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The Specter of Nihilism: On Hegel on Buddhism

Mario D'Amato and Robert T. Moore*

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) is renowned as one of the most complex and comprehensive modern philosophers. The goal of his philosophical system is nothing less than to explain the interrelationships among all the multifarious aspects of the whole of reality, including the entire array of historical religions. But Hegel's dialectical method has been criticized as being speculative and idealistic, and his interpretation of religion has been written off by some as an overly ambitious attempt to force the historical religions into the confines of a predetermined hierarchical scheme. As for his perspective on Buddhism, Hegel interprets it as a form of nihilism, stating that for Buddhism, "the ultimate or highest [reality] is...nothing or not-being" and the "state of negation is the highest state: one must immerse oneself in this nothing, in the eternal tranquillity of the nothing generally" (LPR 253).¹ Hegel's interpretation of Buddhism has of course been appropriately criticized in recent scholarship, most ably by Roger-Pol Droit in his work *The Cult of Nothingness: The Philosophers and the Buddha* (2003). In this essay, however, we will reconsider Hegel's perspective on Buddhism. While we do not believe that Buddhism is properly characterized as a form of nihilism, we do believe that a significant insight may be found through examining Hegel's philosophical interpretation of Buddhism. In short, we will argue that while Buddhism is not itself

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¹ Following the system used by Kolb 1992, "LPR" followed by a page number designates a page in the one-volume edition of Hegel's 1827 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Hegel 1988); "LPR" followed by a Roman numeral and a page number designates a volume and page in the three-volume edition of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (vol. I: Hegel 1984; vol. II: Hegel 1987; vol. III: Hegel 1985).

a form of nihilism, nihilism is the specter that continues to haunt Buddhism.

While Hegel is one of the most notable figures of modern philosophy, it is perhaps less frequently noted that Hegel's philosophical activity was contemporaneous with the formation of Buddhism as an object of study in western academia. Though Buddhism had previously been studied by Europeans—primarily missionaries—before the early nineteenth century, the western study of the religion had been rather fragmentary and fragmented. The understanding that a number of distinct Asian religious practices (“cults,” “forms of idolatry,” etc.) comprised one single religion was not generally integrated into western scholarship until the early nineteenth century.² In 1817 Michel-Jean-François Ozeray published *Recherches sur Buddou ou Bouddou*, “one of the very first works in the French language in which the term ‘bouddisme’ appears, to denote the ‘religion of the Bouddou,’” thus marking a relevant date for the constitution of this “new object of current curiosity and of future studies” (Droit, 2003:37-38).³ And it is only some five years after the publication of this work that Hegel first lectured on Buddhism, in his course on the philosophy of history. Hegel was undoubtedly the most prominent early nineteenth-century philosopher to systematically analyze Buddhism, and he did so precisely at a time when the academic study of the religion was developing in the west.

It is, nevertheless, the case that Hegel's interpretation of Buddhism developed in the context of previous western interpretations of the religion. Though the term *Buddhism* was not in use until the early nineteenth century, western knowledge of the religion dates back to at least the sixteenth century, with the letters, accounts, and analyses of Jesuit missionaries, which were

² Almond states that while there were earlier intimations that “various culturally diffuse religious phenomena...had apparent relationships with each other,” it was in the 1820s that “this congeries of religious phenomena throughout Asia [was] being classified as the religion of Buddha or Buddhism” (1988, pp. 8 and 10; cf. Droit, 2003: 75-76). Droit states, “Before the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was no clearly defined system attached to the Buddha's name” (2003: 27).

³ Similarly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* specifies that the term *Boudhism* was first used in an English journal publication in 1801, and that the term *Buddhism* first occurs in 1816.

published in annuals and disseminated widely throughout Europe.⁴ According to Offermanns, “A close reading of sixteenth century missionary letters indicates that Jesuits of that period already knew more, in particular concerning Buddhism as a lived tradition, than many an Orientalist of the nineteenth century” (2005, p. 17). One notable work by a Jesuit drawing from these missionary sources was Jean Baptiste Du Halde’s four volume *Description Géographique, Historique, Chronologique, Politique, et Physique de l’Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise* (first published in French in 1735, and in English in 1736). In this work Du Halde offers a nihilistic interpretation of Buddhism, stating:

“They teach that a Vacuum or Nothing is the Principle of all things...that it is from Nothing...that all things are produced, and to which they all return...[so] to live happily we must continually strive by Meditation, and frequent Victories over ourselves, to become like this *Principium*, and to this end accustom ourselves to do nothing, to desire nothing, to perceive nothing, [and] to think on nothing... (Du Halde 1736, vol. 3, pp. 50-51)”.

This passage resonates quite noticeably with Hegel’s interpretation of Buddhism.⁵ In fact Droit argues that Hegel developed his interpretation of Buddhism through relying on dated Jesuit missionary sources, rather than consulting more recently available studies, precisely because the Jesuit sources more readily conformed to Hegel’s own nihilistic perspective on Buddhism (2003: 65). However, Hegel did not exclusively rely on older

⁴ See Offermanns 2005, pp. 17-18. There was contact between India and the west dating back to the ancient period, but de Jong indicates that the first known western contact with Buddhism occurred in the thirteenth century, when Franciscan and Dominican friars were sent to the Mongols (1997: 15). Then in the sixteenth century, missionaries went to China, Japan, India, and Southeast Asia, and the information on Buddhism acquired by these missionaries was recounted in letters sent back to Europe. But de Jong states that “it is difficult to get a clear idea of the extent and the accuracy of the information on Buddhism that reached Europe in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries” (1997: 17).

