Hegel, Islam, and Liberalism: Religion and the Shape of World History[[1]](#endnote-1)

Hegel occupies a strange position within the history of Western philosophical thought. He is a key resource for Marx and is thus revolutionary. He advocates for a strong state with homogenizing and nationalistic tendencies, so he is reactionary. His views on non-Europeans and women are typical of the racist, Eurocentric and gendered thinking that much of recent philosophy has sought to escape. Yet, his theory of recognition has been a resource for this work and his political philosophy has been a tool for postcolonial thought. With regards to liberal political philosophy, Hegel defends individual freedom, stresses the importance of private property and urges religious tolerance. He also frequently opposes philosophers now regarded as part of the liberal tradition, emphasizes equality even at the expense of individual freedom and opposes representative forms of government. So, while Hegel has liberalizing tendencies, he also represents a case for a philosophy that thinks askew the set of concepts and questions that were coming to define liberalism in the period that he was writing.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Indeed, it is in this period that liberalism is in the process of becoming the dominant framework for European, and eventually “Western”, political thought. In this key historical moment, he offers detailed considerations of two issues fiercely debated in this process of consolidation: the question of the religious other (especially the Jews, marginalized Christian communities, and Islam) and the French Revolution. Both spark debates about the individual in relation to the state, the individual as a member of the community, the nature of will, the question of freedom, and the dangers of fanaticism. Following Hegel’s ideas about history, law, religion, and politics—his political theology—illuminates the role of Islam in shaping the intersecting notions of liberal, the West, and Europe.

This investigation contributes to the ongoing work assessing Hegel’s role in the development of Eurocentric tendencies within the Western philosophical tradition. These efforts have focused on the Eurocentrism of Hegel’s philosophy of history in general and the racial logic by which other regions of the world are marginalized or excluded.[[3]](#endnote-3) Though this important work sometimes touches on questions of Islam or the Arab, religion is not a primary focus of these assessments. Yet for Hegel, Christianity is essential to both the narrative and logic of the supremacy of Europe, and this supremacy is defined in opposition to Islam. As Theodore Vial has recently demonstrated, the categories of religion and race are closely related in German thought during this period.[[4]](#endnote-4) Further, Vial shows that they are related in understandings of subjectivity and history that continue to be influential for liberal thought. In focusing on Hegel’s treatment of religion, new facets of his understanding of world history come to light.

After briefly suggesting that liberalism be conceived of in terms of a “problem-space”, I will offer a reading of Hegel’s political theology, his view of fanaticism and its implications for thinking about Hegel’s relationship to liberalism. Contextualizing his understanding of Islam within his wider work on fanaticism and history allows a rethinking of his view of world history. I argue that Hegel does not provide resources for narrating a history of a more inclusive Europe, but that interrogating his philosophy offers strategies for thinking askew the liberal problem-space and reconsidering identities formed in opposition to the Islamic fanatic. Such an interrogation reveals the assumptions at work in contemporary questions such as

“can Islam by liberalized?” and “to what extent can the West tolerate Islam?” Engaging with Hegel reveals key assumptions entailed in asking such questions.

*The Problem-Space of Liberalism*

Any discussion of Islam or liberalism is complicated by the historical and geographical variety of both.[[5]](#endnote-5) In the case of liberalism, this variety is only further complicated by the division into economic, political, and cultural forms. To ask whether Hegel or Islam is “liberal” thus risks assuming a unity to the term or, to evaluate according to liberalisms’ own self-definition.[[6]](#endnote-6) The reverse is also true—to argue that Hegel provides some form of a critique of liberalism is to also claim that there is something identified by that term. Any attempt to offer a concrete definition is an exercise in self-defeat: either the definition is too general, describing no specific liberalism, or too specific and of limited utility.

One means of addressing this ambiguity is to take liberalism as a “problem-space” rather than a defined concept. David Scott uses this term to describe

an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs… what defines this discursive context are not only the particular problems that get posed as problems as such (the problem of “race,” say), but the particular questions that seem worth asking and the kinds of answers that seem worth having. Notice, then, that a problem-space is very much a context of dispute, a context of rival views, a context, if you like, of knowledge and power. But from within the terms of any given problem-space what is in dispute, what the argument is effectively about, is not itself being argued over.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Discussing liberalism as a problem-space acknowledges that there is not a universal concept of liberalism as such, nor a single, neat philosophical tradition to be traced. Rather it is a set of questions, answers, and debates that has identifiable limits and tensions.

