opening lines of the text, Kant significantly defines enlightenment not as some new and liberating enhancement in knowledge, but rather as the freeing of one’s own self-imposed bondage in a state of ignorance:

*Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. The immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another.*<sup>5</sup>

The reason for our state of ignorance and irresponsibility is according to Kant not at the outset a lack of understanding. It is rather due to a twofold vice of laziness and cowardice. Critical and independent thinking takes effort and at times also courage. More often than not it is easier and more comfortable to hand oneself over to external guidance rather than to shoulder the burden of self-governance.

Now, enlightenment should not be blind to the various other interests that keep people stuck in their *Unmündigkeit*. But in this age of reason we must acknowledge also our own complicity in keeping ourselves in the dark. The cure for this state of immaturity lies in encouraging people to in fact make use of their own understanding and abilities of critical reasoning and exchange. The most important thing to facilitate such maturation is not to provide a constant supply of correct principles or beliefs, but to secure that freedom of thought and encouragement that aid people in their own self-enlightenment. The obvious didactic implications of this view will be addressed in my conclusion below.

Enlightenment is in this manner not something that may be quickly imparted an individual from without. It points rather to a meticulous process of self-tutelage and practice in the use of one’s own critical faculties. Enlightenment is, further, more a function of collective than individual processes, and it is not arrived at in one blow: “[A] public can only achieve enlightenment slowly.”<sup>6</sup>

Now, in spite of Kant’s otherwise relative enthusiasm for the American revolution and also for the later French one, Kant is sceptical as to the real potential

<sup>5</sup> Kant, What is Enlightenment?, 54. “*Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbst verschuldeten Unmündigkeit. Unmündigkeit ist das Unvermögen, sich seines Verstandes ohne Leitung eines anderen zu bedienen. Selbstverschuldet ist diese Unmündigkeit, wenn die Ursache derselben nicht am Mangel des Verstandes, sondern der EntschlieÙung und des Muthes liegt, sich seiner ohne Leitung eines andern zu bedienen.*”

<sup>6</sup> Kant, What is Enlightenment?, 55.

for enlightenment of a merely political revolution. He remains at this point unconvinced about such a revolution's ability to really get down to the business of reorienting people's understanding of themselves and the world around sufficiently:

A revolution may bring about the end of personal despotism or of avaricious tyrannical oppression, but never a true reform of modes of thought. New prejudices will serve, in place of the old, as guidelines for the unthinking masses.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Hegel and Two Forms of Enlightenment

#### 3.1 *Reformation and Revolution*

In his reticence here, Kant comes to articulate a stance later taken by numerous other German philosophers and intellectuals such as Heine, Schlegel, Fichte and Hegel, in their view of the French Revolution some five years on. Looking westwards, the German idealists are horrified by the chaotic violence of political upheaval and the revolution's deterioration into the Reign of Terror of Robespierre of the 1790's. A narrative takes shape, developing the thought that Germany has already, long time since, undergone its own revolution – a revolution of the mind – that makes superfluous and indeed counterproductive any destructive upheaval of the French kind. Rebecca Comay writes intriguingly about this in her study of Hegel's reaction to the French Revolution, in *Mourning Sickness. Hegel and the French Revolution*.

For our part, the story interestingly also ties in with the theme of the Reformation and its philosophical aftermath. For already with the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, so the story goes, a reform of modes of thought is initiated but not complete, in the form of Lutheran freedom of thought and emphasis on the individual conscience and self-appropriation in matters of faith. As a natural continuation and in keeping with this, German idealistic philosophy of the day is to be considered a revolution of the mind far outweighing the French attempt both in import and effect. The axe of reason and the practical *Vernunft's* moral revolution are seen to achieve a reorientation of modes of thought that the French version of enlightenment may only hold as a faraway dream. Something the French Revolution's slide into despotism and wild paranoia of the 1790's indeed bears witness to.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Kant, What is Enlightenment? [adjusted]. "Durch eine Revolution wird vielleicht wohl ein Abfall von persönlichem Despotism und gewinnsüchtiger oder herrschsüchtiger Bedrückung, aber niemals wahre Reform der Denkungsart zu Stande kommen; sondern neue Vorurtheile werden, eben sowohl als die alten, zum Leitbände des gedankenlosen großen Haufens dienen."

<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Comay, "Dead Right: Hegel and the Terror," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103 (2004): 377.

On this point, Hegel will expound considerably, at first in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* from 1807, then later on in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. For our purposes, it is interesting to note how Hegel stylises his analysis of two forms of enlightenment with particular attention to the way religion is critiqued, in a broadly defined standoff between German *Aufklärung* and the French *lumières*.