⁵ Consider this passage from Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*: “Nothingness is the principle of all things...all proceeded from and returns to Nothingness...To obtain happiness, therefore, man must seek to assimilate himself to this principle by continual victories over himself; and for the sake of this, do nothing, wish nothing, desire nothing” (1956: 168-169).

sources; he also made use of more recently available works.⁶ Nevertheless, Halbfass is correct that Hegel's "historical and philological accuracy and objectivity...leave much to be desired"; but he also rightly points out that Hegel's "philosophy commits him to not being neutral," and that Hegel's interpretation of Indian religion "is a matter of intense historical and systematic reflection" (1988: 84-85). Our focus, then, is not on the analysis of Hegel's sources, but on the reassessment of Hegel's philosophical interpretation of Buddhism. But in order to do this, it will first be necessary to consider Hegel's dialectical method, and his overall interpretation of religion.

Hegel's Dialectic

On Hegel's own account, the purpose of his dialectic is to provide a definitive method for philosophy, so that philosophy could become "an objective, demonstrated science" (Hegel 1969:28)—without a clear method, philosophy could never attain scientific status. Unlike the method of the empirical sciences, however, the dialectical method must be able to account for the *whole* of reality, rather than just one specific domain, since the object of the study of philosophy is the whole: "The True is the whole" (Hegel 1977: 11). As Mure states, Hegel's philosophy aims to demonstrate that reality is a "necessarily ordered whole wherein the elements ordered are the phases of a single timelessly self-constituting activity which is mind or spirit" (1984: 296). And it is the function of the dialectic to explain the manner in which the "self-constituting activity" of spirit unfolds.

Fundamental to Hegel's conception of the dialectic is the view that concepts contain their own negation. The basic dialectic involves the synthesis of two dichotomous elements, wherein each of the dichotomous elements or "moments" contains a self-contradiction. The movement of the dialectic then in some way overcomes the contradiction inherent in each element. This whole process is referred to by Hegel as *Aufhebung*, sometimes translated as "sublation."⁷ Thus the Hegelian *Aufhebung* is a process of

⁶ Further information on Hegel's sources is provided by Hulin (1979: 122-124) and Hodgson's extensive "Bibliography of Sources for Hegel's Philosophy of Religion" (at LPR 503-526).

⁷ It is interesting to note that the verb *aufheben* has three main senses: "(1) 'to raise, to hold, lift up' (2) 'to annul, abolish, destroy, cancel, suspend' (3) 'to

combining opposed states and sublating them into something higher: “What results from the sublation of something, e.g. the whole in which both it and its opposite survive as moments, is invariably higher than...the item(s) sublated” (Inwood 1992: 284). Forster summarizes the process as follows: “Beginning from a category A, Hegel seeks to show that upon conceptual analysis, category A proves to contain a *contrary* category, B, and conversely that category B proves to contain category A, thus showing both categories to be self-contradictory. He then seeks to show that this negative result has a positive outcome, a new category, C (sometimes referred to as the ‘negative of the negative’ or the ‘determinate negation’)” (1993: 132). So the basic dialectic may be understood as a combination and unification, as well as a negation, of two prior moments into a third.

We may further understand the Hegelian dialectic by considering a significant example of its application, i.e., the triad of being, nothing, and becoming. Hegel states that “*Being, pure being, without any further determination...is pure indeterminateness and emptiness...Pure being and pure nothing are, therefore, the same*” (1969: 82). Mure explains that “Pure Being is, we may say, the very vanishing-point of characterization...in so far as the Absolute just positively *is* and no more, it has no determinate character—it *is not*” (1982: 131). Thus the category of *being* may be seen to contain the contrary category, *nothing*. The contradiction inherent in both being and nothing is then sublating (negated, unified) by *becoming*. This precise example, the first one laid out in Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, is quite relevant to our analysis of Hegel’s interpretation of Buddhism. In fact, in his discussion of being in the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, Hegel states, “The Nothing which the Buddhists make the universal principle, as well as the final aim and goal of everything, is the same abstraction” (1892: 161).

Before turning to Hegel’s interpretation of religion generally and Buddhism specifically, we would emphasize two important points regarding Hegel’s dialectic. First, following

keep, save, preserve” (Inwood 1992: 283). And each of these meanings reflects the intent of Hegel’s dialectical method in some way: “Earlier stages of a temporal, developmental process are sublating in (to) later stages: e.g. earlier philosophies are both destroyed and preserved in Hegel’s philosophy” (Inwood 1992: 284).

Forster and Hodgson, we do not take the Hegelian dialectic to present a predetermined structure into which various phenomena must be forced, but rather believe that it should be approached as a tool for analysis, a productive interpretive method that is intended to explain phenomena “*once they are empirically known,*” and not in a manner completely independent of human experience (Forster 1993: 140); as Hodgson states, the “basic movement of Hegel’s philosophy is from the empirical or experiential...to the rational or logical” (1988: 6)—hence Hegel’s dialectic must begin with empirical data. Second, also following Forster, we believe that the dialectical method should be understood as “the core of a grand hypothesis—concerning the structure of our shapes of consciousness, our categories, and natural and spiritual phenomena” (1993: 140). So the dialectical method is the key to understanding Hegel’s hypothesis regarding the way in which religions have unfolded in human history.