Wendy Brown offers a description of this problem-space as “the distinctly Western body of modern political theory and practices built on the assumption of the ontologically a priori nature of the individual, which accord primacy to private individual liberty.”[[8]](#endnote-8) To this brief summary, one could add that this distinct set of questions, answers, and debates begins to be articulated in its modern form by John Locke and, as such, places an emphasis on the exercise of individual liberty through the form of property protected by the force of law.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Brown’s definition includes an important qualification and a key assumption. First, both her description and my amendments are concerned with political theory. While there may be a connection between *liberalism*, in this sense, and *liberals*, in the vernacular sense of the term, establishing and analyzing this link lies beyond the scope of this essay. What is important is that the problem-space of liberalism takes the primacy of the individual, freedom, and property as non-negotiable starting points for political discourse. Even though there is great division on each of those terms within liberal political philosophy, they still dictate the terms within which advocates for other political perspectives must make their case for an alternative.

Second, Brown identifies liberalism as a Western phenomenon. While liberalism has (been) spread to other parts of the world, its intellectual and cultural foundations are in “the West.” This point is particularly important when considering religion, as the Western origin of liberalism is a key theme in considerations of Islam and its place in Europe. The West is defined against the Islamic other through a contrast of the former’s liberalism and the latter’s despotism. Liberal, secular, European, Christian, and Western are mutually reinforcing terms that come to define each other in opposition to the racial and religious other.[[10]](#endnote-10)

In addition to this discursive dynamic, Barry Hindess identifies an underlying historicist and developmental logic that appears in both defenses of liberal superiority and necessitates the work of liberalization.[[11]](#endnote-11) While the philosophical origins of this historicism are complex, Hegel offers a defining account of the historical unfolding of a world spirit that continues to influence progressive notions of history. Understanding the place, or non-place, of Islam in that history opens up the possibility of reimagining the relationship between Europe and Islam.

*Hegel and Fanaticism: Islam and the French Revolution*[[12]](#endnote-12)

For Hegel, Islam is a fanatical religion and fanatical religions are necessarily political. The relationship between state and religion is essential for Hegel, as he makes clear in his 1831 distillation of his political theology: “There is one concept of freedom in religion and state. This one concept is the highest concept that human beings have, and it is made real by them. A people that has a bad concept of God has also a bad state, bad government, and bad laws.”[[13]](#endnote-13) Hegel’s philosophy is also political theological in that he explores the limits of the state and law through his discussions of fanaticism and Islam. Not all of his figures of fanaticism are religious. He employs the term to describe Africa, paralleling the racial dimension of his description of the Orient, Turk, and Saracen, and he also uses it in his analysis of the French Revolution.[[14]](#endnote-14) Fanaticism is thus not only a property of the racial or religious other; it is a potential threat within Western European Christianity.

What protects Western European Christianity from this threat—present in Catholicism, Puritanism, and Anabaptists—are the advancements made by German Protestantism. The most sympathetic readings of Hegel on religion argue that his understanding of this “consummate religion” can be restated. It is not German Protestantism as such that is the consummate religion, rather it provides a model open to all religions (and even certain communities that would not normally be regarded as religious).[[15]](#endnote-15) This model has two interrelated aspects, as Hegel’s political theological maxim makes clear: the concept of God and its political implications. Protestant Christianity is the consummate religion because its understanding of God as Triune allows God to become concrete in Christ. In the person of Jesus, divinity is a “particular human personality,” but the resurrection means that he is now an “exclusively Spiritual Presence” (PH, 390). As such, human beings must look within for the “*definite embodiment*” of the divine (PH, 393). God is in the world through human knowledge of God. “Human consciousness and activity are God’s concretization of himself and the means of his self-knowledge.”[[16]](#endnote-16) This emphasis on subjectivity and inwardness is the distinctive contribution of German Protestantism.

What may initially appear as theological speculation is at the heart of Hegel’s political philosophy. It is in Christianity’s self-consciousness of embodying the divine that “the West” gains “a comprehension of its own principle of subjective infinite Freedom” (PH, 393). God, the universal divine, is not external, but united to humanity. This relationship between the universal and particular allows freedom to be actualized, in Hegel’s sense of that term. As he explains in the *Philosophy of Right*, “Actuality is always the unity of universal and particular, the universal articulated in the particulars which appear to be self-subsistent, although they really are upheld and contained only in the whole. Where this unity is not present, a thing is not actual.[[17]](#endnote-17) Freedom is unity with, not submission to.

