

# Lecture I

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IN OPENING MY SERIES of lectures on the essence of religion, I wish first of all to state that what prevailed over my prolonged reluctance to take such a step was the appeal, the express desire of the students at this university.

Today it is not necessary, as it was in ancient Athens, to promulgate a law requiring every man to support one party or the other in a civil war; today every man, even if he supposes himself to be supremely non-partisan, is at least theoretically a partisan, though he may not know it or want to be; today political interest engulfs all other interests and political events keep us in a state of constant turmoil; today it is actually the duty – especially of us non-political Germans – to forget everything for the sake of politics; for just as an individual can accomplish nothing unless he has the strength to devote himself exclusively for a time to the branch of endeavour in which he wishes to succeed, so likewise mankind must at certain times forget all other tasks and activities for the sake of one particular task and activity if it wishes to achieve something complete and worthwhile. Religion, the subject of these lectures, is to be sure closely connected with politics; however, our consuming interest today is not theoretical but practical politics. We wish to participate directly and actively in politics; we lack the peace of mind, the inclination, the desire to read and write, to teach and learn. We have busied ourselves and contented ourselves long enough with speaking and writing; now at last we demand that the word become flesh, the spirit matter; we are as sick of

political as we are of philosophical idealism; we are determined to become political materialists.

But apart from this reason, implicit in the character of the times, for my reluctance to lecture there are other personal reasons. With my theoretical bent, I have less aptitude for teaching than for thought and inquiry. A teacher does not, and may not, hesitate to say the same thing a thousand times; I am content to have said something once, provided that I am confident of having formulated it correctly. A subject interests me and holds my attention only so long as it presents me with difficulties, only so long as I am at odds with it and have, as it were, to struggle with it; but once I have mastered it I hurry on to something else, to a new subject; for my interest is not confined to any particular field or subject; it extends to everything human. This does not mean that I am an intellectual miser or egoist, who amasses knowledge for himself alone; by no means! What I do and think for myself, I must also think and do for others. But I feel the need of instructing others in a subject only so long as, while instructing others, I am also instructing myself.

Now I long ago settled my accounts with the subject matter of these lectures, namely, with religion; in my works I have exhausted all its most essential, or at least its most difficult, aspects. Moreover, I do not write or speak easily. To tell the truth, I can speak and write only when the subject matter grips me emotionally, when it commands my enthusiasm. But emotion and enthusiasm are not products of the will; they do not take their cue from the clock, arising on appointed days or at set hours. I can speak and write only about things that strike me as worth speaking and writing about. And to me only what is not self-evident or has not already been fully dealt with by others is worth speaking and writing about. Accordingly, even in writing I deal only with that part of a subject which has not been dealt with in other books, or at least not in a way that fully satisfies me; the rest I leave aside. Consequently my thinking is aphoristic,

as my critics say, but aphoristic in a very different sense and for very different reasons than they suppose. It is aphoristic because it is critical, that is, because it distinguishes essence from appearance, the necessary from the superfluous. I have spent many years, twelve whole years, in rustic seclusion, solely occupied with study and literary activity, and as a result have lost, or at least neglected to develop, the gift of oratory, of oral delivery, for it never occurred to me that I should ever again address an audience – I say *again* because I did, long ago, deliver lectures at a Bavarian university – and least of all in a university town.

The period in which I said goodbye forever to the academic career, or so I thought, and went to live in the country, was so abominably dismal that such an idea could never have come to my mind. That was the period in which all public life was so poisoned and befouled that the only way of preserving one's freedom of spirit and one's health was to abandon all government service, every public function, even that of a university instructor; when no public position, even as a teacher, was obtainable except at the price of political servility and religious obscurantism, and only the written word devoted to learned matters was free – though only to a very limited degree and not because learning was respected, but rather because it was disparaged for its real or supposed ineffectualness or lack of influence on public affairs. What was one to do at such a time, especially if one was conscious of holding ideas opposed to the prevailing system of government, but withdraw and resort to writing as the only means of escaping the impertinence of a despotic state power – though that, too, demanded resignation and self-restraint.

But it was not only political disgust that drove me into retirement and condemned me to the use of the written word. Not only was I living in an incessant inner conflict with the political system of the day; I was also at odds with the ruling intellectual systems, that is, the dominant philosophical and religious doctrines. But in order to gain clarity as to the

substance and causes of this conflict, I needed protracted and uninterrupted leisure. And where are they better to be found than in the country, where freed from all the conscious and unconscious servitudes, compromises, vanities, distractions, intrigues, and gossip of city life, one must rely wholly upon oneself? A man who believes what others believe, who teaches and thinks what others think and teach, in short, who lives in intellectual or religious unison with others, has no need to withdraw from them physically, no need of solitude; but it is a very different matter when a man goes his own way, breaks with the whole world of those who believe in God, and then wants to clarify and justify the breach. For that he needs free time and freedom of movement. It is ignorance of human nature to suppose that a man can think and study freely in any place, any environment, under any conditions, if only he has the determination to do so. No! Truly free, uncompromising, unconventional thinking, thinking that aspires to be fruitful, not to say decisive, requires an unconventional, free, and uncompromising life. And anyone who wishes in his thinking to get to the bottom of human affairs must have his two feet physically, bodily on their foundation. That foundation is nature. Only in direct communion with nature can man become whole again, can he cast aside all extravagant, supernatural, and unnatural ideas and fantasies.