Hegel on Religion

To set up the context for Hegel’s views on Buddhism, we must consider his philosophy of religion as a whole. The primary source for Hegel’s interpretation of religion is his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, which is comprised of material from Hegel’s course on the topic, a course he offered four times—in 1821, 1824, 1827, and 1831—during his tenure as chair of philosophy at the University of Berlin.⁸ It is no surprise that the

⁸ Other significant sources for Hegel’s interpretation of religion are his *Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit*, in which he “began to construct a philosophical system, experimenting with a number of approaches” (Hodgson 2005: 29); his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which “belongs to another [earlier] stage of development” (Jaeschke 1990: 209); the section on religion in the three versions of his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences, Part III: Philosophy of Mind*, which comprises only eight paragraphs in the 1830 edition; the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, which discusses Chinese and Indian philosophy, but does not address Buddhism; the *Philosophy of History*, which comments on various historical religions; and his *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, which discusses Indian religion in relation to symbolism, but does not refer to Buddhism. Jaeschke states that “the Berlin lectures of 1821, 1824, 1827, and 1831...for the first time develop the philosophy of religion of the system in the full sense” (1990: 209); for his extended argument in favor of the priority of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, see pp. 209-211. Our list excludes works pertaining only to the interpretation of Christianity, since our focus is

same dialectical unfolding applies to religion as it does to everything else, again representing the unity and completeness of mind or spirit; as Hegel states, the “whole of philosophy is nothing else but a study of the definition of *unity*; and likewise the philosophy of religion is just a succession of unities, where the unity always [abides] but is continually becoming more determinate” (LPR 127-128). In Hegel’s view, the historical religions unfold according to the dialectic elucidated in his philosophy, from the most basic form (i.e., magic) to the consummate religion (i.e., Christianity). Hegel, however, did not come to a definitive interpretation of this process before his death in 1831, shortly after the conclusion of his fourth series of lectures on the philosophy of religion. In fact, Hegel constantly struggled with the question of the precise order in which the religions should be placed, as evidenced by the significant changes apparent in the four different series of lectures.⁹ This is probably due at least in part to the new information being acquired by Hegel throughout the 1820s. However, even with what is known about his final series of lectures in 1831, it is evident that Hegel never completed his arrangement of the historical religions. This by no means detracts from the significance of Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, and if anything militates against the common critique that Hegel is too deterministic in his interpretation of religion. As Hodgson states, Hegel’s “willingness to incorporate new data and experiment with new schemes” implies that his “speculative philosophy was a kind of ‘conceptual play’ based on imaginative variation of the logical ‘deep structure’ in order to arrive at new insights with respect to the myriad, inexhaustible details of nature, history, and human experience” (1988: 2). We agree that Hegel’s philosophy of religion is best approached as a source for new insights in the interpretation of religion.

The structure of Hegel’s philosophy of religion clearly follows the tripartite form of his general system of philosophy, in this case as the (1) concept of religion, (2) determinate religion,

on Hegel’s interpretation of religion in general, and Buddhism specifically. Discussions of Buddhism may be found in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* and the *Philosophy of History*.

⁹ In our overview we will follow the interpretation offered in Hegel’s 1827 lectures, since this is the most developed series for which we have adequate material; the 1831 lectures are only preserved in excerpts and fragments; see Hodgson’s comments at LPR I 8-20.

and (3) consummate religion. These three moments of the dialectic may be explained in terms of the three figures of a syllogism: as (1) universality (*Allgemeinheit*), (2) particularity (*Besonderheit*), and (3) individuality (*Einzelheit*). Hodgson indicates that “this syllogistic structure is mirrored in every aspect of Hegel’s philosophical system: in the system as a whole (logical idea, nature, spirit); in the science of logic (being [immediacy], essence [reflection], concept [subjectivity]) and its many subdivisions...in the doctrine of the Trinity (Father, Son, Spirit),” and of course in Hegel’s philosophy of religion (1988: 5). The first moment, the *concept of religion*, represents universality insofar as it encompasses the universal concept of what religion is; *determinate religion* represents particularity insofar as it encompasses the specific, particular forms of religion that have occurred in human history; and the *consummate religion* (i.e., Christianity) represents individuality, since Christianity sublates the universal concept of religion and the particular determinate religions into the higher form of the one true, absolute religion. We will further elucidate each of these three moments according to Hegel’s account, in order to gain a clearer sense of his overall interpretation of religion.

(1) **Concept of Religion:** This first moment of Hegel’s philosophy of religion is itself comprised of three moments: the *concept of God*, the *knowledge of God*, and the *cultus* (worship of God). According to Hegel, “God is the absolute substance, the only true actuality” (LPR 117). However, Hegel is quick to emphasize that “the fact that God is *substance* does not exclude *subjectivity*...that God is *spirit, absolute spirit*” (LPR 118). Hence God must be properly understood both as substance and as subject, and to consider God only as substance is to uphold a form of pantheism. When God becomes an object of thought, we arrive at the second moment of the concept of religion: knowledge of God. Hegel defines this moment as “the standpoint for which God...is object of consciousness” (LPR 129), and it is here that he addresses the various proofs for the existence of God. But with the knowledge of God, the relationship to God remains theoretical, and “still lacks the *practical* element, which comes to expression in the cultus” (LPR 189), which is the third moment of the concept of religion. While the knowledge of God entails a distinction between God and the human person (i.e., a distinction between the object of knowledge and the knowing subject), in the cultus (worship of God) the distinction is sublated: “In the cultus...is *the including*,

within my own self, of myself with God, the knowing of myself within God and of God within me" (LPR 191).

(2) **Determinate Religion:** From the concept of religion, Hegel delves into the details of the unfolding of the historical religions. We agree with Dupré's assessment of Hegel's ordering of the determinate religions, namely that Hegel's arrangement may be understood "as a *typology* of religions arranged in an order that unfolds the logical conditions required for the very possibility of the consummately spiritual religion in which the *idea* becomes fully *manifest*" (1992: 82)—so the order here is not strictly one of historical development, but rather describes the realization of the necessary stages for arriving at the one true, absolute religion. On Hegel's account, the threefold structure of determinate religion is *nature religion*, *religion which elevates the spiritual above the natural*, and the *religion of expediency* (or Roman religion). For Hegel, nature religion is "religion defined as the unity of the spiritual and the natural, where the spirit still is in unity with nature. In being this way, spirit is not yet free, is not yet actual as spirit" (LPR 207). Nature religion is nevertheless to be distinguished from viewing natural objects as God. According to Hegel, "Even in the basest religion the spiritual is...always nobler than the natural...nature religion is not a religion in which external, physical objects are taken to be God and are revered as God; instead it is a religion in which...the spiritual [is recognized] first in its immediate and natural mode" (LPR 219).