Religion, in the consummate form of German Protestant Christianity, is thus essential to achieving true human freedom. All the other religions, those that are not of a “genuine kind,” remain a persistent source of danger. They possess the same emotional potency that allows for connections to the universal, but without the progression to inwardness and unity with particularity. Without this unity, the universal remains abstract and the particular is merely individual and subjective. Throughout his work, Hegel describes this lack of unity in terms of capriciousness: the world is subjected to religious intuitions and feelings and is judged according to an abstraction (PR, §270r:243). The failure to achieve the necessary unity of the universal and particular had profound consequences for the relationship between religion and the state. Consummate religion is also secular religion, in the sense that religion is a condition for the actualizing of freedom but does not require that the state be ruled by religion. Religion is a foundation for the state but can only be “a *foundation*” (PR, §270r:244). Any on-going subjection of law or the state to religious judgment privileges a subjective relationship to the abstract rather than the objectivity of the freedom achieved through religion and grounded in reason. It is only by “subduing one’s opinions through the labour of study, and subjecting one’s will to discipline” that religion can function as a foundation (PR, §270r:246). Through submitting the feelings of religion to the objectivity of reason, the state becomes “the divine will, in the sense that it is spirit present on earth, unfolding itself to be the actual shape and organization of a world,” resulting in “a stable and authoritative” law (PR, §270r:244-45). The church feels, but the state “*knows*” (§270r:250).[[18]](#endnote-18)

While it is only German Protestantism that has achieved a state reflecting the divine will, other religions are not equal in their error. When Hegel offers religious examples in contrast to this Christian understanding, he repeatedly invokes the same three: pantheism (particularly with reference to Spinoza), Judaism, and Islam. Though there are important differences between these examples, they all share a commitment to God as One.[[19]](#endnote-19) “The One” is universal like the God of Christianity, but in its One-ness, this universality can only be abstract. Unlike in Christianity, the universal is not united with the particular, and thus remains external; their gods are “an *other-world* existence” (PH, 389). This fixation on the abstract and external breeds a form of piety that submits all particularity—all actual existence—to subjective validation. For Hegel, this is why religious fanaticism is also political fanaticism (PR, §270r:245). In the *Philosophy of History*, Hegel argues that freedom is only possible “where Individuality is recognized as having its positive and real existence in the Divine Being” (PH, 50).Freedom is the result of a sublation between the divine and human that remains impossible if God is abstract.[[20]](#endnote-20) For Hegel, both Judaism and Islam render human freedom impossible and the human relationship to God is reduced to one of obedience and “onerous service”.[[21]](#endnote-21) True freedom is only possible through the Trinity (LPR2, 156).

While neither Judaism or Islam are religions of freedom, Hegel clearly judges Judaism to be superior. He argues that Judaism is a religion of particularity because of its national God (LPR2, 158). In other words, Judaism’s lack of universalism is what it makes it better than Islam and inferior to Christianity. It has no expansionist drive. Its adherents may not be free, but they are only fanatical when under attack (LPR2, 438). Thus, when Hegel turns to the question of tolerating religious minorities, he offers the Jews as an example of a group that should be tolerated provided that the state is sufficiently strong (PR, §270r:247n98). Islam on the other hand, in its universalism, is essentially fanatical. Islam is the elimination of all particularity: all national, caste, and racial difference is erased as the human is only a believer (PH, 357). Islam is the devaluation of the individual: while the European is concrete and complex—“a bundle” of [relations]”—the Muslim is “*one* passion and *that alone*” (PH, 358).[[22]](#endnote-22)

While Judaism’s nationalism allows a limited form of politics, the Arabs, the “empire of fanaticism” (PH, 100), lack a constitution or political project (PH, 116). Their fanatical politics is rendered a form of anti-politics. The sole aim of Islam is worship of the One which requires the total subjugation to secular existence (PH, 356). Muslim violence is not the pursuit of political goals, but a negative destruction of any particularity in the name of the abstract universal One (LPH3, 31). For the One, in its abstractness, is negatively related to all concrete particulars. All that is left is subjugation to the abstract.

Hegel has a begrudging admiration for this fanaticism. Devotion to the abstract universal elevates the Muslim above “all petty interests,” encourages “magnanimity and valour” and banishes “selfishness and egotism” (PH, 358-59). It is in acknowledging these advantages that Hegel draws a connection to the French Revolution. If Islam is “*La religion et la terreur*” then the Revolution is “*la liberté et la terreur* (PH, 358). Hegel makes a similar, though more sustained, comparison in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* in 1824. Here, he again focuses on Islam as the veneration of an abstract One. This worship must take the form of a “perfect formalism,” which he connects to the French Revolution, wherein

liberty and equality were affirmed in such a way that all spirituality, all laws, all talents, all living relations had to disappear before this abstraction, and the public order and constitution had to come from elsewhere and be forcibly asserted against this abstraction. For those who hold fast to the abstraction cannot allow anything determinate to emerge, since this would be the emergence of something particular and distinct in contrast with this abstraction (LPR3, 218).

