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# Art and Religion

Max Stirner

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Originally entitled “Kunst und Religion”, this essay originally appeared in June 1842 in the radical newspaper “Rheinische Zeitung”, before Marx became its editor. In this translation, by Lawrence Stepelevich, all italics and other important grammatical features are those of the original text.

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Hegel treats of art before religion. This order is fitting, even under a merely historical perspective. Now, as soon as man suspects that he has another side of himself (*Jenseits*) within himself, and that he is not enough in his mere natural state, then he is driven on to divide himself into that which he actually is, and that which he should become. Just as the youth is the future of the boy, and the mature man the future of the innocent child, so that othersider (*Jenseitiger*) is the future man who must be expected on the other side of this present reality. Upon the awakening of that suspicion, man strives after and longs for the second other man of the future, and will not rest until he sees himself before the *shape* of this man from the other side. This shape fluctuates back and forth within him for a long time; he only feels it as a light in the innermost darkness of himself that would elevate itself, but as yet has no certain contour or fixed form. For a long time, along with other groping and dumb others in that darkness, the artistic genius seeks to express this presentiment. What no other succeeds in doing, he does, he presents the longing, the sought after form, and in finding its shape so creates the — Ideal. For what is then the perfect man, man’s proper character, from which all that is seen is but

mere appearance if it be not the Ideal Man, the Human Ideal? The artist alone has finally discovered the right word, the right picture, the right expression of that being which all seek. He presents that presentiment — it is the Ideal. ‘Yes! that is it! that is the perfect shape, the appearance that we have longed for, the Good News — the Gospel. The one we sent forth so long ago with the question whose answer would satisfy the thirst of our spirit has returned!’ So hail the people that creation of genius, and then fall down — in adoration.

Yes, adoring! The hot press of men would rather be doubled than alone, being dissatisfied with themselves when in their natural isolation. They seek out a spiritual man for their second self. This crowd is satisfied with the work of the genius, and their *disunion* is complete. For the first time man breathes easy, for his inward confusions are resolved, and the disturbing suspicion is now cast forth as a perceptible form. This Other (*Gegenüber*) is he himself and yet it is not he: it is his otherside to which all thoughts and feelings flow but without actually reaching it, for it is *his* otherside, encapsulated and inseparably conjoined with his present actuality. It is the inward God, but it is set without; and that is something he cannot grasp cannot comprehend. His arms reach outward, but the Other is never reached; for would he reach it how could the ‘Other’ remain? Where would this disunion with all of its pains and pleasures be? Where would be — and we can speak it outright, for this disunion is called by another name — *religion*?

Art creates disunion, in that it sets the Ideal over and against man. But this view, which has so long endured, is called religion, and it will only endure until a single demanding eye again draws that Ideal within and devours it. Accordingly, because it is a viewpoint, it requires another, an Object. Hence, man relates himself religiously to the Ideal cast forth by artistic creation, to his second, outwardly expressed Ego as to an Object. Here lie all the sufferings and struggles of the centuries, for it is fearful to be *outside of oneself*, having yourself as an Object,

self in every form, and that only in the light of *reason*. Reason only seeks itself, only troubles itself about itself, loves only itself — or rather, since it is not even an Object to itself — does not love itself but simply is with itself. And so, with a correct instinct, Neander<sup>10</sup> has proclaimed the destruction of the ‘God of the philosophers.’

But as it lies outside of our theme, we have not undertaken to speak any further of philosophy as such.

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<sup>10</sup> (Daniel A. Neander (1786–1850), Professor of Theology at the University of Berlin. He was a celebrated Church Historian. Stirner had attended his lectures.)

nances of his religion, he would exclude the Jew from Christian rights, or, what is the same, from the rights of a Christian — and, above all, from the things of the State. This is so, for religion is for anyone other than a mere tepid hanger — on a relationship of *disunion*.

And so, this is the standing of art to religion. Art creates the Ideal and belongs at the beginning of religion; religion has in the Ideal a mystery, and would, by holding fast to the Object and making it dependent upon itself unite with it in inward godliness. But when the mystery is cleared up, and the otherness and strangeness removed, and established religion is destroyed, then comedy has its task to fulfill. Comedy, in openly displaying the emptiness, or better, the deflation of the Object, frees men from the old belief, and so their dependency upon this exhausted being. Comedy, as befitting its essence, probes into every holy area, even into Holy Matrimony, for this itself is no longer — in the actual marriage — Holy. It is rather an emptied form, to which man should no longer hold.<sup>9</sup> But even comedy, as all the arts, precedes religion, for it only makes room for the new religion, to that which are will form again.