The first form of nature religion is the religion of magic, according to which the "spiritual aspect" is understood as "the power over nature," where "self-consciousness is a power transcending nature" (LPR 226). Hegel sharply distinguishes this "spiritual aspect" from the conception of a *soul*, a realization which occurs in a further stage of the development of religion. Hegel presents Daoism and the imperial state religion of ancient China as highly developed forms of the religion of magic, arguing that the latter especially is superior to the lesser religions of magic through focusing "not merely [on] the power of nature, but the power of nature bound up together with moral characteristics" (LPR 236). Nevertheless, Hegel still believes that morality is not inherent to Chinese religion, that it exhibits "no immanent rationality through which human beings might have internal value and dignity" (LPR 249); hence it remains at the earliest stage of nature religion.

The next two forms of nature religion are Buddhism and Hinduism. We will address Buddhism—the religion of “being-within-self”—in further detail in the next section, but here we will simply note that Buddhism is placed at an earlier stage than Hinduism in the 1827 lectures.¹⁰ Regarding the interpretation of Hinduism, Hegel believes that Hinduism encompasses Buddhism’s “being-within-self,” but makes the further move of externalizing the divine through a “distinction into many powers...[depicted] as a plurality of deities” (LPR 271). This plurality of deities does not negate the conception that “the One is God,” but instead gives way to “particularizations [which] yield distinct, particular configurations or powers” (LPR 269). Basically, the movement is from the nothingness of Buddhism to the all-encompassing character of Hinduism—a movement from lack or negation, to “the concrete, the richness of the world, the particularizing of that universal substance,” unifying the spiritual and the natural (LPR 269). As Halbfass summarizes Hegel’s view, Indian religions “see God as ultimate ‘substance,’ pure abstract being-in-itself, which contains all finite and particular beings as non-essential modifications” (1988: 88). But as Taylor points out, “this is no closer to the vision of God as subject” (1975: 496). Also, Hegel holds that the “unbridled polytheism” of Hinduism does not achieve the beauty found in Greek religion (LPR 271); in Hegel’s view, Hindu conceptions of the divine “are merely fanciful [*phantastisch*],” representing “a wild particularity” (LPR 272).

The final stage of nature religion includes two religions of transition: Persian religion and Egyptian religion. These religions are marked by the complete spirituality of consciousness, the movement towards “genuine independence...the objectivity of the absolute, consciousness of its self-made independence,” wherein God is separated from “empirical self-consciousness” (LPR 293-294). In Persian religion God is equated with the good, which in turn is equated with the true, and with “absolute substance” (LPR 299). However, the good here is understood to be “in conflict with evil, so that evil stands over against it and persists as an absolute principle” (LPR 301); this idea of the absolute “is unable to embrace the antithesis or contradiction within itself and to endure

¹⁰ In the 1831 lectures, however, Buddhism is considered to be more advanced than Hinduism (see LPR II 735-736); but as noted above, information from the 1831 lectures is only fragmentary.

it, so it has evil alongside it instead” (LPR 304), just as light must have darkness alongside it. In Egyptian religion, however, the negative principle is contained within the conception of the divine itself: Hegel states that in Egyptian religion, “for the first time we have the dying of God as internal to God himself, the determination that the negation is immanent in God’s essence” (LPR 313). According to Egyptian religion, Osiris is killed, “but he is perpetually restored and thus...he is not something natural but something set apart from the natural and the sensible” (LPR 314), and thus he becomes the ruler both of the living and of the realm of the dead. However, in Egyptian religion, “what is sensible and natural has not yet been completely transfigured into the spiritual” (LPR 326), a stage that would only be achieved in the next moment of determinate religion.

The second moment of determinate religion is the elevation of the spiritual above the natural, encompassing Greek religion and Judaism. Here the movement is from forms of religion in which the divine is understood as immanent in nature, to forms of religion that make a sharp distinction between the natural and the transcendent. These religions are characterized by “free subjectivity,” the complete release of spirit from natural boundaries, wherein the empirical world becomes “only a sign of spirit” (LPR 329). This movement begins with Greek religion, which Hegel refers to as the “religion of humanity,” because here for the first time the human is “concretely...portrayed as the divine” (LPR 330). The Greek gods have complete power over nature, which is a defining aspect of Greek religion for Hegel: “the spiritual principle elevated itself...it subordinated the natural to itself” (LPR 333). Furthermore, Greek religion is the beginning of “rationality or, more precisely, ethical life,” but this is ethical life “in its immediacy” (LPR 331), in its earliest stages. Above the Greek gods stands fate—the gods are ultimately subject to the fate which governs all of reality—and because fate is “a blind necessity that stands above all, even above the gods, uncomprehended,” it is not rational, since “what is rational is comprehensible” (LPR 339). While in Greek religion the gods are constrained by fate, in Judaism there is the conception of the “unity of God [containing] one power within it, which is accordingly the absolute power” (LPR 359), and this represents an advancement on Hegel’s account. However, in Judaism, “God himself, the ‘wholly Other,’ stands absolutely apart...in the awesome solitude of his own

ineffable holiness” (Reardon 1977: 52), making him completely transcendent, ruling over a world that is entirely separate from the divine.