While Hegel makes this connection between Islam and the French Revolution, they are differentiated by the question of freedom. For Hegel, fanaticism can reflect “the enthusiasm of a people for its independence” (PH, 359). Such freedom may be abstract, but is an aim nonetheless. The Revolution can be read as an example of a fanatical response to an intractable political problem. In the *Philosophy of History*, he argues that the French government was incapable of realizing freedom. The attempt to realize freedom in a fundamentally unfree society can only be violent. Right, in Hegel’s sense, could only be achieved “*all at once*” (PH, 446-7). This attempt was doomed to failure, however, because freedom cannot be realized without “the emancipation of conscience” (PH, 453). Revolutions require Reformations, otherwise they remain a form of submission to an abstract universal. Yet Hegel does not think that people change their conscience without changes in the actuality of their situation.[[23]](#endnote-23) So the Revolution was both a necessary event in world history and one that could not succeed. This stands in contrast to Islam, which is an enthusiasm without remainder. It has no limits or restraints and is indifferent to all concerns other than the One (PH, 359). Fanaticism, in the form of Islam, breeds an anti-political indifference and fatalism (LPR3, 243). God is One and absolute, so there is nothing worth doing other than worshiping that God. Everything else is temporary and insignificant by comparison.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Hegel’s political theological critique of Islam is that this worship of the abstract One generates a negative relationship to particularity that is incapable of sustaining human freedom. He finds a similar issue in the French Revolution, but has a more ambiguous assessment of this event. The Revolution was a celebration of an abstract universal freedom and any actual political system (any particularity) would fail in the light of this abstraction. Yet, for Hegel, the Revolution is still necessary.[[25]](#endnote-25) It is a violent unfreedom, both in the sense that it is necessary (rather than one option of many) and that the commitment to the abstract universal requires a form of subjectivity that does not allow for true freedom. This unfreedom, however, is the condition for the realization of new freedom because one is not freely choosing unfreedom, but in a position of unfreedom, embracing the negativity of the abstract as the route to the possibility of being free. Fanaticism in the form of the French Revolution is thus similar to Islam, but while Hegel describes it in some of the same anti-political terms, he finds an ultra-political aspect to revolutionary anti-politics.[[26]](#endnote-26) In the case of the Revolution, fanaticism reflects a lack of freedom in its submission to the abstract, but sometimes unfreedom renders fanaticism the only route to freedom.

This reading of Hegel’s analysis of fanaticism in its paradigmatic religious and political forms raises two issues for thinking about Islam and liberalism. First, this relationship between fanaticism and freedom is one point at which Hegel operates askew the problem-space of liberalism. Connecting fanaticism to Hegel’s wider political philosophy will clarify that way that Hegel asks a different set of constitutive questions. Second, having clarified the role of fanaticism in world history, it becomes even more important to determine why Hegel thinks that it is impossible Islam could play a revolutionary role. Understanding this impossibility is the condition for challenging the sense of Christian superiority at work in Hegel’s Eurocentrism.

*Fanaticism and the Liberal Problem-Space*

In his consideration of Hegel’s political philosophy and liberalism, Domenico Losurdo argues that the contrast between abstract or formal freedom and concrete freedom is one of the most significant points of divergence. Understanding the relationship between freedom, fanaticism, the law, and the state must begin with this distinction. In classical liberal theory, purportedly abstract citizens are the bearers of abstract rights and freedoms. No one person is “the citizen”. Everyone is a citizen by virtue of abstracting from particularity. Similarly, the citizen is granted any given right or freedom in the abstract. The freedom of speech is not given to this person in this context to say this thing. Abstract citizens have an abstract right to abstract speech.

In his reflections on everything from the education of children to slavery to private property, Hegel is concerned with the potential for this abstract or formal freedom to come into conflict with actual freedom. As Losurdo argues, “in a concrete historical-political situation formal freedom may clash with actual freedom… formal freedom may negate actual freedom and attach itself to institutions that deny freedom.”[[27]](#endnote-27) Hegel thus cares less about what rights individuals have or the structure of government than whether or not people are actually free. Consequently, while the Magna Carta is often celebrated as an important development en route to the modern state and law, Hegel is unimpressed because “the citizens gained nothing by it” (PH, 430). His defence of the monarchy in Germany is rooted in his belief that placing power in the conservative aristocracy, while a move in the direction of democracy, is likely to result in less freedom for ordinary citizens.[[28]](#endnote-28) In general, Hegel favors constitutional monarchies because he lives in a period in which they are taking more progressive positions than representative forms of governance.[[29]](#endnote-29)

The question of fanaticism in relation to freedom must be viewed in terms of this opposition. One way of reading Hegel’s ambiguous support of the French Revolution is in terms of the assertion of concrete freedom when only abstract or formal freedom is available. For Hegel, politics is not abstract: “[l]ife as the totality of ends has a right against abstract right” (PR, §127a:125). He is not concerned with how freedom might be achieved in an abstract or ideal situation, but how, in a given historical-political context, one might assert freedom.[[30]](#endnote-30)