Art makes the Object, and religion lives only in its many ties to that Object, but philosophy very clearly sets itself apart from both. It neither stands enmeshed with an Object, as religion, nor makes one, as art, but rather places its pulverizing hand upon all the business of making Objects as well as the whole of objectivity itself, and so breathes the air of *freedom*. Reason, the spirit of philosophy, concerns itself only with itself, and troubles itself over no Object. God, to the philosopher, is as neutral as a stone — the philosopher is a dedicated atheist. If he busies himself with God, there is no reverence here, only rejection, for he seeks only that *reason* which has concealed it-

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<sup>9</sup> (This was written a year and a half before Stirner's own purposely irreverent and somewhat comical second marriage. See John Henry Mackay's *Max Stirner: sein Leben und sein Werk* (Berlin, 1910), p. 124ff.)

without being able to unite with it, and as an Object set over and against oneself able to annihilate itself and so oneself.<sup>1</sup> The religious world lives in the joys and sorrows which it experiences from the Object, and it lives in the separation of itself. Its spiritual being is not of reason, but rather of understanding. Religion is a *thing of understanding* (*Verstandes-Sache*)!<sup>2</sup> The Object is so firm that no pious soul can fully win it over to itself, but must rather be cast down by it, so fragile is its spirit when set against the Object of the understanding. 'Cold understanding!' — know ye not that 'cold' understanding? — Know ye not that nothing is so ardently hot, so heroically determined as understanding? 'Censeo, Carthaginem esse delendam' spoke the understanding of Cato, and he remained sane thereby.<sup>3</sup> The earth moves about the sun spoke the understanding to Galileo even while the weak old man knelt adjuring the truth — and as he rose up again he said 'and yet it moves about the sun'. No force is great enough to make us overthrow thought, that two times two is four, and so the eternal word of understanding remains this' Here I stand, I can do naught else!<sup>4</sup> The basis for such understanding is unshakable, for its object (two times two is four, etc.) does not allow itself to be shaken. Does religion have such understanding? Certainly, for it also has an unshak-

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<sup>1</sup> A clearly similar conception is found in Bruno Bauer's *The Trumpet of the Last Judgement over Hegel the Atheist and Anti-Christ*. Stirner had reviewed this text for Gutzkow's *Telegraph für Deutschland* in January of 1842.)

<sup>2</sup> (Stirner's treatment of both understanding (*Verstand*) and reason (*Vernunft*) follows that as given by Hegel.)

<sup>3</sup> (In full, 'Ideoque, Censeo ego Carthaginem esse delendam (Therefore, I vote Carthage to be destroyed). Cato usually concluded any of his addresses to the Roman senate with this harsh statement. The repetition of this uncompromising sentence was highly irritating to the majority of Senators.)

<sup>4</sup> (Luther's statement to the Diet at Worms in 1521. Stirner repeats it in *The Ego and His Own* (p. 61), and characterizes it as 'the fundamental maxim of all the possessed'.)

able Object to which it is fortified: the artist has created it for you and only the artist can regain it for you.

Religion itself is without genius. There is no religious genius, and no one would be permitted to distinguish between the talented and the untalented in religion. For religion, everyone has the same capacity, good enough for the understanding of the triangle and the Pythagorean theory as well. Of course, one does not confuse religion and theology, for not everyone has the same capacity here, just as with higher mathematics and astronomy, for these things require a particular level of — calculation.

Only the founder of a religion is inspired, but he is also the creator of Ideals, through whose creation any further genius will be impossible. Where the spirit is bound to an Object, its movement will henceforth be fully determined in respect to that Object. Were a definite doubt over the existence of God, over this transcendent object to emerge for the religious person, that person would stop being religious, somewhat as a believer in ghosts would no longer said to be a believer once he definitely doubted their existence. The religious person concerns himself only about the 'Proofs for God's Existence' because he, as bound fast within the circle of belief, inwardly reserves the free movement of the understanding and calculation. Here, I say, the spirit is dependent upon an object, seeks to explain it, to explore it, to feel it, to love it, and so forth ... because it is not free, and since freedom is the condition of genius, therefore the religious spirit is not inspired. Inspired piety is as great an inanity as inspired linen-weaving. Religion is always accessible to the impotent, and every uncreative dolt can and will always have religion, for uncreativity does not impede his life of dependency.

tuality that which it thinks but to destroy. And so, we do not elect to condemn its horror!

