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Goethe and the Christian Religion

It is commonly recognized that Goethe’s notion of the Christian religion was complex and ambiguous, characterized by apparent contradiction and instances of oracle-like inscrutability, especially when considered in relation to his early conception of *natural religion*, a religion of the heart or feeling, as opposed to revealed, positive religions such as Christianity—a relationship that he initially did not attempt to develop in a coherent fashion. Less well known is that after his first Italian journey, Goethe began to consider their bearing on each other, while seeking to resolve a number of apparent inconsistencies in his concept of natural religion. But multiple difficulties in understanding his notion of Christianity itself remain, despite his life-long effort to come to terms with it. There are a number of reasons for this. First, as Goethe was primarily an author, he tended to voice his religious thinking in his poems, plays and novels. Second, as he was reluctant to offend the religious sensitivities of those around him, he expressed his views in the latter part of his life in isolated, apodictic statements of belief in such works as *Poetry and Truth*, the *Theory of Color*, short essays of a few pages in length, or in easily overlooked letters and conversations, his journal and a considerable number of cryptic aphorisms. Third, the successive stages of the development of his religious thinking unfolded in association

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with the stages of his overall development in relation to the culture of his times, as influenced by Pietism, Herder, the storm and stress movement, its cult of the genius, his metamorphological understanding of the sciences of anatomy, botany, mineralogy and optics, humanistic and enlightenment beliefs, Lessing, Kant, Schiller, German idealism, the Jena romantics and their ideal of a world of literature, among other influences.

This essay nevertheless seeks to demonstrate that the multiplicity of Goethe's religious utterances constitutes an intelligible whole of thought, or the stages of the development of his religious thinking to have culminated in a coherent conception of the Christian religion. The beginning will be made by first reviewing his concept of natural religion, and will then attempt to show how he sought to resolve the evident inconsistencies of that earlier belief by developing a notion of the relation of natural religion to positive revealed religions generally. Afterwards, that general notion will be seen to govern his understanding of Christianity, and that understanding, in turn, to be concretely reflected in his understanding of Catholicism and Protestantism. Or in other words, the essay, in conceiving the whole of Goethe's religious thought, will consider both his general and more concrete religious beliefs as body of thought in which none of his earlier beliefs are abandoned, but all are amalgamated with each other. The stages of Goethe's religious development are then mirrored in the separate sections of this essay. In the end, however, the essay will argue that Goethe, confronted with what he took to be unresolvable contradictions and ambiguities in Christian dogmas and beliefs, augmented his notion of natural religion with a selected number of Christian beliefs compatible with the former in developing a theory of creative activity in relation to an ideal world of culture embracing all forms of human activity (including religious activity) in relation to that ideal world.



In a reply to Gretchen's question concerning his religious beliefs in the first of the Faust dramas, perhaps the clearest statement of Goethe's natural religion of the heart, Faust answers that God, the divine or highest being, as "All-embracer" and "All-preserver," encompasses and maintains all things, and is that in terms of which

everything presses forward
To your head and heart
And weaves together in eternal secrecy
Invisibly-visible next to you.¹

Imploring Gretchen to "fill (her) heart" with the divine being, "however large it is,"² Faust maintains that this belief is universal, "all hearts speak of it / In every place . . . / Each in its own language"³—and yet it is ultimately incomprehensible. For the highest being in its existence and manifestations in nature as a whole, and more specifically in human nature, is "invisibly-visible" in the sense that all rationally posited conceptions or beliefs concerning it, hence all revealed or positive religions, including Christianity, fail to fully comprehend it:

¹ *Faust I* (5 250–251).

For the most part, the author's translations of the Goethe statements cited in this essay are based on the Artemis edition of his works: J. W. Goethe, *Artemis Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe, und Gespräche*, vol. I–XXIV, ed. Ernst Beutler (Zürich 1948–1954). A number of quotations are based on other sources: (1) *Goethe-Briefe*, ed. Philipp Stein (Berlin 1924); (2) *Goethes Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläums-Ausgabe*, vol. I–XL, ed. Eduard von der Hellen (Stuttgart und Berlin 1902–1912); (3) *Goethe-Tagebücher*, Ergänzungsband 2 zur Artemis-Gedenkausgabe (Zürich, 1964)—sources referred to as "Stein," "JA" and "Erg Bd 2" respectively. In each case, the statements are cited according to volume and page number, with 5 250–251 here referring to volume 5, pages 250–251 of the Artemis edition and Stein 3 280, volume 3, page 280 of the Stein edition of Goethe's letters.

Further, it is to be noted that conversations are cited by the name of the person who recorded them and that all ellipses, italics and parenthetical emendations in the quotations are the author's.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

And when you are whole in blissful feeling,
 Call it then what you will:
 Call it Happiness! Heart! Love! God!
 I have no names
 For it! Feeling is everything;
 Names are sounds and smoke
 Clouding over the splendor of heaven.⁴

But, it might be asked, if natural religion is universal, why doesn't Gretchen already share Faust's belief, why hasn't she already experienced the "blissful feeling" of the highest being, why does he exhort her to "fill (her) heart" with it, "however large it is"? How can Gretchen not have "filled (her) heart" with the feeling of the divinity and in what way are some hearts larger and therefore apparently capable of being one with the highest being to a greater extent than others? Or more generally, if natural religion is universal, why do some individuals experience this incomprehensible conscious oneness with the divine being and others not? How can those who do not know it come to an experience of it, if not on the basis of positive teachings or recounted experiences of others? And how do those who do have this experience receive or develop their understanding of it, and how is their experience and are their hearts greater than others? For that matter, if natural religion is universal, why do positive or revealed religions exist? How can their relation to natural religion be conceived? It is as if Goethe in his later religious reflections felt compelled to answer Gretchen's objection following Faust's enthusiastic musing over natural religion, "then you have no Christianity in you."⁵

In a late aphorism, Goethe notes that "religion begins in feeling, but must be developed to reasonableness."⁶ A closer look at his last conversation with Eckermann can form the starting point of an understand-

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Aphorisms and Fragments* (17 779).

ing of what he means by “reasonable” (*vernünftig*), as well as what purity (*Reinheit*) means in this connection. For in that conversation, Goethe develops natural religion further as *primal religion* (*Urreligion*) and distinguishes between primal religion and the churches of revealed religions (he is referring specifically to Christianity here, but the context of the statement shows that it applies to all manifestations of primal religion in revealed religions): “There is the point of view of a kind of primal religion, that of pure nature . . . Then there is the standpoint of the church, which is more human.”⁷ Primal religion is universal in the sense that it exists prior to and forms the foundation of its manifestations in the churches of revealed religions, churches existing in the real or empirical world, the sphere of external conditioning circumstances and limitation. But while primal religion “is of divine origin . . . and will always remain the same,”⁸ the positive belief (*Glaube*) of those churches is *humanly* formulated and only strives to comprehend the highest being experienced as feeling in the hearts of the believers of primal religion:

