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The Rise and Decline of Protestant Rationalism

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Kant on Revealed and Natural Religion

Religion is (subjectively considered) the recognition of all our duties as divine commands. That religion, in which I must first know that something is a divine command in order that I recognize it as my duty, is *revealed* religion (or a religion which requires a revelation); by contrast, that religion in which I must first know that something is duty before I can acknowledge it as a divine command is *natural religion*.¹

Thus wrote Immanuel Kant in his treatise on religion within the boundaries of mere reason. Religion, according to Kant, is the means to help humanity unite in a universal ethical community; but to constitute such an ethical community, as a Kingdom of God, religion must be public, and the community must take shape in the form of a visible church founded by human beings on statutory laws. For a religion underlying such a universal church, no knowledge based on an assertoric dogmatic belief is required – a knowledge that must remain hypothetical. The recognition of ethical duties that can claim general acknowledgement as divine commandments, and the consequences of that recognition for the idea of God, are the only basis for a universal church. A visible church with its statutory laws that claims to be true and universal must have the principle of coming closer and closer to the pure religion of reason. If a duty is but recognized because of its revelation as a divine commandment, the religion is a revealed religion that must be instructed and learned, but if I recognize a duty as a general one by myself and conclude therefore from its divine importance, the religion is a natural or rational one.²

Now:

Anyone who declares natural religion as alone morally necessary, i.e. a duty, can also be called *rationalist* (in matters of faith). If he denies the reality of any supernatural divine revelation, he is called *naturalist*; should he, however, allow this revelation, yet claim that to take cognizance of it and accept it as actual is not necessarily required for religion, then he can be named *pure rationalist*; but, if he holds that faith in divine revelation is necessary to universal religion, then he can be called pure *supernaturalist* in matters of faith.³

¹ Kant 1996:177. Emphasis in the original (1794:229–230).

² Kant 1794:225–231 (1907:151–154; 1996:175–177).

³ Kant 1996:177–178. Emphasis in the original (1794:231–232).

It is obvious that Kant prefers the rationalist's position, but he does not regard the difference as a strict opposition: The rationalist will not claim to prove the impossibility of divine revelation, and a religion can be natural and revealed, if revelation helps to obtain it though it ought and could have been invented by use of reason.⁴ So Christianity is both a revealed religion taught by the teacher Jesus and a doctrine in agreement with pure rational faith.⁵

Neology, Rationalism and Supernaturalism

The enlightened neologists or neologs of the eighteenth century had already endeavored to make Protestant doctrine simpler, more popular, more modern and more evident: Christian religion is in harmony with natural innate ideas about God and virtue, but Christianity and Christian ministry are more capable than natural reason and virtue of comforting, of strengthening human honesty and of advancing worldly and eternal bliss.⁶ The final stages of Protestant Enlightenment theology followed Kant and have been called, respectively, rationalism and supernaturalism;⁷ the conflict between these two directions arose in the early nineteenth century.

Rationalism agreed with neology in striving for rational evidence, simplicity, practicability and popular education. But it had learned from Kant that any knowledge about supersensible realities or divine beings cannot be attained by means of theoretical reason. Rationalism stressed that the use of one's own reason instead of following foreign authorities is the first duty of all autonomous rational beings.

Supernaturalism, too, referred to Kant: If human reason is not able to form certain judgements about transcendental realities, then supernatural revelation is required to make us sure about everything that pure reason postulates in order to found moral law: the existence of God, divine providence, the order of salvation and the final judgement. So faith cannot renounce Holy Scripture; it takes therefrom all the knowledge that it needs from beyond the boundary of pure reason.⁸

⁴ Kant 1794:231–235 (1907:154–157; 1996:177–179).

⁵ Kant 1794:235–246 (1907:157–167; 1996:179–188).

⁶ Cf. Aner 1929:esp. 61–143; Beutel 2009:112–151, 221–222.

⁷ Cf. Reinhard 1810:95; Hahn 1827:21–25.

⁸ Cf. Rohls 1997:297–308, 389–393; Beutel 2009:160–169.

Though rationalism is the last shape in which Enlightenment theology occurs, it postdates the first attempts to overcome Enlightenment. In 1799, the young Reformed hospital chaplain Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote in his *Speeches on Religion*:

Religion's essence is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling. [...] Praxis is an art, speculation is a science, religion is sensibility and taste for the infinite.⁹

So-called natural religion is usually so refined and has such philosophical and moral manners that it allows little of the unique character of religion to shine through.¹⁰

Schleiermacher contradicted the enlightened ideal of natural and rational religion, the utility of religion for the common life, and the contamination of religion with morals and metaphysics. Religion is not obliged to be useful for any purpose beside itself. It is a kind of intuiting the world and everything in the world as one universe – an artistic *Weltanschauung* rather than a scientific one.

