Dialectics of Religion in the Roman World

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Chapter 1
A Dialectical Approach to the Roman Religion of Utility

The Hinges of History

RUDOLF J. SIEBERT / DUSTIN J. BYRD

In the perspective of the dialectical religiology, informed by the dialectical logic of Georg W. F. Hegel, the dialectical materialism of Karl Marx, and the dialectical Critical Theory of Religion of the Frankfurt School, the objective structure of the Roman Religion of Utility, or äussere Zweckmässigkeit (external purposiveness) consisted of (A) god or the gods, (B) their relationship to nature and man, and (C) the cult, in which the Romans related themselves to their gods, and from which they moved into family, civil society, state, and history.¹ The character of the cult (worship) of the Roman Religion of Utility was rooted in its dialectical structure: the pre-Christian Romans served the gods, for the sake of a purpose, i.e. the safety and prosperity of the Roman State, be it the Republic or the Empire. However, the actual, subjective content of the Roman Religion of Utility did not begin with the gods, or their nature, but with man, with human purpose: with the need, want, trouble, and/or necessity of the Roman citizen.² This troubled condition generated the Romans’ piety. Thus, their worship was the positing of a power in order to remedy the Roman subject’s needs and necessities. It was, in essence, a “quid pro quo” religion, or even a “do ut des” (I give that you may give). As if in a mere transaction, the gods are given sacrifice and worship, so that they may return benefits and protections upon the petition. We approach the dialectical structure of the Roman religion with the help of dialectical method, the triplicity, the trinity, as it has been developed in Greek and Roman antiquity by Plato and the Neo-Platonists, and as it has been rediscovered, to begin with, by instinctive insight, but left lifeless and incomprehensible, now having been raised to its significance as an absolute method and adopted in modernity in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, the greatest modern

enlightener. This dialectical method and logic has been further completed by the German idealist Georg W. F. Hegel and his dialectical materialist student Karl Marx. Such a Hegelian perspective will serve as the theoretical basis for our analysis of ancient Roman religion, as its deployment gives us a penetrating look into the fundamental logic that structures the religious Weltanschauung (worldview) and religious praxis within the Roman Republic and the Empire.

From the perspective of Hegel’s dialectical logic, true form is set up in its true content, and the conception of science has come to light. The dialectical method constitutes the modern enlightenment, which separates from mythology as well as from positivism, enlightenment’s perversion. The method of triplicity, or trigonomy, or the logical law of the three moments, means determinate negation, or double negation, and can be found in many positive religions already long before the Platonic philosophy, not only in the Roman Religion of Purposiveness, but also in Daoism, the Religion of Measure, in Hinduism, the Religion of Imagination, in Zoroastrianism, the Religion of Light and Darkness, Good and Evil, in the Egyptian Religion of Riddle, in the Gothic Religion of Blood and Soil, and in Christianity, the Religion of Freedom. In the history of religions, bourgeois skepticism abstracted from the fact that the death – the nothing of one particular positive religion – was determinate, concrete, or specific negation, and was the nothing of that positive religion, out of which it came as a historical or logical result, e.g. the Roman Religion out of the Greek Religion of Fate and Beauty, Christianity out of the Jewish Religion of Sublimity as well as the Greek and Roman religion. Positive religions die but are born again in different forms: like the Phoenix Bird, or better still, like the death and resurrection of the God Tammuz (Dumuzid) in the Mesopotamian/Syrian Religion of Pain, or the God Osiris in the Egyptian religion, and the Christ in Christianity. Bourgeois skepticism is abstract negation. Dialectic is determinate negation (aufheben). Once the result of the death of one positive religion is apprehended as it truly is, not skeptically, or paradoxically, but rather dialectically, as determinate, concrete, or specific negation, then a new form of positive religion has thereby immediately arisen. Thus, according to our dialectical religiology, the formation of the Roman gods did not simply negate abstractly the Greek gods, but, despite of all skepticism, also preserved them to a large extent, if under different names. The formation of the Roman gods was, dialectically seen, hardly differentiated from their cult. This was so because the free Roman cult presupposed a truth, which was in-and-for-itself

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a universal, objective, and truly divine one, and one which existed for-itself through its content above the particular subjective need and/or want of the individual Roman citizens. Roman worship was thus the process in which the individual Roman citizens gave themselves enjoyment through their identification with a particular divinity, in both the Republic and Empire.

Marx’s dialectical method was, according to its foundation, not only different from the Kantian and Hegelian one, but their direct opposite. Marx claims in his *Das Kapital*, that,

to Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i. e., the process of thinking, which under the name of “the idea,” he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurges of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of the “idea.” With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind and translated into forms of thought.

The ideal is nothing other than the human head turned over and translated into the material. Marx had criticized the mystifying side of the Hegelian dialectic already in 1843, at a time when it was still the fashion of the day in Germany and Europe. However, when Marx worked out the first volume of his *Das Kapital*, the “peevish, arrogant, and mediocre epigones,” who at the time in educated Germany had the last word, were pleased with themselves in treating Hegel as the good Moses Mendelson, i. e. as a dead dog. Yet, Marx confessed openly to be the disciple of that great thinker. However, according to Marx, dialectical logic suffered at the hands of Hegel due to his mystifying idealistic language. Nevertheless, that did not diminish the fact that it was Hegel who first articulated dialectical logic’s universal form in a comprehensive and conscious mode. For Marx, Hegel’s idealistic dialectic was indispensable, especially as it could be interpreted through materialism. He merely had to turn it around materialistically, in order to discover the rational core in its mystical, i. e. idealistic cover.

According to Marx, in its mystified, idealistic form, dialectical logic was fashionable in Germany because it appeared to “transfigure” and “glorify” the status quo. Writing in 1873, Marx said,

In its rational form it is a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors, because it includes in its comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up; because it regards every historically developed social form

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8 Marx. *Capital Vol 1–3.*
10 Ibid.
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