Art creates a new Ideal, a new Object and a new religion. It never goes beyond the making of religion. Raphael's portrayal of Christ casts him in such a light that he could be the basis of a new religion — a religion of the biblical Christ set apart from all human affairs. From that first moment when the tireless understanding begins to pursue its long course of reflection upon a new Object, it steadily deepens in its thoughts until it finally turns upon itself in total inwardness. With devoted love, it sinks into itself and attends to its own revelations and inspirations. But yet this religious understanding is so ardently in love with its own Object that it must have a burning hatred for all else — religious hatred is inseparable from religious love. Who does not believe in the Object, he is a heretic, and who is not truly godly, he tolerates heresy. Who will deny that Philip II of Spain is infinitely more godly than Joseph II of Germany, and that Hengstenberg<sup>7</sup> is truly godly, whereas Hegel<sup>8</sup> is quite not? In our times, the amount of hate has diminished to the extent that the love of God has weakened. A *human* love has infiltrated, which is not of godly piety but rather of social morality. It is more 'zealous' for the good of man than for the good of God. Truly, the tolerant Friedrich the Great cannot serve as a paragon of *godliness*, but can indeed well serve as a pattern for *manliness*, for humanity. Whosoever serves a God must serve him completely. It is, for example, a perverted and unreasonable demand of the *Christian* to have him lay no fetters upon the Jew — for even Christ, with the mildest heart, could do naught else, for otherwise he would have been indifferent to his religion, or would have been proceeding thoughtlessly. If the Christian were to reflect *understandingly* upon the ordi-

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<sup>7</sup> (Ernst W. Hengstenberg (1802–72), a determined and influential Lutheran pietist critic of Hegel and the Young Hegelians.)

<sup>8</sup> (Bauer's *Posaune des jüngsten Gerichts* had satisfied both the Berlin pietists and the Young Hegelians that Hegel was a covert atheist.)

strives to recover this world once again for man's inwardness, to draw it back to its source, to make it again *subjective*. Religion endeavors to reconcile the Ideal, or God, with man, the subject, and to strip God of his hard Objectivity. God is to become inward — 'Not I, but Christ lives in me.' Man, sundered from the Ideal, strives to win God and God's Grace, and to finally transform God into his own being (*Gott ganz zu seinem Ich zu machen*), and God, separated from man, would only win him for the Kingdom of Heaven. Both sides seek and so complement each other. However, they will never find one another, and will never become united, for if they ever would then religion itself would vanish, for religion only exists in this separation. Accordingly, the believer hopes for nothing more than that he will someday have a 'face-to-face *view*'.

But still, art also accompanies religion, for the inwardness of man is expanded by its struggle with the Object, and in the genius of the artist it breaks forth again into a new expression, and the Object becomes yet further enhanced and illuminated. Thankfully, hardly a generation has been passed without such enlightenment by art. But, at the last, art will stand at the close of religion. Serene and confident, art will claim its own once again, and by so doing will rob the Object of its objectivity, its 'other-sidedness', and free it from its long religious imprisonment. Here, art no longer will enrich its Object, but totally destroy it. In reclaiming its creature, art rediscovers itself and renews its creative powers as well. It appears, at the decline of religion, as a trifling with the full seriousness of the old belief, a seriousness of content which religion has now lost, and which must be returned to the joyful poet. Hence, religion is presented as a ridiculous *comedy*.<sup>6</sup> Now, however, terrible this comedic destruction might be, it will nevertheless restore to ac-

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<sup>6</sup> (Cf. Hegel's similar treatment of Comedy which unmasks 'the pretentious claims of the universal abstract nature', in *Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baille (London, 1964), pp. 745ff)