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, too, in his lectures on academic studies, settled accounts with Enlightenment theology: While the object of philosophy is the original knowledge, the supreme identity and indifference of spirit and nature, of intelligence and reality, Christian religion means to interpret the universe as an allegory of this supreme identity and indifference, as the absolute realizing itself in history, as the reconciliation of nature, necessity and freedom, as God realizing himself in history, as God made man. The ecclesiastical dogmas try to find phrases for this speculative truth; they represent an advance in comparison with the earlier documents of Christianity, like the New Testament. Modern Enlightenment theology, Schelling wrote, wanted to clarify Christian religion, but instead it cleared religion out. It had neither understanding nor appreciation for the idea; it wanted to explain everything according to morals and according to empiricism, and in so doing it lost the main thing, the speculative idea; it meant shallowness triumphing over profundity.¹¹

Rationalism stood not only against the old literal orthodoxy, Pietism and Biblicism, and against supernaturalism; it also stood against new pantheistic and idealistic ideas, that is, against transgressing the boundaries drawn by Kant against all speculation on sublime matters.

⁹ [Schleiermacher] 1799:50, 52–53 (1984:211–212; 1996:22–23).

¹⁰ [Schleiermacher] 1799:243 (1984:296; 1996:98).

¹¹ Schelling 1803:151–210 (1859:279–305).

Wegscheider's *Institutiones*

In 1815, a new dogmatic textbook appeared under the title *Institutiones theologiae Christianae dogmaticae* – Instruction of Christian dogmatic theology. Its author, Julius Wegscheider, born in 1771 in the Duchy of Brunswick, was a disciple of the prominent rationalist Konrad Henke at Helmstedt. In 1804, Wegscheider had defended Kant's doctrine of religion against "the separation of morals from religion postulated by recent philosophy"¹² – that is, by Schleiermacher and romanticism. Since 1810 Wegscheider had been a professor at Halle. His lectures were reputed to be dry but clear, distinct and instructive, and they attracted hundreds of students.¹³

This combination of dryness and clarity characterizes not only Wegscheider's lectures, but also his textbook on dogmatics. It is divided into an introduction called *Prolegomena* and three main parts, concerning Holy Scripture, God and Humanity. The *Prolegomena* establish the rationalistic standpoint: Concerning divine matters, reason is to be used not only as the formal principle but also as the material one.¹⁴ Not to use reason would deny it and would offend human dignity; authority and sensual perception without reason can neither give certainty nor claim general recognition. Both piety and moral respectability are based on reason and closely connected by reason.¹⁵ Wegscheider does not deny revelation, but any revelation is natural and accords with God's providential work in nature, which does not skip the natural causal connections. With the increasing of rational insight, revelation and external authority must recede.¹⁶

The sections of the main parts offer a clear and logical compilation of everything relevant to the problem under discussion, from the Old and New Testaments, through the Church Fathers, medieval authors, reformers and Protestant symbols, up to modern authors. The concluding *Epicrisis* summarizes the argument in a way that both corresponds to the testimony of Scripture and satisfies the claims of rational insight.

Reason, according to Wegscheider, is the organon that facilitates critique and appreciation of the biblical, dogmatic and ecclesiastical traditions, and distinction between the true core and the veil of older mythological or superstitious conceptions that obscures it. Supernatural causes or immediate divine intervention

¹² Wegscheider 1804.

¹³ Hoffmann 1908:35.

¹⁴ Wegscheider 1833:49 (§11)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, x (Praefatio), 15–16 (§3), 50–51 (§11)

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xiv–xv (Praefatio), 51–53 (§11), 58–60 (§12)

cannot be acknowledged; what is traditionally derived therefrom must be explained as a product of accommodation or of defective knowledge of natural occurrences.¹⁷ The Bible itself is not a uniform work; it exhibits developing views and different types of doctrine, and many things have been distorted and warped over the course of centuries of exegesis. Wegscheider knows all that and takes it into consideration, and you cannot maintain that he is a bad exegete who interprets the texts at will.