[U]niversal, natural religion requires no belief, strictly speaking. For the conviction that a great, productive, ordering and governing being hides itself, as it were, in nature, in order to make itself tangible to us, forces itself on everyone. . . . Entirely different is the case of particular religions proclaiming that the supreme being has decidedly adopted one particular tribe, people or locality above all others. These religions are founded on . . . belief . . .⁹

Later, while referring generally to every element of the legacy of culture (*Überlieferung*) that individuals are confronted with in their development, but as applicable in context to revealed religion specifically, Goethe asserts that

⁷ Eckermann, March 11, 1832 (24 769).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Poetry and Truth* (10 154).

what matters is its foundation, its inner nature, its meaning and direction; here lies its original, divine, effective, inviolable, indestructible nature, and no time, no external influence or condition can harm this original quality. . . . (These influences and conditions), while closely related to (its) inner nature . . . , expose (it) to deterioration and corruption . . . on account of differences in times and locations, (and) especially the difference in human powers and manners of thinking . . .¹⁰

Similarly, again referring to assimilation of elements of the legacy of culture in general, but applicable in particular to the reception of the beliefs and doctrines of revealed religion, he holds that “man,” given his experience of the divine being of primal religion,

by relating everything to himself, is forced to ascribe to everything an inner determination directed outwardly . . . (This) perfect inner organization is . . . most pure . . . (and can only exist) under certain outward conditions . . .¹¹

Thus Goethe observes that “the history of churches . . . becomes . . . confused because the main idea”—i.e., their fundamental inner nature as manifestations of primal religion—“is obscured, disputed and diverted by the moment, the age, by localities and other particulars.”¹² It follows that primal religion in relation to established revealed religion is “invisibly-visible” like the highest being itself: “in every land the multitude of true believers, thinking people, will always remain an invisible church.”¹³

Goethe stresses, however, that the relation of primal religion to revealed religion *can* be comprehended by “true believers” of that invisible church:

[I]t is everyone’s duty to explore the inner, true nature of (revealed religion) . . . Everything external . . . one should leave to criticism, which, even if it is able to break up the whole into

¹⁰ *Ibid.* (10 558).

¹¹ “Essay on a universal Theory of Comparison” (17 228).

¹² Letter to E. H. F. Meyer, April 23, 1829 (21 849).

¹³ “On the Worth of some German Poets” (JA 36 9).

pieces, will never be able to rob us of the true foundation that we hold fast to . . .¹⁴

Only they are able to understand the positive content of revealed religions *purely* (rein), in relation to the primal religion underlying them:

If only people . . . would not alter and darken what is right and proper after it has been found, I would be satisfied; for a positive tradition delivered from generation to generation is essential to mankind . . . In this regard, I should be happy if men understood it purely . . .¹⁵

But primal religion as an invisible church is “only for chosen ones,” “divinely gifted beings” or “thinking people” whose hearts and capacity to experience the highest being are greater than others and who are therefore capable of distinguishing primal religion from its positive real or empirical manifestations in the world and whose greater awareness of the highest being is essentially inborn:

There is the point of view of primal religion, that of pure nature and reason, which is of divine origin. This will always remain the same and will last and hold true as long as divinely gifted beings exist. But it is only for chosen ones and is much too high and noble to become universal.¹⁶

Conversely, while “the light of undiminished divine revelation is much too pure and brilliant to be suitable and bearable of weak and needy humankind,” the churches of revealed religions are “more human” and not restricted to “divinely gifted” understanding of the highest being. They “enter() as . . . charitable mediator(s) to shade and reduce (the light of divine revelation), in order that all are helped and many are in good spirits.”¹⁷ Such churches “will last as long as there are weak human beings.”¹⁸ In this respect, the positive belief of revealed

¹⁴ *Poetry and Truth* (10 558).

¹⁵ Eckermann, Feb. 1, 1827 (24 238–239).

¹⁶ Eckermann, March 11, 1832 (24 769).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* (24 769–770).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* (24 769).

religions is also universal, as indispensable for the welfare of mankind as a whole.



It follows for Goethe that the history of revealed religions and their associated churches is characterized by perpetual transformation of their positive beliefs. For only a minority of their members are “thinking people,” “divinely gifted” “chosen ones” capable of understanding the relation of those beliefs purely in relation to their foundation in primal religion. Thus the churches of revealed religion are “exposed to deterioration and corruption,” especially because of the “difference in human powers and manners of thinking.”¹⁹ Or in other words, the history of the churches of revealed religions is “confused, because the main idea, which may accompany its course in the world most purely and clearly, is obscured, disrupted and diverted,” not only “by the moment, the age . . . (and) localities,” but by “other particulars”²⁰—that is to say, the particular positive beliefs of those churches. From the standpoint of their congregations generally, that of “weak and needy humankind,” their beliefs are “fragile, changeable and changing” over time:

[T]here is the standpoint of the church, which is more human. It is fragile, changeable and changing. In perpetual transformation, it too will last as long as there are weak human beings.²¹

Goethe expresses many of the same ideas, if in slightly altered terminology, in his discussion of the Bible, not as sacred book exclusive to the Jewish and Christian churches, but as

¹⁹ *Poetry and Truth* (10 558).

²⁰ Letter to E. H. F. Meyer, April 23, 1829 (21 849).

²¹ Eckermann, March 22, 1823 (24 769).

book of all peoples, because it makes the destiny of one people the symbol of all others, relates its history to the creation of the world and develops it to the furthest regions of final eternal verities by means of a succession of earthly and spiritual stages, necessary and accidental events.²²

But the Bible, apart from the comprehension of its beliefs by “thinking people” or “chosen ones,” those capable of conceiving it purely in relation to primal religion, is incomprehensible to the “weak and needy” nature of mankind generally, and the sacred texts of any given revealed religion will be just as incommensurable as the Bible has been to Jews and Christians. For their sacred texts also “brought no standard in terms of which the self-containment, wonderful originality, many-sidedness, totality and incommensurability of (their) contents could be measured.”²³ That standard had to be applied from without, and so arose a chorus of

Jews and Christians, heathens and saints, church fathers and heretics, . . . reformers and their opponents, all of them . . . wanting to interpret and explain, link together or supplement, understand or apply the Scriptures.²⁴

Consequently the churches of all revealed religions contemplating the Bible or other sacred texts in a manner symbolized by the Bible, as destiny of all peoples,

split into an infinite number of opinions concerning it. Thus we find that men worked, not so much with the Bible, as *on* the Bible, and quarreled over conflicting manners of interpretation that they could apply to the text, could substitute for the text or with which they could cover it up.²⁵

Hence Goethe argues, with specific reference to the Bible, but applicable as well to the sacred texts of all revealed religions, that “the reason

²² *Theory of Color* (16 344–345).