'But is not love the proper essence of religion, and is not that totally a matter of feeling and not of understanding?'<sup>5</sup> But if it is a matter of the heart, must it be less a matter of the understanding? If it takes up my whole heart, then it is a concern of my heart — but that does not preclude it engaging my whole understanding as well, and that in itself is nothing particularly good, since hate and envy can also be concerns of the heart. Love is, in fact, only a thing of the understanding (*Verstandes-Sache*), but otherwise, it can retain unblemished its title as a thing of the heart. Love, in any case, is not a concern of reason (*Sache der Vernunft*), for in the Kingdom of Reason there is even less love than that which will be celebrated, according to Christ, in the Kingdom of Heaven. Of course it is permitted to speak of a love that 'passes understanding', but it is either so far beyond understanding as to be worthless — as that often called love by those enamoured by an attractive face — or it can appear in the future, a love that is presently beyond the expression of understanding, but yet to have expression. Childish love, without consciousness, is only understandable *in itself*, and taken alone is nothing without the given concerns of consciousness, going only so far as the maturation and growth of the child's understanding. As long as the child gives no sign of understanding, it shows — as anyone can learn from experience — no love. Its love begins in *fear* — or, if one wishes to say, in respect — of that Object which first separates itself from the general chaos that contains all, including men, and which then focuses itself upon it more than another. The child loves because it is drawn by a presence, or thing, and so a person, into its boundary of power or its magical circle. It clearly *understands* how the being of its mother is distinguished from another being even if it yet knows not how *to speak of this understanding*. No child

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<sup>5</sup> (An obvious reference to the sentimental religiosity of dependency held by Hegel's rival Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Stirner had attended his lecture series at the University of Berlin in the Spring of 1827.)

loves before any *understanding*; and its most devoted love is nothing but that innermost understanding. Whoever has sensibly observed the love of a child will find this principle confirmed. But not only does the love of a child rise and sink with the understanding of its 'Object (*Gegenstandes*)' (as so often the loved one is significantly, but crudely, named) but rather every love. If a misunderstanding enters, so love more or less exists while it lasts, and one even uses the word 'misunderstanding' to exactly signify the discord which disturbs love. Love is gone and irretrievably lost whenever one has been totally mistaken about another: the misunderstanding is then complete, and the love extinguished.

The beloved thing is an indispensable Object, an 'Other (*Gegenstand*)'. It is this way with the understanding, that one and only proper spiritual act of religion, because understanding is only thought over and about an *object*, only meditation and devotion, and not free, undirected (*objectlose*) 'reasonable' thinking, which religion would rather consider and so condemn as 'philosophical chimeras'. Since to the understanding an object is necessary, it will always cease its activity whenever it finds more to know. Its concern with a case expires with its activity upon the case, and for it to willingly dedicate itself and its powers to anything, that thing must be a *mystery* for it. This holds equally for the beloved as the lover. A marriage is only assured of a steady love when the couple discover themselves anew each day, and when each recognizes in the other an inexhaustible spring of life, that is, a mystery, unfathomed and incomprehensible. If they find nothing new in one another, so love dissolves inexorably into boredom and indifference. The *activity* of understanding, when unable to be exercised upon a mystery because its darkness has been dispelled, turns away from the completely understood and now insipid other. Who wishes to be loved must take care, like the clever woman, not to offer all charms at once. With something new every morning the love might

endure centuries! The understanding is concerned with real mysteries which it develops into affairs of the heart: the real person is involved with matters of understanding, and so these are transformed into concerns of the heart.

Now as art has created the Ideal for man, and with this gives man's understanding an object to wrestle with, a wrestling match which will, in the course of time, give worth to those empty objects of the understanding, so is art the creator of religion, and in a philosophical system — such as Hegel's — it should not be placed after religion. Not only have the poets Homer and Hesiod 'made the gods of the Greeks', but others, as artists, have established religions, although one hesitates to apply the superficial name 'Artist' to them. Art is the beginning, the *Alpha* of religion, but it is also its end, its *Omega*. Even more — it is its companion. Without art and the idealistically creative artist religion would not exist, but when the artist takes back his art unto himself, so religion vanishes. However, in this return it is also preserved, for it is regenerated. Whenever art strides forth in its full energy, it creates a religion and stands at its source. On the other hand, philosophy is never the creator of a religion, for it never produces a *shape* that might serve as an Object of the understanding, and its insensible ideas do not lend themselves to being the revered objects of cultic worship. Art, other than philosophy, is compelled to draw forth from its seclusion within the concealing darkness of the *subject* the proper and best form of the spirit, the most completely idealized expression of the spirit itself, and to develop it and to release it as an *Object*. At that, man stands opposite to this Object, this creation of his spirit, to the God, and even the artist falls before it on his knees. In this engagement and involvement with the Object, religion pursues a course opposite of art. In art, the world of the artist is set before one's eyes as an Object, a world which the artist has brought forth and concentrated from the full power and richness of his own inwardness, a world which will satisfy every real need and longing. For its part, religion