The emphasis on concrete rather than abstract law generates an obvious tension with the state and its law. As seen in the previous section, Hegel embraces a particularly strong vision of the state. Despite this strong view, however, Hegel continuously sides with the violation of law when faced with injustice or unfreedom. His justification for this violation is not political, but ethical or historical. Ethically, this is most clear in Hegel’s discussion of *Notrecht* and the standard example of a starving person’s right to steal bread (PR, §127-28:125-26). Hegel, like many of his contemporaries, defends this right, putting him at odds with key liberal thinkers such as Locke, for whom property rights are sacrosanct. What differentiates Hegel from others, though, is his willingness to see this right as an ethical response to a political problem. To refuse the starving person bread is to “annul” his freedom, “the most wrong of all offences, namely the complete negation of the existence of freedom” (PR, §127a:125). For Losurdo, this stands in contrast to Kant and Fichte, for whom this right can only be invoked in extreme situations and has no bearing on wider political or legal issues. Hegel sees the “theft” as a potential response to a violence “produced by the socio-political order itself.”[[31]](#endnote-31)

Historically, Hegel again consistently affirms disruptive challenges to political order. He affirms every example of political revolution he discusses, include anti-colonial struggles.[[32]](#endnote-32) Within the context of these revolutions, there can be no political legitimacy. In Losurdo’s reading, there could be no absolute right to revolt. A revolution is a risk, a gamble in world spirit.

If the right to resistance is considered inherent to the concrete historical process, then this leaves no doubt: the superior right of the World Spirit with respect to the State is a given fact, and it is based upon this view that Hegel does not condemn the great revolutions as criminal acts, but instead justifies and celebrates them. Of course, to particularism, free will, and noble and feudal oppression, Hegel contrasts the objectivity and the superiority of State order, but the State order is to be considered inviolable and sacrosanct from a legal point of view, not a historical-universal one. The historically-existent “positive” may take the shape of “violence,” and as a result the “thought” that criticizes it tends to become “violent” itself; this is how the French Revolution, or others for that matter, is explained and legitimized; but it is a legitimacy that cannot derive from a legal norm, but rather from concrete conditions and a concrete historical analysis. It is a legitimacy that, after all is said and done, can only be claimed and verified *post factum*.[[33]](#endnote-33)

In both these examples, *Notrecht* and the right to resistance, Hegel’s willingness to endorse disruptions of the political order is evident. It is important not to overstate Hegel’s evaluation of the French Revolution and other such transformations. It is an ambiguous endorsement, finding both necessity and tragedy in the course of events. Further, Hegel’s preference is clearly for the upholding of law and gradual reform.[[34]](#endnote-34) He has many liberalizing tendencies. Yet, in the unfolding of world spirit, Hegel can identify moments of unfreedom in which fanatical acts are necessary for the emergence of new forms of freedom.[[35]](#endnote-35)

*Hegel, World Spirit and the Fanaticism of Islam*

Given these views, the question of Islam, the French Revolution, and fanaticism can be posed anew. As seen above, Hegel argues that the French Revolution, while fanatical in its submission to abstract notions of freedom and equality, nonetheless has a political aim. Islam does not, consisting only of an absolution submission before the divine One. This certainly is a starting point for reflecting on the difference between the two forms of fanaticism, but is not a sufficient explanation for why Hegel is so resolute in his dismissal of Islam. A more thorough account requires understanding the positions of Christianity and Islam in world history, or the history of world spirit, which is ultimately the only justification for fanaticism.

Hegel sees himself as standing in the last age. In the 1825-26 *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, he divides history into three periods: ancient (550 BC - AD 529), the establishment of the Christian world (529 - 16th century) and Hegel’s own age. In the crucial second age, philosophy becomes essentially Christian. Thanks to the German people, the bearers of the Christian principle (PH, 341), Western Europe is realizing a form of freedom only possible through the Trinity (LPR2, 156). At last the world has a spirituality in which God is concretely spirit, manifested in human consciousness.[[36]](#endnote-36) In this period and following, “Arabs and Jews” are no longer essential to world history. They are merely “background” to the story of Christianity (LHP3, 15).

Hegel is not always consistent on this point, though. Arabs and Jews, despite their shared qualities, do not occupy the same place in world history. Take for instance, his spatial rather than temporal differentiation of the world into the Far East, Islam, and the “the Christian World of Western Europe.”[[37]](#endnote-37) Here, Islam “embodies the principle of absolute antithesis; present in it is the principle of abstract spirit, the simple eternal God…” (LPWH1, 156). Jews can be included within the narrative of the emergence of Christianity in obvious, if supersessionist, ways. Arabs, on the other hand, are “external” to world history (LHP3, 15), but they are external in a way that is different to other areas or peoples such as Africa. Arabs are not merely external, they are antithetical.