²³ *Ibid.* (16 347).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.* (16 346).

the Bible is an eternally influential book is that as long as the world exists, no one will come forward and say: I comprehend it as a whole and understand it in its details.”²⁶

[I]f only people . . . would not alter and darken what is right and proper after it has been found, I would be satisfied; for a positive tradition delivered from generation to generation is essential to mankind, and it would be good if this positivity were simultaneously right and true. In this regard, I should be happy if men understood it purely and then continued in what is right, without becoming transcendent again, after everything had been done with respect to what is comprehensible. But people cannot keep still, and before one knows it, confusion is dominant once again.²⁷

More particularly, in a letter to Zelter using Biblical terminology, Goethe holds the Old and New Testaments to be a symbol of the “perpetually repeating essence of the world” in which he finds

there the law that strives towards love, here the love that strives back towards the law and fulfills it, not by means of its own power and strength, but rather by belief . . .²⁸

In the context of the preceding pages it can be said with respect to the “perpetually repeating essence of the world,” as manifested in all revealed religions symbolized by Bible, that the Old Testament or its law comprises positive belief, the New Testament of love, the fulfillment of the law in experience of the divinity, that experience giving rise to further positive beliefs as law to others, and so on, for ever.



In his novel *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, Goethe attempts a broad classification of revealed religions in terms of their fundamental positive beliefs and finds them to exhibit this same cycle of perpetual

²⁶ *Maxims and Reflections* (9 534).

²⁷ Eckermann, Feb 1, 1827 (24 238).

²⁸ Letter to Zelter, Nov. 14, 1816 (21 196).

transformation in themselves and in their relation to each other. These forms, though alluded to at times throughout the novel, are not taken up and coherently developed there or in his other writings and conversations. For us, their primary significance is the manner in which they conform to the argument of the preceding pages.

As explained to Wilhelm by the overseers of the Pedagogical Province where he takes his son to learn at, there are three forms of revealed religion associated with a three-fold reverence (*Ehrfurcht*) determining the positive direction of their worship: reverence for that which is “above us,”²⁹ reverence for that which is “below us,”³⁰ and reverence for that which is “like us.”³¹ Though set forth as the Province’s educational ideal, the several forms of reverence and the religions founded on them are considered to be “inborn in a higher sense . . . in especially favored individuals, who have always therefore been held to be holy or gods”³² in founding one of the three forms of revealed religions.

The overseers term religion based on that which is above us the *ethnic (ethnische) religion*. It is “the religion of all peoples and the first successful separation from base fear.”³³ Worshipping the highest being as incommensurable power embracing and sustaining all things, it is comparable to Goethe’s original natural religion. The relation based on reverence for that which is below us is termed the *Christian religion*. This manner of thinking, while present in other revealed religions, is “most clearly revealed in (the Christian religion).”³⁴ It seeks to raise up the individual by concrete experience of the highest being in the real or

²⁹ *Years of Wandering* (§ 169).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.* (§ 171).

³² *Ibid.* (§ 170–171).

³³ *Ibid.* (§ 171).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

empirical world in such a way that “every appearance of Christ”—as well as that of the god-like appearance of the founders of similar religions—“serves to make the higher life tangible.”³⁵ The third religion based on reverence for that which is like us is termed the *philosophical religion*. The philosopher seeks to “pull down everything higher” and “raise up everything lower to himself” in the sense that he conceives both the positive beliefs of the ethnic religions and the Christian religions purely in relation to their true foundation in primal religion. For “by clearly understanding his relation to people like himself and thus to the whole of mankind, his relation to all earthly surroundings,” he “lives in a cosmic sense in truth.”³⁶ The proponents of this third form of religion are, in short, the “thinking people,” the “divinely favored beings” of the primal religion’s invisible church. But the founders of particular branches of philosophical religion are themselves limited or conditioned in their actual existence in the world and their writings or collections of sayings, while inwardly pure, are outwardly positive and ultimately incommensurable for the majority of ‘non-thinking people’ contemplating their works. The god-like founders of philosophical religions can only hope to inspire or encourage followers by the example of their lives to become “thinking people” in the reception of their works.

When Wilhelm asks the overseers which of these three forms they profess, they answer, “all three . . . only together do they bring forth the true religion.”³⁷ For “out of the three there arises the highest form of reverence, reverence for oneself.”³⁸ With it, they say,

man achieves the highest that he is capable of, namely, that he may hold himself to be the best that God and nature have created,

³⁵ Letter to Zelter, Nov. 9, 1830 (21 946).

³⁶ *Years of Wandering* (8 171).

³⁷ *Ibid.* (8 172).

³⁸ *Ibid.*

and yes, that he may linger at this height without being pulled down again into the lower sphere by arrogance and self-centeredness.³⁹

The overseers, however, do not explain how or why the god-like founders of each of the three forms of revealed religion limit themselves to a conception of the divine being in apparent one-sidedness with respect to only one of the three forms of revealed religion. It may be due to their particular individualities, the individualities of those about them, or the positive outer conditions in the world they faced together. Nor do the overseers explain how or why out of the fourth form of reverence and unity of those three forms the latter “develop themselves again”⁴⁰ in perpetual alternation of positivity and its reconciliation with the divine being. It is only clear that the three forms of revealed religion are essentially or ideally one, yet repeatedly split and only momentarily united again in the empirical world—a unity, separation of that unity and its resumption that the overseers find expressed in a credo “pronounced by a large segment of the world, however unconsciously,” in which “three divine beings” or persons are united in “the highest unity,” in one God, with the first person of that credo being “ethnic and belonging to all peoples; the second being Christian, struggling along with those who suffer and are glorified in suffering; the third . . . teaching an imagined community of holy beings, that is to say, who are good and wise to the highest degree.”⁴¹ Expressed in terms of the three divine Persons of the Christian Credo, this means:

THE FATHER (as divine being underlying the religions of all lands and peoples):

“belonging to all peoples;”

THE SON (the concrete embodiment of the Father in the real or

“struggling along with those who suffer and those who are glorified

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

empirical world):

THE HOLY SPIRIT (the community of thinking people belonging to an invisible church):

in suffering;”

“existing in the inspired community of holy beings . . . , that is to say, who are good and wise to the highest degree.”⁴²

Goethe does not refer to the Trinity elsewhere in the *Years of Wandering*, nor does he attempt to deal with the well-nigh infinite range of its perceived manifestations in Christian sacred writings and experience, but it can be thought to be implicit in the argument of the preceding pages—in the cycle of law, positivity, fulfillment of the law and renewed positivity, or the union of the “true believers” of primal religion with the “weak and needy” believers of revealed religions as constituting a whole of benefit to all of mankind.



Having examined Goethe’s conception of all revealed religions and their associated churches, as well as their second form “most clearly revealed” in Christianity, it is possible to progressively develop his notion of the unique nature of the Christian religion as actually existing religion and reflecting in its history the manner in which its main or underlying idea becomes “confused,” “obscured, disrupted and diverted” in the real or empirical world, “split into an infinite number of opinions” in embodying the “perpetual repeating essence of the world,” the continual cycle of experience of the divine being, formulation of that experience in terms of positive belief or law and reconciliation of that belief with its divine foundation, and continued positivity on that basis.