Wegscheider appreciated the traditional proofs of God's existence: Although they did not actually prove God's existence, they showed that atheism is absurd.¹⁸ The divine trinity manifested God's singularity; the unique dignity of Christ, who as teacher of the truth, was the envoy and instrument of divine providence; and God's efficacy in preserving human liberty.¹⁹ Justification by faith meant gaining God's pleasure by means of a well-disposed mind, rather than by individual meritorious deeds.²⁰ The likelihood of the soul's immortality was attested by consensus of most of the nations and by arguments of theoretical and practical philosophy.²¹

Wegscheider's *Institutiones* was a highly successful textbook. Nowadays, other contemporaneous books in the field are more renowned, especially Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre* (1821–1822),²² but also Philipp Marheineke's *Grundlehren der christlichen Dogmatik* (1819),²³ the latter influenced by Schelling and Hegel. Yet, while the dogmatics of Schleiermacher and Marheineke each went through two editions in the decade after their respective publications, Wegscheider's went through seven between 1815 and 1833 (an eighth edition was published in 1844). And no wonder: Wegscheider's book was neither original nor ingenious nor innovative, but readers of Latin can nevertheless still learn much from its rich trove of information on religious controversies and its collection of *dicta probantia* on every theme, from the Bible to modern times. Innumerable rural and small-town clergymen owned it and consulted it on all questions relating to faith and preaching.²⁴ Among early nineteenth-century theologians, wrote Karl Barth, Wegscheider was the "philistine bourgeois."²⁵

¹⁷ *Ibid.*:61 (§12), 117–119 (§26)

¹⁸ *Ibid.*:238 (§57)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*:337–338 (§93)

²⁰ *Ibid.*:542–543 (§155)

²¹ *Ibid.*:671–672 (§194)

²² Schleiermacher 1830–1831 [1821–1822].

²³ Marheineke 1827 [1819].

²⁴ Cf. Barth 1952:423.

²⁵ *Ibid.*:427, 432.

Clearly, after all, rationalism is to an extent a conservative rather than a progressive movement. Like the old orthodoxy, it regarded the clergy as the elementary educators of the people and the consistories of the State Church as the executive organs of a wise government (provided that rationalism was in power), whereas all fashionable ideas about religious friendship were but mystical enthusiasm. For example, Henke, Wegscheider's teacher, was not only a critical church historian and a rational dogmatist at the university; he also held a high office in the official Lutheran Church of the Duchy of Brunswick.

Hase versus Röhrl

In 1830, Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg's conservative *Evangelische Kirchenzeitung* launched an attack against the rationalist professors at Halle, Wegscheider and Wilhelm Gesenius: These two opposed as erroneous what the evangelical church by its confessions recognized as the truth. What should the students who were obliged to frequent their lessons do once they were in office? Should they preach what they had learnt to despise as superstitious, while trying to intersperse some of the typical moral trivialities that bored everybody? Gesenius, Wegscheider and many others protested against this denunciation. The Prussian King Frederick William III ordered a thorough inquiry, but the rationalists ultimately were acquitted.²⁶

A few years later, however, rationalism suffered its decisive defeat. What happened? Karl August Hase, a young scholar at Jena, published a booklet on dogmatics entitled *Hutterus redivivus* – Hütter reborn. Though shorter, its form to an extent resembles that of Wegscheider's *Institutiones*: It is a relatively short text with long footnotes citing and discussing various opinions about theological questions. What was special about it is that Hase, himself a liberal Protestant influenced by Schelling, Schleiermacher and Hegel, sought to discuss these issues from the point of view of old Leonhard Hütter, or Hutterus, an early defender of Lutheran orthodoxy, who, over two centuries before, had published a popular compendium of *Loci theologici* according to the Bible and the symbols of the Lutheran Church. If Hütter were to come back to life, how would he now explain to us the classic doctrine of Protestantism, and how would he converse with modern schools of thought, like neology, idealism and rationalism?²⁷

²⁶ Cf. Bachmann 1880:177–283; *ibid.*, Beilage, 21–60.

²⁷ Hase 1833:iii–vii.

Apart from Wegscheider, one of the most renowned rationalists was Johann Friedrich Röhr, who was not a professor at the university but a prominent church dignitary, the General Superintendent of the Duchy of Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach; in 1832 he had delivered the eulogy for Goethe. According to Röhr's popular *Letters on Rationalism*, an epistolary defense of rationalism, the purpose of the New Testament was to express the truths of rational religion.²⁸ Röhr responded to Hase's *Hutterus redivivus* in his review journal, the *Kritische Predigerbibliothek* (Critical Library of Preachers):

What is this *Hutterus redivivus* to us? Who summoned up this shade of an evangelical scholastic from the tomb of the sixteenth century? What has he got to tell the sons of the nineteenth century? Would he vainly boast of making us forget what three centuries have gained in better insight into the spirit of the gospel and in better philosophical systematization of its content?