The final moment of determinate religion—the synthesis of nature religion and those religions that elevate the spiritual above the natural—is the religion of expediency, or Roman religion. In Roman religion, the Greek conception of multiple gods is brought together with the Jewish conception of unity, and this unity is then connected with the natural aspect of the power of Rome:

all these gods together, the individual gods, are gathered into one. The extension of the Romans’ worldly dominion consisted in this: that individuals and peoples were brought under one power and rule, and likewise their ethical powers, the divine national spirits, were compressed into one pantheon, assembled under one destiny, subordinated to the one Jupiter Capitolinus. Whole cargoes of gods were hauled to Rome from Egypt, Greece, Persia (the Mithra worship), etc. Rome is a potpourri of all sorts of religions; the total condition is one of confusion. (LPR 384)

And this confusion can only be sorted out by the unfolding of the consummate religion. It should be emphasized that Roman religion in Hegel’s account “is not higher than what has gone before but gathers up and makes explicit the limitations of determinate religion as such” (Hodgson 2005: 208)—limitations that would only be overcome in the consummate religion. And the unfolding of the determinate religions is interpreted in terms of the dialectic: the determinate religions are “necessary conditions for the emergence of the true religion, for the authentic consciousness of spirit” (LPR 205).

(3) **Consummate Religion:** The final moment of Hegel’s philosophy of religion is that of the consummate religion, or Christianity. In Christianity, for the first time, “spirit *is only for spirit*” (LPR 393); thus Christianity represents the pinnacle of religion, insofar as religion is “*spirit that realizes itself in consciousness*” (LPR 104), i.e., spirit aware of itself *as spirit*. In Christianity, God is conceived as both substance and subject, as the sublation of the finite and the infinite, and as the sublation of the relationship between the human and the divine: “The reason why the Christian religion is for Hegel the consummate religion is that it sublates the mere relationship-of-consciousness, according to which God stands on the one side while the human worshiper

stands on the other” (Jaeschke 1992: 12). Taylor also emphasizes the dimension of *relationship* as crucial to Hegel’s understanding of God in Christianity, stating that the trinity may be understood as “a play of love in the absolute itself” (1975: 489). Hence, Christianity is the consummation of spirit revealing itself to itself. This is not to say, however, that Hegel was an orthodox Christian, and the “idea that Hegel was a humanistic atheist was briefly defended after Hegel’s death by the ‘left’ Hegelians (e.g., Bauer and Marx), who saw him as a subtle subverter of Christian faith, against the ‘right’ Hegelians, who took Hegel at his word as a Lutheran and as a defender of the faith” (Solomon 1987: 58).¹¹ So contention arose quite soon after the development of Hegel’s philosophical interpretation of religion.

Hegel on Buddhism

Having considered Hegel’s overall interpretation of religion, we may now turn to the details of his interpretation of Buddhism. Hegel refers to Buddhism as the religion of “being-within-self,” and specifies that it is the first religion to understand the absolute as substance—“as an essence,” as “power or dominion,” which accounts for “the creation and maintenance of the world, of nature and of all things” (LPR 251). According to Hegel, in Buddhism this substance, the absolute, is understood to have its “existence in sensible presence, i.e., in singular human beings” (LPR 252)—such as the Buddha Śākyamuni (the historical buddha, born Siddhārtha Gautama). Hegel points out, however, that Buddhism entails an “elevation above the immediate, singular consciousness...an elevation above desire and singular will” (LPR 252), and thus implies the “cessation of desire” (LPR 252), which is of course a reference to the third of Buddhism’s four noble truths: that the cessation of suffering is brought about through the cessation of desire (or craving, *trṣṇā*). Buddhism, then, negates the individual human will, and posits that nothing or non-being is the highest state, since “everything emerges from nothing, everything returns into nothing” (LPR 253). Thus, “human holiness consists in uniting oneself, by this negation, with nothingness, and so with God, with the absolute,” and the path to nothingness is “to will

¹¹ See Jaeschke (1990: 381-388) for an analysis of the debate between the “left” and “right” Hegelians.

nothing, to want [nothing], and to do nothing” (LPR 254). The attainment of this state is referred to as nirvāṇa. Here we clearly see Hegel’s characterization of Buddhism as nihilism.

For Hegel, however, Buddhism does not just leave us with a bleak view of the absolute, and there is certainly something to be learned from these negative conceptions. He states:

More closely considered...[Buddhism’s] characterization [of the divine] means nothing other than that God purely and simply is nothing determinate, is the indeterminate...God is the infinite. For when we say that God is the infinite, that means that God is the negation of everything particular...That does not mean, however, that God is not, but rather that God is the empty, and that this emptiness is God. (LPR 255-256)

So Hegel does not read Buddhism’s conception of the divine in purely negative terms, but views it as a form of apophasis, as a means of arriving at the absolute through negating all particular, determinate characterizations of the absolute. Indeed Hegel sees this same tendency in certain aspects of Christian theology: “When we say, ‘We can know nothing of God, can have no cognition, no representation of God,’ then this is a milder expression for the fact that for us God is the nothing, that for us God is what is empty” (LPR 256). Thus, as Droit indicates, “nothingness in Hegel’s thinking, the very nothingness that he attributes to the Buddhists, is to be understood not as the absolute opposite of Being, but as its indetermination” (2003: 67). As we saw in the first triad offered in Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, “*Pure being* and *pure nothing* are, therefore, the same” (1969: 82).

Hegel’s statement regarding Buddhism’s negative conception of the divine indicates that Buddhism plays a very significant role in his general interpretation of religion. For Hegel, Buddhism is “a definite and necessary stage of religious representation” (LPR 256), because Buddhism’s conception of the divine as indeterminate for the first time understands the divine to be something other than a particular, determinate being. So while Buddhism’s negative conception is not viewed as the pinnacle of understanding, it is a crucial moment in the dialectical unfolding of religion, and must be properly comprehended. Furthermore, Halbfass points out that in Hegel’s view, Indian religion “can function as a corrective.... According to Hegel, a major aberration of modern Western thought is its excessive subjectivism and

anthropocentrism, its tendency...to lose itself in sheer narcissism,” whereas in Indian religion “all vanity is consumed” (1988: 93-94). Thus for Hegel, Buddhism represents an important moment in the development of religion, and can serve to counteract certain narcissistic tendencies in western thought.