It was already seen that Goethe observes that soon after the books of the Old Testament and New Testament were combined, there arose a “chorus of Jews and Christians, heathens and saints, church fathers and

⁴² *Ibid.*

heretics, councils and popes, reformers and their opponents” seeking to “interpret and explain, link together or supplement, understand or apply the Scriptures.”⁴³ Similarly, he notes that “soon after its emergence and propagation, the Christian religion suffered from both thoughtful and nonsensical heresies, and lost its original purity.”⁴⁴ Only a few of its believers were able, as “thinking people,” members of Goethe’s invisible church, to comprehend the positivity of the Christian religion purely. This was not confined for him to the chronologically first form of the Christian religion, Catholicism, but is exemplified in Protestantism as well. For the Protestant church is similarly characterized by a “tiresome . . . sectarian divisiveness”⁴⁵ and its reformation history he finds to be a “sad spectacle of boundless confusion, error struggling against error, self-interest with self-interest, truth only heaving a sigh here and there.”⁴⁶ Even with regard to the Lutheran religion of his upbringing he notes that its “main notion . . . is based on the decided opposition between Law and Gospel, and then on the mediation between these extremes,”⁴⁷ i.e., their dialectical development throughout its history.

Thus Goethe observes that the Christian church (i.e., as including both Catholicism and Protestantism, at least in the latter’s early history) is “a very great power,” because it “can free man from the weight of sin.” The positive law engenders an awareness of sin, human failure in observing the law, and consequent awareness of estrangement from the divine being. But the reconciliation with the divinity takes place, not in the believer as “thinking person,” but through the mediation of the church in its beliefs and practices—and for the Catholic church in particular, by means of its doctrine of the forgiveness of sin by the clergy:

⁴³ *Theory of Color* (16 347).

⁴⁴ Letter to Zelter, Nov. 14, 1816 (21 198).

⁴⁵ Eckermann, March 11, 1832 (24 772).

⁴⁶ *Journal*, Nov. 26, 1826 (Erg Bd 2 466).

⁴⁷ Letter to Zelter, Nov. 14, 1816 (21 195–196).

Because the belief is present in the Christian church that . . . it can free man from the weight of sin, it is a very great power. And it is the primary aim of the Christian priesthood to preserve this power and so protect the edifice of the church. . . .

There is so much that is foolish in the statutes of the church. But it wants to rule, and for this it requires a mass of dense people who cower before it and let themselves be ruled. The high, richly endowed clergy fears nothing more than the enlightenment of the masses.⁴⁸

Hence in the *Italian Journey* Goethe remarks that the activity of the Jesuits in their outer works was intended, not to enlighten the Christian congregation, but to maintain its status in front of a “mass of dense people who cower” before the church:

[C]hurches, towers and other edifices (which) are designed to have something grand and perfect about them that unconsciously fills everyone with awe. . . . Here and there some tastelessness is also not lacking, so that human nature is placated and attracted.⁴⁹

Implied in this context are the substantially similar efforts that can be observed throughout the history of the Protestant church. Finally, Goethe somewhat ambiguously observes in a conversation with Riemer:

The characteristic features of the Christian religion, as developed in the particular existence of the Roman Catholic church, reveal themselves to be preformed, so to speak, in the characters of the individual apostles: love in John, belief in Jacob, fanaticism and persecuting frenzy in Peter, doubt in Thomas, and the greed of Judas Iscariot—owing to which the church, like Judas, was undone. For it was principally the greed of the Roman clergy that was the last straw for the Reformation.⁵⁰

It would not be difficult to find instances of love, belief, fanaticism and persecuting fury and greed in the “sad spectacle of boundless confusion, error struggling against error, self-interest with self-interest, truth

⁴⁸ Eckermann, March 11, 1832 (24 770).

⁴⁹ *Italian Journey* (11 11–12).

⁵⁰ Riemer, March 10, 1809 (22 544).

only heaving a sigh here and there” in the “particular existence” of the Reformation and the Protestant church in general.

The Christian religion in its historical development, in short, apart from its comprehension by “thinking people,” “chosen ones,” is “much too pure and brilliant for it to be suitable and bearable for weak and needy humankind”⁵¹ and is ultimately incommensurable in Goethe’s view for both Catholic and Protestant believers:

[T]he myth of Christ is the reason that the world can stand for 10,000 years and no one will come to his senses, because it requires just as much power of knowledge, understanding and comprehension to defend it as it does to dispute it.⁵²

Concerning history generally, and especially that of . . . religion, it occurs to us that poor, narrow-minded individuals find it not unworthy to project their darkest, subjective feelings, their apprehension of restricted circumstances, onto their contemplation of the universe and its higher appearances.⁵³

Scepticism . . . could only arise out of the religious sects of Protestantism, where each claimed he was right and that the other was wrong, without knowing that they all were only judging subjectively.⁵⁴

In this connection, Goethe’s mention in his discussion of the Bible in the *Theory of Color* that “if one inserted before John’s Revelation a summary of the pure Christian teaching of the New Testament,” it would “unravel and clarify the confused manner of teaching of the Epistles”⁵⁵—and by implication, the other books of the New Testament, as not achieving together a clarification for him, at least, of pure Christian teaching.

⁵¹ Eckermann (24 769).

⁵² Letter to Herder, Sept. 4, 1788 (Stein 3 280).

⁵³ *Aphorismen und Fragmente* (17 776–777).

⁵⁴ Riemer, undated (22 544).

⁵⁵ *Theory of Color* (16 345).

This is not to say, however, that Goethe does not differentiate between Catholicism and Protestantism. For the former coming chronologically first betrays a tendency towards enforced all-inclusiveness of its church on the basis of positive belief; the latter, emerging later, a tendency towards reform, if only momentarily, in its focus on the true belief of the individual. Though it can be said that both churches have been in conflict with individuals, “who (they strive) to gather all together in (themselves),”⁵⁶ and although they have both sought to confront their congregations outwardly with “something grand and perfect . . . that unconsciously fills everyone with awe” and that “some tastelessness is also not lacking, so that human nature is placated and attracted,” this was in particular the case for Goethe with respect to the Catholic church, coming as it did after the fall of the Roman Empire and attempting to impart its teaching and communal order to the “brutal and base-minded characters” of the north, where “crude means were necessary.”⁵⁷ “This,” says Goethe, “is in general the genius of the external form of Catholic service to God”⁵⁸ and the reason why “the Roman church succeeded the most in making religion popular.”⁵⁹

To paraphrase Goethe, however, the ‘*internal* genius of the Catholic form of service to God,’ i.e., that pertaining to the direct relation of the Catholic congregation to the divine being, can most particularly be found in its sacrament of the Eucharist, its notion of the concrete incarnation of God in the real or empirical world. For as developed by Goethe in *Poetry and Truth*, “in the Eucharist, earthly lips are held to receive an incarnated divine being and are granted heavenly nourishment in the form of earthly nourishment.”⁶⁰ The meaning of the Eucharist “is

⁵⁶ *Poetry and Truth* (10 518).

⁵⁷ Letter to Zelter, Nov. 14, 1816 (21 198).

⁵⁸ *Italian Journey* (11 11–12).

⁵⁹ “Folk Songs” (14 426).