### 3.2 Self-Enlightenment and Other-Enlightenment

The main difference between the two lies in the way the *light* of Enlightenment is conceived to fall. German *Aufklärung* is, in the words of Comay, understood as primarily self-illumination in the manner of “reason’s own self-clarification or explication.”<sup>9</sup> Conversely, and still according to Hegel’s analysis, French *lumières* mistakenly understands itself as “reason’s illumination of a blind, superstitious other.”<sup>10</sup> The two opposing forms of enlightenment are thus broadly conceived as the difference between self-critique and a critique which is first and foremost directed towards the unenlightened *other*.

### 3.3 Enlightenment and the Critique of Religion

In the German tradition, following Luther and his philosophical heirs Kant and Hegel himself, religion is seen to both inform and be informed by reason to such an extent that the two in actual fact accommodate each other. For Hegel this implies a more or less a total absorption of the Christian truths in the philosophical march forward of the Spirit. In French-style Enlightenment, however, religion is seen not as kith and kin to reason, but rather as something in alien opposition to it. The way religion is critically dealt with inside the two opposing paradigms is consequently at odds.

In her reading of Hegel at this point, Comay rather convincingly brings to light how strongly Hegel takes on a Freudian tone in his analysis of French Enlightenment’s inquisitorial attempts to rid itself of unmodern religion. Even in terminology Hegel seems to anticipate Freud’s analyses of defensive pathologies, in describing Enlightenment’s struggle with religion in terms of “disavowal,” “perversion,” “splitting,” “isolation” and stubborn “forgetting.”<sup>11</sup> As a result, the two forms of enlightenment in Hegel’s analysis reveal themselves as classical case studies in the difference between *melancholy* and *mourning* in a Freudian sense.

The self-illumination of German reason identifies the critique of religion as a critique also of reason itself, and by this also permits an important process of mourning the lost object of otherworldly transcendence. The French revolu-

<sup>9</sup> Comay “Dead Right,” 381.

<sup>10</sup> Comay “Dead Right,” 381.

<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness. Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 64.

tionary disownment of religion as a foreign body and an alien attachment, on the other hand, takes the form of a melancholy failure to see that the critique of religion also amounts to a critique of reason itself. In the words of Comay: “Enlightenment fails to register faith’s losses as its own.”<sup>12</sup>

### 3.4 *The Return of the Repressed*

Misguided enlightenment, in Hegel’s analysis, employs ‘pure insight’ in a critique of religion that, as we have seen, understands itself as a critique of some foreign body, alien to reason. However, by not recognizing religion’s problems as indeed also reason’s own problems, such a critique only serves to prolong and perpetuate the problems of religion in a classically melancholy fashion. An example of this would be the superstitious dynamic of guilt-by-suspicion and all-but-religious fervour of the Terror in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Instead of a critique that successfully deconstructs the ails of religion, an unholy collusion is entered into between pure insight and an undigested religiosity that sustains itself only as a return of the repressed. This is indeed the topic “Self-alienated Spirit” in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

The critical point for our purposes is that what is argued for by German-style Enlightenment is not at all an exoneration of religion or an attempt to say that religion’s problems are only on the surface to be considered real problems. Quite the contrary, religion can and should be criticised. But such a critique – as part of an enhancement in self-consciousness – must be understood as also a critique of reason itself and not just a critique of something which ails the ‘irrational other’.

## 4. Kant and the Problem of Transcendental Illusion

After this sketch of German and French enlightenment as typologies of self-enlightenment and other-enlightenment, respectively, in their critique of religion, I should like to return to Immanuel Kant and his critical project. For the striving after “a true reform of modes of thought” that we read about in the *Aufklärung*-text is no doubt more than a clever slogan for Kant. There are reasons to take such an ambition to be at the core of the philosopher’s professional ideal, encompassing his philosophical enterprise as a whole and providing its central *raison d’être*. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant provides a more *systematic* philosophical interpretation of humans’ “self-imposed occlusion” which is of interest to us. For in the dialectic part of his critique, Kant deconstructs the fallacies of reason in a manner that well illustrates the interconnected character of the critique of religion and a critique of reason in his thinking.

<sup>12</sup> Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, 65.

#### 4.1 *The Transcendental Dialectic of Pure Reason*

A central aspect of the *Critique* is the critical enterprise of sorting out from one another, on the one hand, sound knowledge according to reason's own standards and what, on the other, has, by habit or lack of analytical clarity, come to be reckoned as such, but which in actual fact fails to meet the criteria of objective knowledge of the world. Kant achieves this by distinguishing between *Denken*, which is thought unrestricted by the limits of our experience of the world and *Erkennen*, which is our understanding of the world in terms of objective knowledge in the spatio-temporal realm. Now, neither of the two modes of thought should be considered better than the other, nor more authentically human. The important point, however, is that, in identifying what constitutes our factual knowledge of the world, the two should not be confused.