Hegel goes on to discuss another central aspect of Buddhist doctrine, i.e., the doctrine of rebirth, or “the dogma of the transmigration of souls” (LPR 256). He begins this discussion by stating that while in Daoism, the soul or spirit is not understood to be intrinsically immortal (one must strive to attain immortality in Daoism), in Buddhism “it is known that the soul is immortal” (LPR 257). While it may seem that Hegel is inappropriately foisting a doctrine of ātman (self or soul) on the religion of anātman (no-self, absence of self), it should be kept in mind that on Hegel’s interpretation, the “principal cultus” in Buddhism “consists of transposing oneself...into the nothing” (LPR 256), and “a human being who attains this self-negation, this abstraction, is thus exempted from transmigration of souls” (LPR 258); furthermore, he states, “When one attains this, there is no longer any question of something higher, of virtue and immortality...this pure nothing...is the absolutely highest state” (LPR 254). Hence this purported “soul” does not exist eternally, but rather is subject to extinction, and ultimately should be negated. In fact, on Hegel’s account, the highest goal—nirvāṇa—is “a state of annihilation” (LPR 315).

How then, according to Hegel, should it be understood that in Buddhism, the absolute is viewed as existing as a “sensible presence in a human being” (LPR 251)? If the highest state is a form of annihilation of the individual, then how does the divine come to be present in specific individuals, such as the Buddha? Hegel addresses this issue by emphasizing that “it is in mediation, in preoccupation with self or deep absorption within self, that a person is the universal substance” (LPR 264). Because the absolute is understood as nothingness, when one withdraws into this nothingness through renunciation, one becomes united with the divine, or attains unity with the absolute. As Hegel states in the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, “the Buddhists, who make God to be Nought...from that principle draw the further conclusion that self-annihilation is the means by which man becomes God” (1892: 163).

In his interpretation of Buddhism, Hegel also addresses the topic of pantheism, which is notable insofar as Hegel himself has sometimes been interpreted as a pantheist.¹² Hegel states that Buddhism “should be understood as the standpoint of ‘pantheism’ in its proper sense—this Oriental knowing...of the absolute substance” (LPR 260). Pantheistic doctrines were criticized in Hegel’s time, and in this discussion Hegel defends Spinoza, a thinker whom Hegel admired, and who had been “reproached with pantheism” (LPR 262). However, Hegel states that “‘pantheism’ is a poor expression” because it is open to a “possible misunderstanding” (LPR 263). When misunderstood, pantheism is interpreted as the “thoughtless, shoddy, unphilosophical view” that “everything is God” [*Allesgötterei*], rather than the view that “the All is God” [*Allgötterei*] (LPR 261). Furthermore, Hegel emphasizes that when it is properly understood, it can be seen that pantheism’s “representation of substantiality underlies the representation of God in our own religion, too” (LPR 261-262)—so pantheism prepares the ground for the consummate religion. Thus for Hegel, Buddhism begins the process of arriving at a true understanding of God, because it is the first religion in which “Only God is, only God is the one, genuine actuality” (LPR 261). However, Hegel also indicates that Buddhism’s conception of the divine as substance is still incomplete: “In all higher religions, but particularly in the Christian religion, God is the one and absolute substance; but at the same time God is also subject, and that is something more” (LPR 263). Hence for Hegel, Buddhism is interpreted as a moment—albeit as a necessary moment—in the unfolding of the one, true religion.

The Specter of Nihilism

Roger-Pol Droit’s *The Cult of Nothingness: The Philosophers and the Buddha* begins with the statement, “Let us say it straight out: Buddhism is not a religion that worships nothingness” (2003: 1). With this simple sentence, Droit seemingly dismisses Hegel’s philosophical interpretation of Buddhism.¹³

¹² On Hegel and pantheism, see Williamson 1984: 203-294; Harten 1994: 132-146; and Viyagappa 1980: 64-77.

¹³ Park similarly states, “Needless to say, understanding Buddhism as a cult of nothingness leaves much to desire to be an accurate description of the tradition,” and argues that Hegel “projects a feminized, castrated, and

While we do not hold that Droit's perspective is necessarily wrong, we do believe that Hegel's interpretation of Buddhism as nihilism merits further consideration. We believe that through an investigation of Buddhist discourse, one can see that even within Buddhism itself there is a concern that Buddhism may be misinterpreted as a form of nihilism.¹⁴

The misinterpretation of Buddhism as nihilism is not terribly surprising in an initial contact with Buddhist doctrine. The basic Buddhist doctrines of *anātman* (absence of self) and *nirvāṇa*, at first pass at least, seem to be *negative* in character: the doctrine of *anātman* holds that fundamentally there is *no* self as an abiding substance, and the doctrine of *nirvāṇa* posits that the highest attainment—the Buddhist salvation—is a form of *cessation*. In fact, the terms *anātman* and *nirvāṇa* are even negative from a grammatical point of view (the former with the negative prefix *an-*, and the latter with the negative prefix *nir-*). While the analysis of meaning does not necessarily rest on the grammar of the terms under consideration, when one turns to more technical Buddhist accounts of these doctrines, again we see that their negative character is brought to the fore.

Considering the doctrine of *anātman*, it is of course a central Buddhist doctrine that there is no eternal, unchanging metaphysical substratum corresponding to conventional notions of the self; the continuity of rebirth is accounted for in terms of interrelated processes of momentary events comprised of the five aggregates (form, feeling, etc.), which themselves have no permanence. This point is emphasized in the so-called “unanswered questions,” a set of questions which the Buddha refused to address. Among these are the questions of whether after death the Tathāgata

despotic East” (2008: 45). Others also view Hegel's interpretation of Buddhism as a projected counterpart to Hegel's own philosophy; e.g., Morton states that Hegel “is unable to jettison Buddhism, even while he is criticizing it, for it provides some key elements of his models of thinking” (2007: 3).