⁶⁰ *Poetry and Truth* (10 318).

in all Christian churches one and the same, regardless whether it is received with more or less reverence for its mystery, more or less accommodation to what is comprehensible.”⁶¹ But, he adds, the sacrament of the Eucharist must not stand alone:

No Christian can enjoy it with the true joy for which it is given, if the symbolic or sacramental sense has not been nourished in him. He must become accustomed to regarding the inner religion of the heart and the outer religion of the church as identical, as one great universal sacrament that divides itself into the several sacraments and that conveys its holiness, indestructibility and eternal nature through those divisions.⁶²

Catholic divine worship holds six sacraments to be authentic in addition to the Eucharist, with Baptism, Marriage, Confirmation, Confession and Penance, Extreme Unction and Ordination encompassing the life of the believer from birth to death in relation to the Christian community about him, and tends to succeed in this way in holding the Christian community together. Protestant divine worship “has too little fullness and consequence to hold the congregation together,” for it has only the sacrament of Eucharist where the Christian “shows himself to be active.”⁶³ Consequently Goethe exclaims, “How has (the) truly spiritual relation (of Catholic sacramental belief) not been torn apart in Protestantism!”⁶⁴

Conversely, the Protestant religion has for Goethe a pronounced tendency to reform of the Christian religion on the basis of Christ’s pure “teaching of love:”⁶⁵

[T]he spirit sought to free itself in the Reformation. Enlightenment with respect to Greek and Roman antiquity brought forth the wish, the longing, for a freer, more decent and tasteful life. It

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.* (10 317–318).

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* (10 321).

⁶⁵ Eckermann, Jan. 4, 1824 (24 551).

was not less favored by the fact that the heart aspired to return to a certain simple natural condition and the imagination, to concentrate itself.⁶⁶

Thus towards the end of his final conversation with Eckermann, he also observes:

We have no idea of all that we must be grateful to Luther and the Reformation for. We have become free of the chains of spiritual narrow-mindedness . . .⁶⁷

It would be a mistake to conclude that Goethe believed that the reformist character of Protestantism was realized all at once, however. Rather, it was evidenced for him in successive reformist acts throughout its history in relation to Catholicism and then within the various sectarian branches of the Protestant religion. And the Catholic religion, too, had to deal with various reformist tendencies at the outset and over the course of its history—and in time, in response to Protestant reforms:

If there is . . . a real need for a great reform in a people, God is with it and that reform succeeds. This was evident with Christ and His first disciples, for the appearance of the new teaching of love was needed by the peoples. It was similarly evident with Luther, for purification of the teaching disfigured by the priesthood was not less of a need.⁶⁸

But in Goethe's view the majority of those reforms were brought about by the "weak and needy" congregations of both Christian denominations. Only "divinely gifted," "chosen individuals" were able to comprehend the "eternal verities" of Christian belief purely in relation to primal religion (at least at this point in Goethe's religious development).

Goethe is, however, just as much aware of two related negative characteristics of the Protestant religion progressively revealed in its

⁶⁶ *Maxims and Reflections* (9 588).

⁶⁷ Eckermann, March 11, 1832 (24 771).

⁶⁸ Eckermann, Jan. 4, 1824 (24 550–551).

history: first, as was seen, that it tends to be unable to hold its congregation together, then, that it focuses on the morality of the individual with respect to every day domestic life: “Protestantism focuses on the moral development of the individual, thus the virtue that affects earthly, domestic life is its beginning and end.”⁶⁹ As a result, while freeing the individual, the Protestant religion “(gives) the single individual too much to bear.” Formerly, “the weight of conscience could be alleviated by others” through the forgiveness of sins and penance, “now an affected conscience must endure it alone and loses thereby the power to attain harmony again”⁷⁰—that is to say, harmony within himself, the world and ultimately with the divine being. Losing the feeling of this harmony, the natural feeling of primal religion, alone, weighed down by conscience, the Protestant tends to replace it with the lesser feelings of self-centered sentimentality: “With Protestants, as soon as good works and what is meritorious in them cease, sentimentality immediately arises and takes their place.”⁷¹

Thus Catholicism

gives its special attention to assuring man of his immortality, and more precisely, assuring good men of a happy afterlife . . . On account of smaller or greater failings, it also posits a middle condition, purgatory, which we can have an effect on while on earth by means of pious good works. Here God . . . stands in the background, as the glory of subordinate gods, coequal and similar to each other, in such a way that heaven is wholly full of riches.⁷²

“God stands in the background” in the sense that while the feeling of immediate oneness with or feeling of the highest being may be lost for Catholic believers who are not “thinking people” or “chosen ones,” its belief gives rise to a relatively large multiplicity of positive conceptions

⁶⁹ *Journal*, Sept. 7, 1807 (Erg Bd 2 282).

⁷⁰ H. Voss, Feb. 8, 1805 (22 365).

⁷¹ *Maxims and Reflections* (9 532).

⁷² *Journal*, Sept. 7, 1805 (Erg Bd 2 282).

“suitable for weak and needy humankind” and suggesting harmony with the world and with the divine being, as the latter’s imagined “glory.” Conversely, in Protestantism, given that it “focuses on the moral development of the individual” and that “earthly domestic life is its beginning and end,” God also stands in the background for non-thinking people, but in such a way that “heaven is empty,” less rich in positive belief, “and immortality is only spoken about problematically.”⁷³



In the end, Goethe concluded that the beliefs of the Christian religion were “confused” and “unclear,” incommensurable in themselves and in relation to each other and in need of a conceptual “unraveling”—*even for the “thinking people” of his invisible church*. As a result, as is argued in the following pages, Goethe revised his conception of natural or primal religion by amalgamating selected Christian articles of belief that appeared compatible with it.

The *Years of Wandering* is particularly important for an understanding this metamorphose of Goethe’s late religious thought. In the second chapter of its second book dealing with Wilhelm’s visit to the gallery of paintings of the Pedagogical Province depicting Jewish history and the Old Testament, Wilhelm remarks to his guide that “there is a gap in this history.” For they have portrayed the destruction of Jerusalem and the scattering of the Jewish people, “without presenting the divine Man who shortly before was still teaching there and who they didn’t want to listen to.”⁷⁴ His guide replies that this would have been a mistake, for “the life of this divine Man . . . stands in no relation to the

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Years of Wandering* (§ 176).

history of his time. It was a private life, His teaching, a teaching for individuals.”⁷⁵ In this vein, his guide continues:

What publicly happens to masses of peoples and their members belongs to world history and world religion . . . What happens inwardly to the individual belongs to . . . the religion of the wise: such was the religion that Christ taught and practiced, as long as He wandered about on earth.⁷⁶

But, it can be objected, Christianity was and is a revealed world religion. And the teaching of Jesus did stand in relation to the history of His age. After all, if Jesus hadn’t adapted His teaching to the circumstances of His times; if He hadn’t acquiesced to the worldly authority of Roman rule uniting the peoples of the known world; if He hadn’t sought to fulfill the positive prophecies and law of the Jewish religion with His teaching of peace and love, the Kingdom of Heaven and the forgiveness of sins; if He hadn’t attempted to heal the sick and bring salvation to the unrighteous and outcast—not just of the Jewish nation, but all of mankind, we wouldn’t know roughly 2000 years later what He taught. True, subsequent “thinking people” could understand that teaching in its positive nature purely in relation to primal religion, *if* they could somehow come to know it, but on the whole that teaching was transmitted over time by masses of Christian congregations lacking pure understanding, without which His teaching would have remained, if at all, an “invisible church” wholly detached from world history. And yet, Goethe himself writes that “the original worth of every religion can be judged only after the course of centuries by its consequences.”⁷⁷

Later, when Wilhelm visits the second gallery of paintings treating the New Testament and asks why it ends with the Last Supper and

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ “Divan Notes and Essays” (3 438).