The Arab, the Muslim, and the Turk thus occupy a strange place in Hegel: aesthetically praised, militarily feared, theologically scorned, and historically cast aside.[[38]](#endnote-38) In an editorial note to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Peter Hodgson argues that Islam receives little attention in the lectures because it represents “an earlier phase of religious consciousness” that now stands in opposition to Christianity “as a contemporary rival” (LPR3, 242n.210). While it is true that Hegel pays Islam little attention in terms of the philosophy of religion, the Islamic other is nonetheless present throughout his work. Islam is always there to be the antithesis, the external, that which Western European Christianity is defined against.

Fanaticism more generally plays a role in this definition. “Western”, “European” and “Christian”—terms that are fluid if not interchangeable—are defined against both internal and external others. Internally, there are the fanatical Catholics (with their “slavish religious obedience”), Puritans, Thomas Müntzer (PH, 435), and even a reference to the “sansculottism” in the Sermon on the Mount (LPR3, 119), while externally Hegel invokes the Turks, the Saracens, the Arabs, and the Muslims (interestingly “the Jews” occupy a liminal space). Internally, these events, movements, and ideas can be overcome as stages in the internal development of Western European Christianity or errors along the way. The problem with Islam, for Hegel, is that it does not fit into this narrative. It is out of place, or rather out of time.

*Hegel, Islam, and the History of New Worlds*

Hegel’s philosophies of history, politics, and religion thus allow for the necessity of fanaticism in the development of world history. Moments of fanaticism cannot be politically legitimate within their own context, but they may create a new context that justifies them historically. The French Revolution is an example of such an event, but Islam is denied even the possibility of such a role.[[39]](#endnote-39) World history has generated German Protestant Christianity and a secular politics rooted in subjective freedom. Islam can only be outside and antithetical to this world.

In considering Hegel’s work on Islam and fanaticism, one option would be to argue that Hegel has not adequately considered the richness or diversity of Islam. A more thoroughly Hegelian reading of Islam would yield a different result. Similarly, one might adopt the familiar pattern of recent work on Hegel’s treatment of topics such as race, colonialism, and religion: a careful reading either shows that Hegel is not guilty of these intellectual crimes or reveals that Hegel’s philosophy provides resources for redressing these errors.[[40]](#endnote-40) There are Hegelian solutions to Hegelian problems. Sai Bhatawadekar makes this case for Hegel’s treatment of Islam arguing that Hegel’s work reveals “not just a simple Orientalist scene, where Hegel, the quintessential Western observer, imposes a derogatory definition on a passive voiceless East; from within his system, playing by his rules, the East has agency here to shake him loose.”[[41]](#endnote-41) This work is important, as it is certainly true that Hegel is invoked more than carefully read, but I am less convinced that Hegel can be or needs to be saved. Further, Hegel’s system *is a system*. He has careful arguments justifying his rejection of Islam that connect to foundational aspects of his view of subjectivity, dialectics, and freedom. His views of the Arab, Turk, and Saracen are not incidental to his philosophy.[[42]](#endnote-42)

One does not have to redeem Hegel to note the way that he sits askew the liberal problem-space that was emerging in the early part of the 19th century. His insistence on concrete rather than abstract freedom and his subordination of politics to history open new ways of thinking about Islam and the liberal problem-space. That problem-space is formed, in part, by the question of the religious other. As David Nirenberg writes in his comparison of Hegel and recent discourse about Islam and the West, “the debate about Europe’s relationship to Islam is both a constitutive attribute of Europe, and a distinctly European product.”[[43]](#endnote-43) The question of Islam’s relationship to Western liberal society is constitutive of the problem-space that defines the Western liberal society in which that question is posed.

In attempting to sit askew these debates, the question is not so much how can a liberal Europe or a liberal West be tolerant of Islam, but what kind of society, what problem-space, makes this question unintelligible. We do not need to make room for Islam (or the Arab, the Turk, the Saracen or the African) in Hegel’s World History. Inclusion is a fundamentally conservative gesture. We need a different history because there is a different spirit. This question can also be asked from a different direction—how can Islam be included in that which is constituted by the externalization and exclusion of Islam? The gesture of inclusion denies that Islam is already part of Europe. What is the future whose history does not require such inclusion?