¹⁴ Some interpreters have been drawn to the similarities between Hegel and Buddhism. While that is not our focus, see Kim 2006 and Scarfe 2006 for recent examples. Brief overviews are offered by Conze 1963, Dumoulin 1981, and Wilhelm 1961. Kim had discussed similarities between Hegel and Buddhism more than half a century ago, and described the noted Japanese philosopher Kitarō Nishida (1870-1945) as “a Hegelian who incorporated Zen thinking into his system” (1955: 25).

(the Buddha) can be said to exist, to not exist, to both exist and not exist, or to neither exist nor not exist.¹⁵ The Buddha responds by stating that “the Tathāgata has abandoned that material form by which one describing the Tathāgata might describe him; he has cut it off at the root, made it like a palm stump, done away with it so that it is no longer subject to future arising...The Tathāgata has abandoned that feeling...perception...[mental] formations...[and] consciousness” (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 593-594). Hence all five aggregates have been cut off by the Buddha at death, including consciousness: “The Tathāgata is liberated from reckoning in terms of consciousness” (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 594). As Collins explains, the problem with the unanswered questions is clear from a Buddhist perspective: “Conceptually they rest on the mistaken assumption that a real entity exists as a referent for terms such as ‘Tathāgata,’ ‘being,’ and the like” (1982: 135). According to Buddhism, there simply is no substantially existing self.

In the vast domain of Buddhist discourse many differing conceptions of *nirvāṇa* have been articulated, sometimes in opposition to the doctrines of other texts and schools. For example, from a survey of Buddhist doctrinal treatises, La Vallée Poussin (1929: 670-671) identifies the following four types of *nirvāṇa*: (1) naturally pure *nirvāṇa* from beginningless time (*anādikālika-prakṛti-śuddha-nirvāṇa*), which refers to the fundamental state of peace of all phenomena due to their being without any inherent nature; (2) *nirvāṇa* with residual conditioning (*sopadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa*), which refers to the state of having eliminated all forms of mental affliction during one’s final rebirth; (3) *nirvāṇa* without residual conditioning (*nirupadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa*), which refers to the attainment of an unconditioned state after one’s final rebirth has ended; and (4) non-abiding *nirvāṇa* (*apraṭiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*), a particularly Mahāyāna conception, which refers to a form of *nirvāṇa* wherein there is no abiding in either *samsāra* (cyclic existence) or *nirvāṇa*.¹⁶ Certain Mahāyāna texts, considering the third form, *nirvāṇa* without residual conditioning, to be the ultimate goal of the “Hīnayāna,” characterize that form of *nirvāṇa*

¹⁵ See, e.g., the *Aggivaṅgagotta Sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995).

¹⁶ These four are also listed in the *Mahāvīyūtpatti*, a compendium of Sanskrit and Tibetan terms from ca. the early ninth century, although there the first member of the list is simply *nirvāṇa*.

in completely negative terms, as a form of utter cessation, termination, or non-existence.¹⁷ But such entirely negative characterizations of *nirvāṇa* do not only occur in Mahāyāna critiques of the “Hīnayāna.” For example, in the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* the famous scholar-monk Vasubandhu states that according to the Sautrāntika school, “*Nirvāṇa* is pure non-existence.”¹⁸ So while *nirvāṇa* is by no means consistently interpreted as entirely negative in Buddhist discourse, negative characterizations of this important Buddhist doctrine may indeed be found.

Turning from these two basic Buddhist doctrines to broader concerns, it is commonly known that according to one standard self-description, Buddhism is the “middle way,” steering a course between a number of pairs of extremes that are to be avoided. One significant pair of extremes in this regard is eternalism (*śāśvatavāda*) and annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*), respectively, the view that the self is eternal and the view that an existent self is completely extinguished at death.¹⁹ Interestingly, Buddhist thinkers are sometimes at pains to distinguish their own perspective from that of the annihilationists, or “nihilists,” and in fact have often been charged with nihilism by their Brahmanical opponents. In the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, the Buddha himself states, “I have been baselessly, vainly, falsely, and wrongly misrepresented by some recluses and brahmins thus: ‘The recluse Gotama is one who leads astray; he teaches the annihilation, the destruction, the extermination of an existing being’” (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 234). The charges of nihilism, however, were not easy to dismiss, and would continue to be raised against various forms of Buddhism.

In a particularly relevant section from his commentary on Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*, the Madhyamaka scholar-monk Candrakīrti engages with an imaginary interlocutor on the question of whether Buddhism (or Candrakīrti’s Madhyamaka Buddhism) is not in fact really just a form of nihilism.²⁰

¹⁷ E.g., *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra-bhāṣya* ad 3.3.

¹⁸ La Vallée Poussin 1991, vol. 1, p. 285; for a discussion of this section of the text, see Kritzer 2003: 339-341.

¹⁹ See Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995, pp. 229-231 for a statement of this distinction in the *Majjhima Nikāya*.

²⁰ The discussion may be found at La Vallée Poussin 1903-1913, pp. 368-369.

Candrakīrti's problems here arise out of a confusion in the central Madhyamaka conception of "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*), according to which all phenomena are without an inherent nature—another important Buddhist doctrine with a rather negative tinge. Our aims here are not to enter into debates regarding the proper interpretation of this central Madhyamaka doctrine,²¹ but merely to highlight the sense in which Buddhism does seem to "tarry with the negative." Furthermore, it is significant that the Madhyamaka conception of emptiness was considered even by some fellow Mahāyāna Buddhists to move a bit too closely to a form of nihilism, as evidenced by the Yogācāra reconception of this doctrine.²² What sense is to be made of all this negative talk? Was Hegel, after all, *right*? Is Buddhism simply a form of nihilism?