Jesus' departure from His disciples, his guide replies that the Pedagogical Province distinguishes between the life of Jesus and His end:

In life, He appears as a true philosopher, . . . as wise in the highest sense. He stands His ground firmly; He goes His way without deviation and, by raising lower things up to Himself, by letting the ignorant, the poor, the sick, take part in His wisdom, His inner riches, His power, thereby seeming to make Himself their equals, He does not on the other hand deny His divine origin. He dares to declare Himself the equal of God, even to be Himself God. In this way, he amazes those about Him from youth onwards, wins some of them over to Himself, excites others to oppose Him . . . Thus His life is even more instructive and fruitful for the noble part of mankind than His death.⁷⁸

It is evident that Goethe, at this point—still conceiving Christianity from the standpoint of his invisible church of “divinely gifted” individuals, has not grasped the significance of the death of Jesus on the Cross and the essence of Christianity as actually existing revealed religion. For with His death Jesus gave up His life out of love for others in positing a new religion, one in which the believers of His church would similarly give up their lives out of love for others—if not physically, as the early and later martyrs of the church, then morally in the sense that individuals, mindful previously only of their this-worldly, empirical interests and aspirations, would care for others, in particular, “the ignorant, the poor, the sick,” in realizing the Kingdom of God, an ideal kingdom in which all would live in Jesus and have eternal life. And yet Jesus knew full well that in founding *one* church for the whole world and maintaining that no one could come to the Father except by Him, He would divide mankind, “excite others to oppose him”—not just the Jews, but the believers of other religions as well. But how can Christianity truly be a religion of peace and love, if that peace and love is restricted to His church, while exciting opposition and even hatred from unbelievers? What is clear is that Jesus, while claiming to have brought

⁷⁸ *Years of Wandering* (§ 178).

peace to the world, also declared many times that He did not come to bring peace, but a sword, division and judgement (even when He also said that those who lived by the sword would die by the sword). For not only would many outside His church react to the doctrines of the new religion with rejection and hatred, but many even within it would present themselves as believers to Jesus at the Last Judgement, having prophesied and done works in His name, and would hear those fateful words, “Depart from me, you workers of evil; I never knew you.” It is also not clear what the life of the Kingdom of God consists of, as a kind of devotional redemption of the sacrifice of Jesus and His followers in making the Kingdom’s realization possible, or a spiritual life engendered by the Holy Spirit in the Christian community throughout its history. And what of the unbelievers? Are they simply thrown into hell and purgatory, and how then has the Kingdom of peace and love truly encompassed the world? Is the meaning of the incarnation of Jesus celebrated in the Eucharist that He will be with Christians to the end of the age also a devotional remembrance of what He intended to accomplish with His death, or do His believers physically feel their oneness with Him—and if so, is that oneness with Jesus identity with a distinct, actually existing person, or with a spiritual principle that He embodied in His life and teaching?

A particularly consequential instance of the anomalies and contradictions pertaining to the positive beliefs of the Christian religion concerns the interpretation of the death of Jesus in relation to the “perpetually repeating essence of the world—the cycle of positive belief, its reform and the affirmation of new belief, or law, awareness of failures in observing the law and resulting sense of sinful estrangement from the divine being followed by eventual reconciliation with the divine being and subsequent promulgation of new positive law. For “weak and needy” Catholic and later Protestant congregations, soon after Christianity’s emergence and throughout its subsequent history, the Savior’s death is not held to exclusively involve physical death or moral sacrifice out of

love for others, but also spiritual death, perhaps even sinfulness in taking up the sins of the world in positing a new religion and new positive law encompassing that world (as would seem to be indicated by His final words on the Cross, where He appears to feel Himself forsaken by God, or the scriptural declaration that God sent His Son into the world in the likeness of sinful flesh). For Jesus Himself maintained that if He hadn't done the works that no one else did, men would not have sin, but now in seeing Him, they have hated both Him and the Father. According to this understanding of the death of Jesus, God sent His son in the likeness of sinful flesh in order to condemn man's sensual, real or empirical, unspiritual nature, with the result that the death of His followers consists of an ascetic resolve to weaken or mortify the sinful body, with their inevitable failures in this regard being repeatedly forgiven by the church (but without true reconciliation with the divine being until the resurrection of the dead).

On the other hand, for the "divinely gifted" believers, the "chosen ones" of both the Catholic and Protestant denominations, especially in the latter's early years, the denial or mortification of the inner sensual nature of the individual in complete negation of all previous experience of the outer world, is a consequent extension of the in-body experience of the Eucharist, where prophecies, articles of belief and the practices and visual structures of the church are symbols or metaphors, "eternal verities," expressing the stages of the believer's incommensurable journey towards complete union with the highest being in love, a path in which he is guided only by faith. Confronted with the "confused" and "unclear" anomalies and contradictions of Christian belief, Goethe, however, in a fashion reflective of his religious upbringing and the schools of enlightened, humanistic thought and other cultural factors of his time, affirmed the entire multiplicity of an individual's inner life and previous experience in the outer, real or empirical world in relation to the divine being in his final religious reflections, as resulting in

concrete manifestations of the divinity in the form of an individual's created works and eternal truths or verities in connection with the individual's creative life in relation to the unending life of the legacy of culture, as consisting of all such works, if always only in a manner ultimately incommensurable to rational understanding—whereby then the verities of both the Catholic and Protestant religions are comprehended by Goethe as one, united with each other in what might be termed alternating “catholic” and “protestant” moments of the inner life of every individual and of all religions and cultures in the “perpetually repeating essence of the world,” but in a sense in which the notion of sin effectively disappears from consideration.



In subsequently developing his religious thought, Goethe thus came to believe that “we are all . . . moving from a Christianity of word and belief to a Christianity of character and action” in which man's “God-given human nature” courageously “stand(s) fast on God's earth,” the outer ‘God-given’ empirical world, as itself manifestation of the highest being. For after Luther and the Reformation,

We have become free of the chains of spiritual narrowness and able, owing to our ever-growing culture, to return to the source and conceive Christianity in its (original) purity. We have once again the courage to stand fast on God's earth and feel ourselves in our God-given human nature.⁷⁹

The more industriously . . . we Protestants lead the way in noble-minded development, the sooner the Catholics will follow. As soon as the feel themselves touched by the ever-expanding enlightenment of the times, they will follow . . . In the end, all will be one.