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2. Or, as Karin de Boer puts it, Hegel might agree with his liberal contemporaries in their critique of society, but differs in the fundamental ideals that animate that critique (“Freedom and Dissent in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right,*” in *Hegel and Resistance*, ed. Rebecca Comay and Bart Zantvoort (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 140). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. On Hegel’s Eurocentrism, see for example Alison Stone, “Europe and Eurocentrism,” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 91 (2017): 83-104 or Andrew Buchwalter’s more ambivalent “Is Hegel’s Philosophy of History Eurocentric?” in *Hegel and History*, ed. Will Dudley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 87-110. On race, see Robert Bernasconi, “With What Must the Philosophy of World History Begin? On the Racial Basis of Hegel’s Eurocentrism,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 22, no. 2 (2000): 171-201 and Sûrya Parekh, “Hegel’s New World: History, Freedom, and Race,” in *Hegel and History*, ed. Will Dudley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 111-31. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Theodore Vial, *Modern Religion, Modern Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Vial’s focus is on Kant and Schleiermacher, though Hegel is briefly discussed. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Hegel refers to Mahometanism, Islam, Arabs, Turks, Saracens, and Ottomans, so there is a loose geographical boundary to his reflections. His concern with the Maghreb (though he does not use the term), by contrast, is limited to the Muslim rule of Spain. See the opening chapters of Lorella Ventura, *Hegel in the Arab World: Modernity, Colonialism, and Freedom* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Domenico Losurdo, *Hegel* *and the Freedom of the Moderns*, trans. Marella and Jon Morris(Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 4. There are other ways of conceptualizing the dynamics Scott describes, most notably in the work of Foucault. While Foucault is a major influence on Scott, one way of differentiating their work is to describe “problem-space” as a postcolonial interpretation of Foucault’s analysis of power/knowledge and discourse. Foucault is famously silent on issues of coloniality and his work has been critiqued for its Eurocentrism, making Scott’s notion of “problem-space” a more natural concept by which to analyze the relationship between a “European” or “Western” liberalism and “foreign” Islam. On Foucault, Eurocentrism, and coloniality see Stephen Legg, “Beyond the European Province: Foucault and Postcolonialism” in *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*, ed. by Jeremy Crampton and Stuart Elden (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 265-89. On Scott’s relationship to Foucault and the limits of Foucault’s applicability to coloniality, see Donald E. Pease, “The Crisis of Critique in Postcolonial Modernity,” *boundary 2* 37, no. 3 (2010), 179-205. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Wendy Brown, ‘Subjects of Tolerance: Why We Are Civilized and They Are the Barbarians,” in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence Eugene Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 728-29. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. On the continued centrality of Locke for liberal political thought see, Ruth Abbey, “Is Liberalism Now an Essentially Contested Concept?” *New Political Science* 27, no. 4 (2006): 474-76. It should be noted that Locke’s importance to liberal thought is itself a historical development as Duncan Bell notes in “What is Liberalism?” *Political Theory* 42, no. 6 (2014), 682-715. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. This general claim has been the focus of a body of literature which, following Cécile Laborde, we can call “critical religion” (*Liberalism’s Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 15-17). This includes Talal Asad’s *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), Saba Mahmood’s *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), and Mayanthi Fernando’s *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Barry Hindess, “Liberalism—what’s in a name?” in *Global Governmentality: Governing International Spaces*, ed. Wendy Larner and William Walters (London: Routledge, 2004), 36. Hindess is particularly critical of “incomplete” accounts of liberalism that ignore the ways that this logic is used to suspend individual liberty and private property (23-24). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. While the French Revolution has long been a topic of Hegel scholarship, discussions of Islam are comparatively rarely, even in the work of those Hegel scholars who are specialists in Hegel’s philosophy of religion. One notable exception is Kevin Thompson’s “Hegel, the Political, and the Theological: The Question of Islam,” in *Hegel on Religion and Politics*, ed. Angelica Nuzzo (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 99-119. Other work on Hegel and Islam tends to come from those working on Islam in European thought, such as Ian Almond in *History of Islam in German Thought: From Leibniz to Nietzsche* (New York: Routledge, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. G.W.F. Hegel, “The Relationship of Religion to the State According to the Lectures of 1831,” in *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, Volume I: Introduction and the Concept of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R.F Brown, P.C. Hodgson and J.M. Stewart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 452. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991), 97. Subsequent references to PH. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For example, see the arguments made by John Burbidge in “Hegel’s Open Future,” in *Hegel and the Tradition: Essays in Honour of H.S. Harris*, ed. Michael Baur and John Edward Russon (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 185, Walter Jaeschke, “Philosophical Theology and Philosophy of Religion,” *New Perspectives on Hegel’s Philosophy of Religion*, ed. David Kolb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 12, or Thomas A. Lewis, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 247, [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Sai Bhatawadekar, “Islam in Hegel’s Triadic Philosophy of Religion,” *Journal of World History* 25, no. 2-3 (2014), 414. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. G.W.F. Hegel, *Outline of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Stephen Houlgate, trans.T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008),§270a:253. Subsequent references to PR. I provide a more detailed consideration of Hegel’s understanding of this relationship between freedom, universalism, and Christianity in “A Political Theology of Tolerance: Universalism and the Tragic Position of the Religious Minority,” in *German Idealism and the Future of Political Theology: Kant to Marx*, ed. Alex Dubilet and Kirill Chepurin (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. The centrality of feeling to religion is a feature of Hegel’s understanding of religion as representation or *Vorstellung*. For more on this understanding see my *Apocalyptic Political Theology: Hegel, Taubes, and Malabou* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 49-62. On the political significance of this understanding see Lewis’s *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel*, particularly the final chapter. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. For example, “Pantheism or Spinozism is the standpoint or general outlook of Oriental, Turkish, Persian, and Arabic writers, historians, or philosophers” (LPH3, 31). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Bhatawadekar, “Islam,” 415. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, Volume II: Determinate Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R.F Brown, P.C. Hodgson and J.M. Stewart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 156. Subsequent references to LPR2. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. As evidence, Hegel describes the exaction of blood-revenge in the event of a murder, arguing that the punishment shows that the crime is against the family rather than the individual killed (PH, 352). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Losurdo, *Hegel*, 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Bhatawadekar, “Islam,” 414. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. As Karin de Boer argues, making the French Revolution necessary ultimately makes it compatible with a progressive notion of history and is therefore a fundamentally conservative gesture (“Hegel’s Non-Revolutionary Account of the French Revolution in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*,” *Epoché* 22, no. 2 (2018): 456). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. On the ultra-political see Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (London: Verso, 2010), 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Losurdo, *Hegel*, 91. It should be noted that this issue of freedom must always be considered within Hegel’s view of the state as rational. It is not just any freedom that must be achieved, but the universal freedom that the *Philosophy of Right* takes as its central focus. On this point see de Boer, “Freedom and Dissent,” 141. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Losurdo, *Hegel*, 100-2 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Losurdo, *Hegel*, 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Losurdo, *Hegel*, 36. The importance of the historical, cultural, and political context for thinking about rights and freedoms is also a central feature of Steven B. Smith’s *Hegel’s Critique of Liberalism: Rights in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Losurdo, *Hegel*, 157. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Losurdo, *Hegel*, 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Losurdo, *Hegel*, 84. This emphasis on history is what differentiates Losurdo’s reading from others, such as Klaus Vieweg, who argue for a stronger political right to revolution (“Elements of an Inversive Right of Resistance in Hegel” in *Hegel and Resistance*, ed. Rebecca Comay and Bart Zantvoort (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 157-75). Vieweg is clear, however, that in his reading of Hegel the right to rebellion is a matter of self-defence in which one is “reclaiming” rights rather than overthrowing the foundations of the state (166). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Losurdo, *Hegel*, 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. It is important to remember that these freedoms are new in the sense of historically new, but not new in terms of reason. As Mark Tunick summarizes, the world historical significance of the French Revolution is that it marked “for the first time in history the right of all citizens to have their welfare needs met and their personality respected, and with this the right of all human beings to be free (as Hegel understands freedom)” (“Hegel on Justified Disobedience,” *Political Theory* 26:4 (1998): 524). For more on Hegel’s view of the Revolution in relation to liberalism, see Frederick C. Beiser, “Hegel and Hegelianism” in *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. by Gareth Stedman Jones and Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 110-46. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1825, Volume III: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, ed. R.F. Brown, trans. R.F. Brown and J.M. Stewart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), 15-16. Subsequent references to LHP3. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, Volume 1: 1822-3*, ed. and trans. Robert F. Brown and Peter C. Hodgson (Oxford: Clarendon, 2011), 156. Subsequent references to LPWH1. The logic of temporalizing difference is a feature of much German thought of this period and continues to inflect debates about Islam and liberalism, as shown by Christine Helliwell and Barry Hindess in their “The temporalizing of difference,” *Ethnicities* 5, no. 3 (2005), 414-18. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Ian Almond describes this tension in his *History of Islam in German Thought*, 128-29. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. One might object that the difference is that the French Revolution is a discrete historical event, while Islam is a religion. Yet Hegel has no problem seeing Christianity as a historical event. The question is not one of category, but of position within history. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. For an example of the former, see Nicholas Mowad, “The Place of Nationality in Hegel’s Philosophy of Politics and Religion: A Defense of Hegel on the Charges of National Chauvinism and Racism,” in *Hegel on Religion and Politics*, ed. Angelica Nuzzo (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 157-85. For the latter, see M.A.R. Habib’s *Hegel and Empire: From Postcolonialism to Globalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), in which he argues that “the deepest principles of Hegel’s own philosophy could be used to undermine his Eurocentric views” (155). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Bhatawadekar, “Islam,” 401. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. This position channels Robert Bernasconi’s argument that the study of the history of philosophy must not only be concerned with the racism and, in my argument, religious prejudice present in philosophical texts, but the ways that contemporary readings of those texts minimize that racism in problematic ways. See his “Will the real Kant please stand up: The challenge of Enlightenment racism to the study of the history of philosophy,” *Radical Philosophy* 117 (2003): 13-22. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. David Nirenberg, “Islam and the West: Two Dialectical Fantasies,” *Journal of Religion in Europe* 1 (2008), 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)