It must be pointed out, of course, that there is a positive side to Buddhist doctrine as well. Not all conceptions of nirvāṇa characterize it as non-existence. In fact, most commonly, *nirvāṇa* is simply described as unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*). And in the *Nibbāna Sutta* (in the *Udāna*, considered to be among the earliest Buddhist scriptures), *nirvāṇa* is said to exist: "There is, monks, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unfabricated" (Thanissaro 1994). Collins also states that "certain positive-looking descriptions of the *Tathāgata*" occur in the Theravāda Buddhist canon, including the statement that "the Buddha both before and after death is 'immeasurable like the vast ocean'" (1982: 135-136). In the realm of Mahāyāna discourse, there are further positive characterizations of the ultimate. Even the Madhyamaka Buddhist thinker Bhavya—arguing that "'*Brahman*' [i.e., the absolute in Hinduism]...*if properly understood*, could be equated with Nirvāṇa"—claims that great Mahāyāna bodhisattvas "adore [*Brahman*] by the method of non-adoration" (Gokhale 1962: 274-275). And in the fully-

²¹ Tuck 1990 offers an overview of western interpretations of Nāgārjuna's thought.

²² On the Yogācāra reinterpretation of emptiness, see Nagao 1978 and Garfield 2002; Garfield states that while for the Madhyamaka, emptiness means "emptiness of inherent existence" (*svabhāva*), for the Yogācāra emptiness refers to "the emptiness of subject-object duality" (2002: 181-182). Buescher (2008: 173-176) discusses the early Yogācāra critique of Madhyamaka thought as nihilist. The critique was to continue, and King (1994: 671) states that this "interpretation of the Madhyamaka position, that it is a form of nihilism, is a frequent cry of later Yogācārins (e.g., Dharmapāla)".

developed conceptions of buddhahood that occur in Mahāyāna treatises, the tide seems to turn towards a conception of buddhahood as the absolute, encompassing the whole of reality.²³

We believe, however, that the negative character of a number of significant Buddhist doctrines must still be taken seriously, that certain tendencies towards more positive formulations in Buddhism do not serve entirely as the “negative of the negative” (to use a Hegelian phrase). But what precisely is going on with all this negativity? Our response, in short, is that there is a strong apophatic tendency running throughout much of Buddhist discourse, that certain significant strands of Buddhist doctrine aim towards the removal of all views, all doctrines, indeed all concepts, as a means of attaining the realization of the ultimate spiritual goal.²⁴ Gomez states, “Contrary to the customary insistence on ‘right views,’” one significant early Theravāda text “speaks of giving up *all* views” (1976: 140). Collins also argues that in Theravāda discourse one can note two ways in which Buddhism “seeks to counter what it sees as mistaken views”: one approach, “which might be described as quietistic, recommends exclusive concentration on religious practice, avoiding any speculative thought,” while another approach counters a mistaken view by putting forward “an opposing theory...which is correct: ‘right view’” (1982: 87). The apophatic tendency that we are calling attention to here would correlate with what Collins refers to as the quietistic approach. This approach is exemplified by the well-known trope of Buddhist teaching as a raft, i.e., the teaching should be used for spiritual attainment, but should be left behind when it has served its purpose.²⁵ In Madhyamaka thought, while the doctrine of emptiness certainly entails a negative ontological claim—namely that inherent nature does not exist—this should not be interpreted as nihilistic, or as a generalized denial of existence per se; furthermore, we would emphasize that the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness must be understood as having a soteriological aim. As Kapstein states, the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness “is sometimes said to dispense with all expressed tenets, even this one,” which may be interpreted as a “type of

²³ On this interpretation, see Griffiths 1994.

²⁴ For an analysis of this specific Buddhist technique of apophasis in Peircean terms, see D’Amato 2008.

²⁵ See Collins 1982, pp. 120-123 for a discussion of this and relevant similes.

scepticism, specifically a sceptical view of the referential capacity of language and conceptual activity”; he goes on to point out that “‘emptiness’ cannot be understood primarily in propositional, or ‘theoretical’ terms; rather it fundamentally determines one’s orientation to the Buddha’s salvific project” (2001, pp. 13-14). Hence, the doctrine of emptiness should also be viewed in terms of the apophatic tendency towards the removal of all views. Indeed, in the commentary referred to above, Candrakīrti quotes a Mahāyāna *sūtra* which states that “emptiness is the exhaustion of all philosophical views. I call incurable whoever holds emptiness as a philosophical view” (Huntington 1989: 58). Also, in Yogācāra thought, buddhahood is characterized in terms of a nonconceptual awareness (*nirvikalpa-jñāna*) which is to be cultivated through meditation, again emphasizing that the ultimate goal entails the end of all conceptual thought. Thus one significant technique of Buddhist practice is the removal of all barriers—including the removal of all views and concepts—which prevent one from directly apprehending the ultimate.

In employing such apophatic techniques, however, Buddhism might be easily misinterpreted as entirely negative in character—if, for example, the technique of “giving up all views” is misread as a denial of all forms of existence. But is the “exhaustion of all philosophical views” equivalent to nihilism? Not necessarily, if the exhaustion of views is properly understood as a mode of apophasis, and not as a *view* denying existent entities (“I call incurable whoever holds emptiness as a philosophical view”!). In using techniques of apophasis, however, Buddhist discourse opens itself to the danger of being so misinterpreted. And it is not surprising that Hegel would view Buddhism in these negative terms, and characterize it as the “Religion of Annihilation,”²⁶ especially since similar critical characterizations were even brought forward by Buddhists against fellow Buddhists in the long and complex history of Buddhist discourse. While in the end, we do not believe that Buddhism *is* indeed entirely negative in character, or that Buddhism is the religion of nothingness, we do believe that because of the use of apophatic techniques, a nihilistic (mis)interpretation lurks close by—and that nihilism is the specter that must always be exorcised from Buddhist discourse.

²⁶ See LPR II 735.

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