Röhr suspected Hase of introducing his Schellingian mystical phantasms under the guise of ecclesiastical orthodoxy.²⁹

This review set off a dispute in which both sides collected their writings in anthologies, entitled, respectively, *Anti-Hasiana* and *Anti-Röhr*. The title *Anti-Röhr*, Hase wrote, recalled Lessing's *Anti-Goeze*, an anthology of polemics against the Hamburg pastor Melchior Goeze. The dispute between Lessing and Goeze, over biblical letter, spirit and freedom, had been a collision of two principles and two ages – scriptural orthodoxy and Enlightenment. The same was now the case with himself and Röhr: Two ages were colliding.³⁰

Hase declared that the doctrine set out in his *Hutterus redivivus* was not his own view, and that one must be a little sophisticated to maintain an old orthodoxy in modern times; the *Hutterus redivivus* was to be understood as a historical exposition. Nevertheless, this old doctrine still had more strength and was greater and more consistent than most of the modern attempts. The main problem wasn't Schelling but rationalism, and while the latter had its role and its historical merit, the "vulgar rationalism" (as it was called in the theological review journal *Rheinwalds Repertorium*) of Röhr and Wegscheider lacked all understanding of history and religion. And what kind of reason was the touchstone by which Röhr sought to test and examine all things? It were neither science nor speculation, but merely ordinary common sense. With this, Röhr claimed to represent true Protestantism, but Christianity was neither founded on common sense nor

²⁸ Röhr 1813:129.

²⁹ [Röhr] 1836:1–2.

³⁰ Hase 1837:v–vi.

reformed by it in Luther's time. For itself, declared Hase, common sense was nothing but banality and triviality.³¹

The Lichtfreunde

Rationalism's last step was a sometimes broad movement for freedom of dogmas and of spiritual tutelage, at a time when philosophy, *Weltanschauung*, epistemology and ethics were already pursuing routes that parted from rationalistic optimism.³² In 1841, after a pastor was sensationally reprimanded for calling the prayer to Christ superstition, eight theologians met at Gnadau and founded an association for the preservation of all the attainments of Enlightenment within the broad church. In May 1845, two or three thousand people attended the ninth general assembly of the association at Köthen – the Protestant Friends, as they called themselves, or the Lichtfreunde, Friends of the Light, as they were called by the people, theologians and laity, especially primary school teachers. They acknowledged as true and corresponding to their principles the maxim that the living spirit dwelling within, and not the biblical letter, was the true rule for the free Protestant consciousness.

This was followed by conflicts with state and church authorities and the founding of free religious congregations, which were granted full liberty in 1858. In the following decades, however, first the Christian content and then the congregations themselves thinned out and mostly vanished, with the rest going over to the freethinkers.³³

Many nineteenth-century religious movements, such as those of Christian revival, confessionalism, chiliasm, fundamentalism and Pentecostalism, successfully established denominations that exist to this day alongside the mainstream churches; and some religious groups that have their roots in the nineteenth century, like the Mormons, the New Apostolic Church and the Jehovah's Witnesses, are founded on principles that seem quite absurd. Why did these succeed while rationalism did not, though it was a rather broad movement?

I believe the reason for this is that religious rationalism is not a genuine religious idea, but the application of another idea to an existing religion. It is the notion of mediating between religion, plausibility in modern terms and usefulness – of a religion keeping abreast of intellectual and moral development.

³¹ Hase 1834:11, 27–43; Hase 1837:1–2, 8, 15, 69–70, 75–84, 89–90.

³² Cf. Elert 1921:159–212.

³³ Cf. Kampe 1852–1860; Pitzer 1983; Uhlig 1991.

Rationalism can show how a religion should be reformed to fit the claims of modern thinking, but it may itself persist in thinking in a way that is no longer modern. Even more importantly, it can hardly maintain something as unconditionally valid, or make it evident why you should follow a certain path or doctrine, or why you should join a certain group to escape damnation. Rational and perhaps also liberal Christianity can be an important element within a broader church, but it cannot maintain itself as a community in its own right.

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