For as soon as one has comprehended and become accustomed to the pure teaching and love of Christ as it is, one will feel oneself

⁷⁹ Eckermann, March 11, 1832 (24 771).

great and free as a human being, and will not attach so much importance to a little more or less in external forms of worship.

We all are also gradually moving from a Christianity of word and belief to a Christianity of character and action.⁸⁰

The mention of character and action in these two statements, combined with “ever-growing culture,” “ever-expanding enlightenment,” and resulting pure understanding of the Christian religion, is indicative of the course that Goethe’s final religious reflections took. Character (*Gesinnung*) for him “expresses itself in the capacity to be active;”⁸¹ enlightenment signifies freedom of belief from unexamined, uncomprehended positivity; and culture, the positive material the creative individual selects from the legacy of culture and makes use of or “comprehends” in his works, traditions, conventions, techniques, thoughts and beliefs, along with seminal works such as Homer, Plato and Aristotle or the Bible—views that are then reflected in Goethe’s transformation of the Christian dogma of incarnation and its belief in the Kingdom of God.

Thus, first of all, Eckermann’s last conversation closes with these paragraphs which, given their importance in determining Goethe’s religious thought in relation to Christianity, I will quote in full:

[Eckermann:] The conversation turned to great individuals who lived before Christ in China, India, Persia and Greece and in whom God’s power was just as efficacious as in many great Jews of the Old Testament. Then we came to the question: what can be said with regard to God’s effectiveness in exceptional individuals of our present day world?

[Goethe] . . . In religious and moral matters, men still concede the possibility at least of divine influence, but with respect to the works of science and the arts, they believe that those works are nothing but earthly things and only the products of human powers.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* (24 772).

⁸¹ “Draft of a Book of Peoples” (14 464).

But let someone try to create something with human determination and human powers that can stand beside the creations that bear the name of Mozart, Raffael or Shakespeare. I know very well that these three noble individuals are not the only ones and that in every branch of art there is a host of excellent spirits that have been active and created works that are as perfect and good as those three. But if they were as great as those individuals, they towered over common human nature to the same extent and were just as godlike as they were.

. . . God did not rest after the imagined six days of creation, but rather He has continued to be as active as He was on the first day. Constructing this unformed world out of simple material elements and setting it in motion year after year under the rays of the sun would certainly not have caused Him much enjoyment, if He hadn't had a plan to establish a plantation for the cultivation of spirits on that material foundation. In this way, He is continually efficacious in higher natures, in order to raise up the lower ones.⁸²

That elevation (*Erhebung*) of one individual by another individual transpires for Goethe by means of the latter's creative actions, his actions or works (*Taten, Werken*) raising others from the common level of existence and estrangement from the highest being, as was seen earlier to be the significance of Christ's actions in "(making) the higher life tangible."⁸³

Hence, in this otherwise enigmatic aphorism expressed in a letter to Schubarth, Goethe writes:

On
 belief love hope
 rests for the divinely favored individual
 religion art science
 these nourish and satisfy
 the need
 to pray to create to behold
 all three are one
 from first to last
 though separated in the middle.⁸⁴

⁸² Eckermann, March 11, 1832 (24 772–773).

⁸³ Letter to Zelter, Nov. 14, 1816 (21 196).

⁸⁴ Letter to K. E. Schubarth, April 21, 1819 (21 329).

“All three are one” refers simultaneously to religion, art and science; belief, love and hope; and pray, create and behold—meaning that each of these three must be understood as essentially one and forming together a whole (as seeming manifestations of the Trinity, like the three forms of revealed religion), though “separated in the middle,” that is to say, though differing in their concrete positive forms. In this context, Goethe’s remark in a late letter to Boisserée, where he observes that he had striven to be a Hypsistarian (*Hypsistarier*) all his life, can be understood:

I have learned in my old age of a sect called the Hypsistarians, who, wedged in between heathens, Jews and Christians, professed to treasure, admire, honor and, in so far as it stood in close connection with the divine, worship, the best and most perfect in all that they became aware of. There thus arose for me a joyous light out of the dark past, for I sensed that I had striven all my life to qualify myself as a Hypsistarian.⁸⁵

In religious works, artistic works, in scientific works—indeed, in all works represented in the legacy of culture, the creative individual acts in terms of a feeling in his heart or soul in which the highest being is physically or as it were eucharistically embodied in his breast:

Continue in uninterrupted observation of the duty of the day and examine thereby the purity of your heart . . . When you then draw a deep breath in a free moment and find room to elevate yourselves, you will most certainly also assume a proper position in relation to the highest being, which we must reverentially devote ourselves to by every means possible . . .⁸⁶

. . . the pure and quiet wink of the heart . . .

Wholly silently, a god speaks in our breast . . .

Wholly silently, but distinctly, we are shown

What is to be taken hold of and what to be fled.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Letter to Boisserée, March 22, 1831 (21 976).

⁸⁶ *Years of Wandering* (8 457).

⁸⁷ *Torquato Tasso* (6 261–262).

You will never miss the right path
If you act according to feeling and conscience.⁸⁸

In acting as a whole in accord with the feeling of the divine principle in his breast, the individual acts *unconsciously* as a whole, asserts the full multiplicity of his inner life and previous experience and knowledge of the legacy of culture and creates a whole, a whole that is ultimately incommensurable to himself and others:

O, that we forget so much to follow
The pure and quiet wink of the heart.
Wholly silently, a god speaks in our breast . . .⁸⁹

. . . (creative individuals) are wont to pull . . . everything that approaches them into their circle and transform it into something that belongs to them. They continue this process until the small or greater world, whose intention lies spiritually within them, also appears outwardly in bodily form.⁹⁰

. . . when men . . . construct a whole . . . that is beyond all demonstration and understanding, . . . they are neither able to discover clearly how they reached the conviction they have done so, nor what the precise basis of that conviction is . . .⁹¹

. . . the beginning and end of all writing, the reproduction of the world without by the inner world, which takes hold of everything, connects, rearranges, molds it, and displays it outwardly again in an individual form or manner, . . . remains eternally a secret.⁹²

When the healthy nature of man is active as a whole, when he feels himself in the world as in a great, beautiful, worthy and dear whole, . . . then the universe, if it were able to be aware of itself, would shout with joy as having reached its goal and admire the

⁸⁸ *Tame Xenien* (2 388).

⁸⁹ *Torquato Tasso* (6 261–262).

⁹⁰ J. D. Falk, Jan. 25, 1813 (22 673–674).

⁹¹ “Study after Spinoza” (16 843).