And this is one of the important tasks that the *Critique of Pure Reason* sets before itself. After the transcendental aesthetic and the analytic part of the *Critique*, treating the faculty of sensibility and understanding in turn, the transcendental dialectic represents a third, deconstructive phase of the enterprise. Its aim is to expose the category mistakes made by classical metaphysics and rational theology in trying to establish their areas of investigation as sound objects of knowledge on a par with the understanding's judgements in the experiential realm.

#### 4.2 *Transcendental Illusion*

As part and parcel of the drive of reason [*Vernunft*] to bring coherence and full consistency to the knowledge established by the understanding [*Verstehen*] there is a propensity of reason to extend such consistency and coherence all the way to the supreme unity of our conceptual knowledge. This problematic extension should not as such be considered a logical fallacy nor a wilful deception by reason, but rather as an inclination stemming from the nature of our search for knowledge in itself. Classical metaphysics is in this manner, according to Kant, the philosophical result of reason's yearning to gain not only far-reaching knowledge of the world, but also its desire to follow through to the unconditioned premises of this knowledge.

Reason, in its own misunderstood way, by this comes to discover firstly, in the area of rational psychology, the absolute unity of the thinking subject. Secondly, in the area of transcendental cosmology, reason oversees the totality of conditions in space and time and claims to arrive at a non-contradictory concept of free causality. And thirdly, in the area of natural theology, reason claims to establish God as a supreme being and condition of all objects of thought. These absolute objects of thought are nonetheless only established – and this is the aim of the transcendental dialectic to show – by a faulty *overextension* of the understanding outside its rightful domain in the world of conditioned objects.

Or, conversely, by reason's direct and speculative engagement with objects of the world without the necessary mediating activity of the understanding.<sup>13</sup>

The illusion that lies in this must be exposed, but may – and this is the interesting point – not be eliminated by such exposure. As inherent to the natural functioning of reason, as transcendental vs. empirical illusions in the terminology of Kant, these misguided inclinations of thought must be understood but may not once-and-for all be eradicated. And it is therefore a perennial task of the transcendental dialectic to deconstruct reason's propensity to establish these notions as absolute objects of thought. The aim of such deconstruction is not to ban the notion of the subject, freedom or God from the domain of thought or reality itself. Rather, by their retrieval from the domain of spatio-temporal objects, these are now reinstated as something else, as possible meaning-bearing horizons of human existence.

#### 4.3 *Philosophy's Self-Restraint*

For Paul Ricoeur, this Kantian insight implies decisive self-restraint on the ambitions of philosophy to know it all. Kant's critique of the transcendental illusion consequently opens up a room which needs to be kept open

[...] at the very place where I am deceived by the so-called absolute objects: "I" as a substance – "freedom" as an object in the world – and "God" as a supreme being, as the cause of all causes, as the whole of all partial reality. In that sense reason must first despair, despair of the absolute, despair of itself as claiming to reach the absolute under the form of an object of knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

However, such "despair, within the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is not a feeling, an emotion; it is a process, an operation, the positive act of opposing a limit [...],"<sup>15</sup> in other words, it is a necessary act of self-moderation on behalf of what we may and may not state as objectively secured knowledge of the world. And not only is this important in order to avoid entangling our capacities of sound thinking in untenable antinomies. Just as much, Ricoeur underlines, is this important in order for thought to receive phenomena such as the subject, freedom and God in an adequate manner, as horizons of thinking and not objects of thought.

The philosophical deconstruction of transcendental illusions of the unconditioned also gives back to religion a more adequate horizon for receiving the unconditioned as meaningful points of orientation. And as a critique that expresses a genuine anthropological concern, and not just distortions of an

<sup>13</sup> Claus Bratt Østergaard, *Kants kritik af den rene fornøft* (København: Informations Forlag, 2009), 47.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems," in *Figuring the Sacred. Religion, Narrative, and Imagination / Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 212.

<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur, "Hope and the Structure," 212.



authentic anthropology, Kant's critique of the mistaken reification of the unconditioned addresses all humans, religious and irreligious alike. On Ricoeur's reading, the Kantian critique of transcendental illusion affects not only religious positions, but *critiques* of religion alike. In line with the Kantian deconstruction of the subject, freedom or God as absolute objects,

[...] even atheism can be reinterpreted as an aspect of the same critique of transcendental illusion in a philosophy of the limits; through this reinterpretation, atheism may be cured from another illusion, from its own illusion, the illusion that puts humankind at the centre and transforms it into a new absolute. The thought of the unconditioned prevents us from this last illusion, which we would call the anthropological illusion.<sup>16</sup>