⁹² Letter to F. H. Jacobi, Aug. 21, 1774 (18 237).

summit of its becoming and being. For what use is the expenditure of suns and planets and moons, of stars and galaxies, of comets and nebulas, if in the end a fortunate human being does not delight in his existence unconsciously?⁹³

The legacy of culture, on the other hand, as consisting of the positive material shared by all works of individuals who have acted in accord with the feeling of the divinity in producing their works, constitutes for Goethe an ideal *world or whole of culture (Kulturwelt)* immanent in the real or empirical world—an apparent restoration of the harmony within the individual himself, with the world and with the divine being that Goethe found lost in Protestantism and for the most part only imagined as its positive glory in Catholicism:

When the healthy nature of man is active . . . , when he feels himself in the world as in a great, beautiful, worthy and dear whole, . . . then the universe, if it were able to be aware of itself, would shout with joy as having reached its goal and admire the summit of its becoming and being.⁹⁴

As their development progresses, all good men feel that they have a double role to play, a real and an ideal role, and the foundation of all that is superior is to be sought in this feeling.⁹⁵

We live in a time where we feel ourselves stimulated daily to recognize the two worlds that we belong to, the upper and lower, as interrelated, acknowledging thereby the ideal in the real, and thus soothe our momentary discomfort with finite things by elevation into the infinite sphere.⁹⁶

Man, however the earth attracts him with its thousands and thousands of appearances, raises his gaze questioningly and longingly to heaven, . . . because he feels deeply and clearly in himself that he is a citizen of that spiritual kingdom, the belief in which we are able neither to deny nor give up.⁹⁷

⁹³ “Winckelmann and his Century” (13 417).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* (13 417).

⁹⁵ *Poetry and Truth* (10 507–508).

⁹⁶ *Aphorisms and Fragments* (17 696).

⁹⁷ F. von Müller, April 29, 1818 (23 32).

This ideal world or whole of culture has then eternal life:

Mankind's song of praise, that it so pleases the divinity to hear, is never silent, and we . . . feel a divine good fortune when we apprehend the harmony emanating from all times and places.⁹⁸

—in so far as the positivity of the world of culture is assimilated and reformed or recreated by particular, actually existing empirical individuals in their concrete works, works that then stimulate or inspire future individuals with the capacity for creative activity to act in similar fashion—or that at least leave those who are not “divinely gifted,” “thinking people,” “creative individuals,” “helped and in good spirits,” just as Goethe believed that the positivity of all revealed religions, even when not understood purely, is beneficial to mankind generally:

The main virtue of mankind rests . . . on its ability to deal with and master the material of the legacy of culture. . . .

We continuously struggle with the legacy of culture . . . And yet the individual who has been given the capacity for original activity feels the calling to personally stand the test of this . . . struggle . . . For in the end, it is always only the individual, who is destined to confront the legacy of culture with heart and mind.⁹⁹

What was written and done shrivels up and only becomes something again when it is raised to life once more, when it is felt, thought and acted upon again.¹⁰⁰

What history offers, that gives life,
He willingly takes it up at once:
His soul collects what is widely scattered
And his feeling breathes life into what is unanimated.¹⁰¹

Whatever great, beautiful or meaningful object we encounter . . . must . . . weave itself with our inner life right from the start, become one with it, give birth to a new and better self in us, and so live on in us and be creatively active without end. There is only

⁹⁸ *Theory of Color* (16 340).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* (16 342–343).

¹⁰⁰ Letter to Zelter, June 1, 1809 (19 582).

¹⁰¹ *Torquato Tasso* (6 218).

an eternal newness that forms itself out of extensive elements of the past . . .¹⁰²

Positivity in this sense loses all connection for Goethe to estrangement from the divine being and the law, breaks the cycle of love—positivity—and law, or positivity—fulfillment or reconciliation with the divine being and renewed positivity:

I honor and love positivity and rest upon it myself, in so far as it has been increasingly put into action from the earliest times and serves us as the true foundation of life and activity.¹⁰³

The inextricably related human ages and times force us to acknowledge a legacy of culture . . .—all the more so, since the merits of the human race rest on the possibility of this legacy.¹⁰⁴

Or, as expressed in two of Goethe's late poems:

Truth was found already long ago,
It united a noble community;
Ancient truth, seize hold of it!

.....

*The past is lasting then,
The future living in advance,
The moment is eternity.*

And if you are finally successful,
And full of the feeling:
Only what is fruitful is true . . .

.....¹⁰⁵
Join the smallest company . . .

World soul, come and fill us!

.....

Good spirits taking part and guiding,
Highest masters gently leading
To Him, who creates and has created all.

¹⁰² F. von Müller, Nov. 5, 1823 (23 315).

¹⁰³ Letter to Zelter, Jan. 2, 1829 (21 825).

¹⁰⁴ *Theory of Color* (16 342).

¹⁰⁵ "Testament" (1 515).

And unending, living activity works
 To recreate what was created,
 In order that it does not become lifeless.
 And what hasn't been, now it wants to become
 Pure suns, colorful earths;
 In no case may it rest.

It shall move itself, act creatively,
 First form itself, then transform itself;
 It only seems for moments still.
 The eternal is ceaselessly active in them all . . .¹⁰⁶

It follows that positivity, so construed, lacks any necessary relation to an awareness of sin for Goethe. And indeed, Goethe rarely mentions sin in his writings and conversations and deals with it, as far as the author is aware, in only one brief, but noteworthy passage:

[T]hat evil something that separates us from the being that we owe life to, the being in terms of which all that should be termed living is to be enjoyed, that something called sin, I haven't known at all.¹⁰⁷

In this way, Goethe's hopes that a "morally universal world community" might be realized one day "(when people) unite and recognize each other . . . with heart and spirit, with understanding and love,"¹⁰⁸ are expressed in his notion of the unending life of the world of culture as ideal world immanent in the empirical world, kingdom of the higher being or God, a concrete, actually existing "richly filled" heaven for mankind, or as his invisible church, but now as *visibly* invisible:

Heavenly and earthly things constitute such an extensive kingdom that only the organs of all beings together can grasp it.¹⁰⁹



¹⁰⁶ "One and All" (1 514).

¹⁰⁷ "Confessions of a Beautiful Soul," *Years of Apprenticeship* (7 419).

¹⁰⁸ *Aphorisms and Fragments* (17 771–772).

¹⁰⁹ Letter to F. H. Jacobi, Jan. 6, 1813 (16 689).

Goethe and the Christian Religion

SUMMARY

Over the course of his life Goethe felt constantly challenged to determine the relation of his own religious and philosophical beliefs to those of the Christian revealed religion. The resulting reflections, expressed in many of his works, letters and conversations, fall into distinct periods or phases that this article will attempt to analyze. Towards the end of his life, however, Goethe came to the conclusion that the Christian religion, owing to numerous apparent anomalies and contradictions in its beliefs and doctrines, can never be rationally comprehended, though it can be known to reflect incommensurable eternal verities of the spiritual life of every individual and community of individuals. Upon this basis, Goethe will be shown to have developed a philosophy of an actually existing ideal Kingdom of God embracing all cultures and their associated revealed religions.

KEYWORDS

Christianity, Catholicism, Protestantism, revealed religion, invisible church, natural religion, primal religion, positivity of religion, true or divinely gifted chosen believers, pure understanding, three/four fold reverence, the highest being, God, belief vs. oneness with the divine being, perpetually repeating essence of the world, sin and the law.

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