Kant himself states that since the objects of transcendental illusion can neither be decisively proven nor disproven, the transcendental dialectic will deconstruct any hope of securing some uncontested, objective foundation for a materialism, fatalism, atheism, superstition, enthusiasm or scepticism by way of reason.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4.4 Critique As Active Vacancy

The critique is reminiscent of Claude Lefort's efforts to reveal the unavowed theologico-political attachments of modernity's political space and democratic institutions. Lefort criticises modern democracy's all too direct substitution of the king by the people as symbolic guarantor and legitimate foundation for the order of things. With Ricoeur, and borrowing the tactics of Lefort, one could argue that the aim of also Kantian deconstructions of transcendental illusions is not to fill the vacancy with some more authentic content, but to keep the empty place of transcendence "as an active vacancy rather than as the usual vacuum into which anything and everything might flow."<sup>18</sup>

The point of dispelling the transcendental illusions from our faculties of reasoning would in this line of thought (and cf. Kant's argument) not be to replace them with some more authentic content or other, but to continuously keep their "absolute" position open and unsettled, "as an unending activity of defetishization."<sup>19</sup> Regarding questions of personhood, freedom or God, this would mean guarding the open-endedness and principal unsettledness of these notions from hasty attempts at foreclosure.

With reference to the teaching of religion, ethics and philosophy in Norwegian classrooms today, the starting point of this essay, this latter point seems well

<sup>16</sup> Ricoeur, "Hope and the Structure," 213.

<sup>17</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Vol. 1. (1781/1787) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 35 (Bxxxxv).

<sup>18</sup> Here in the words of Comay: *Mourning Sickness*, 79. Comay refers to Lefort's article, "Permanence of the Theological-Political?" from 1988.

<sup>19</sup> Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, 79.

suit to meet the demands of a pluralistic, objective and critically informed subject.

## 5. Teaching Critically About Religion in Norwegian Classrooms

The aim of the preceding considerations has been to see if there is something in German philosophy of religion and the tradition of the Reformation that may be of assistance in considering the question of critical teaching and the critique of religion in Norwegian classrooms today. My aim here is not to arrive at some ready cut didactic plan for such an endeavour. What I should like to do, however, is to draw attention to three points in the discussion above that may suggest a starting point for such a later working out in concrete terms.

1. First of all, a point of embarkation that the thinkers we have looked at all share, is that some kind of critical discourse pertaining to humankind's religious imagination is called for. And it is called for from a *philosophical* and *anthropological* point of view, and not just because religions and religious concerns make their appearance in the world today in challenging ways.

If we take as an acceptable guiding principle – also for primary school education – Kant's enlightenment ideal to assist human beings' emergence from their own "self-imposed immaturity" and Hegel's underscoring of the need to see critique and the destruction of idols as always pertaining also to our *own* habits of thought, what does this mean for teaching and discussions of religions and world views in the classroom?

2. This Kantian principle of self-enlightenment may be helpful in orientating activity in the classroom. On the question of the critique of religion, in the sense of also drawing attention to religion's problematic aspects, this would then most fundamentally be geared towards a process of self-enlightenment involving the whole classroom. More than the teacher considering if she or he "should dare to criticize this or that religion in itself," and to what degree, focus should be on providing the individual pupil and the class – teacher included –, with *tools* necessary to critically evaluate one's own possible and probable "self-imposed immaturity."

I am not going to be didactically more specific at this point,<sup>20</sup> but would merely like to suggest that a sound introduction to the severe and deep-delving criticisms of religion found in e. g. Marx, Nietzsche and Freud should

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Øystein Brekke, "Religionskritikk i klasserommet. Fag, kritikk og ontologi i norsk skule" [Critique of Religion in the Classroom. School Subject, Critique, and Ontology in the Norwegian School System], *Prismet* 69, no. 2–3 (2018), 107–131. Online: <https://www.journals.uio.no/index.php/prismet/article/view/6260/5286>.

all give ample room for extending the individual pupil's analytical tools in meeting one's own tradition and that of others.

3. A third point we may take as an extension of the preceding discussion, is how both Kant and Hegel's critiques of religious and non-religious certitudes, may challenge the very standpoint one finds oneself at in engaging in such critique in the classroom.

It is e. g. not uncommon in Norwegian schools – as reflected in the objects clause of the Education Act – to regard human rights as some kind of last resort and more or less objective position to measure other positions and stances up against. Teachers and politicians may well be aware of their history and tensions within the human rights (between religious freedom and equality of the sexes, individual vs. cultural rights etc.), but this will most often not affect the employment of human rights in this manner.

To my mind, human rights is not at all a bad place to try to establish some common ground upon which we meet and also discuss religion in the classroom. But it must be understood that not even these may be taken as some kind of irrefutable absolute and universal objects, but must be argued for and interpreted in accordance with a reason that is historical and so also hermeneutical.