But a man who spends years in seclusion – not, to be sure, in the abstract seclusion of a Christian hermit or monk, but in humane seclusion; whose only communication with the world is by way of the written word; loses the desire and ability to express himself by word of mouth. For there is an enormous difference between the spoken and the written word. The spoken word is addressed to a specific audience which is physically present; the written word to an absent, indeterminate audience which exists only in the writer's mind; speech is addressed to persons, writing to minds, because the people I write for are beings who, as far as I know, exist only in my mind, in my idea. Consequently writing lacks all the

charms, the amenities, the social virtues as it were, which attach to the spoken word; the writer grows accustomed to rigorous thinking, to saying nothing that cannot be defended against criticism, and by that very fact becomes terse, rigorous, deliberate in his choice of words, incapable of speaking easily. Gentlemen, I call your attention to that fact; remember, if you please, that I have spent the better part of my life not on a speaker's platform, but in the country, not in the lecture hall but in the temple of nature, not in drawing rooms and reception chambers, but in the solitude of my study. I should not like you to attend my lectures with unwarranted hopes, expecting to find an eloquent and brilliant speaker.

Since thus far I have communicated with the public exclusively through my written works; since I have devoted my happiest hours, my best energies, and my whole mind to my writings and owe my name and reputation to them alone, it seems only natural that I should take my books as the foundation and guideline of these lectures. Accordingly, they will serve as my text, my role in speaking will be that of a commentator. My purpose, then, in delivering these lectures is to explain, to elucidate, to demonstrate what I have said in my books. What makes this seem all the more fitting is that I tend to write with the utmost brevity and succinctness, confining myself to the most necessary and essential, omitting all tedious transitions, leaving all self-evident parentheses and consecutive clauses to the reader's intelligence – thereby exposing myself to extreme misunderstandings, as the critics of my works amply demonstrate. But before I name the works I have chosen as the text of these lectures, it seems advisable to give a brief survey of my literary work as a whole.

My works can be divided into two groups, those dealing with philosophy as such, and those concerned more specifically with religion or the philosophy of religion. To the first group belong my *History of Modern Philosophy from Bacon to Spinoza*, my *Leibniz*, my *Pierre Bayle*:

*A Contribution to the History of Philosophy and of Mankind*, my *Philosophical Critiques and Principles*. To the second belong: my *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*, *The Essence of Christianity*, and finally, the *Explanations and Additions to the Essence of Christianity*. But regardless of this classification of my writings, all have strictly speaking only one purpose, one intention and idea, one theme. This theme, of course, is religion or theology and everything connected with it. I am one of those who very much prefer a futile one-sidedness to a sterile, futile versatility and prolixity; who throughout their lives have only *one* purpose in mind, upon which they concentrate all their powers; who study widely and intensively and never cease to learn, but who teach only one thing and write about only one thing – in the conviction that such single-mindedness is the only means of exhausting a subject and accomplishing something in the world. Accordingly, I have disregarded religion and theology in none of my works, though of course I have treated this central concern of my thinking and my life in different ways according to the time of writing and the viewpoint of each particular work. Still, I am obliged to admit that before publishing the first edition of my *History of Philosophy* I deleted all direct references to theology, not for political reasons but out of youthful caprice and antipathy. In the second edition, however, which was reprinted in my *Collected Works*, I filled in these gaps, though from my present rather than my original point of view.

The first name that this work mentions in connection with religion and theology is that of [Francis Bacon](#) of Verulam, the father of modern philosophy and natural science, as he has often, and not without justification, been called. Because he solemnly professed that he had no intention of applying to religion and theology the profane critique which he developed in the field of science, that he was an unbeliever only in human matters, but in divine matters an absolute and utterly submissive believer, many regard him as the model of a scientist who is a pious

Christian. It was he who wrote the famous words: “A little philosophy inclineth men's minds to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion” (*Essays*, 16), a statement which, like so many statements of past thinkers, was once a truth but is so no longer, although it is still upheld by our historians, who draw no distinction between past and present. But in my account of Bacon, I showed that in dealing with physics he negated the principles he professed in matters of faith, in theology; I showed that the old manner of considering nature, teleology – the doctrine of intentions or purposes in nature – was a necessary consequence of the Christian idealism which derives nature from a being who acts with purpose and consciousness, and that Bacon deprived the Christian religion of the all-encompassing character it had held for the true believers of the Middle Ages; I showed that he applied his religious principles only as a private individual, but not as a physicist or philosopher, not in that aspect of his thinking which was to exert an historical influence, and that it is therefore quite mistaken to regard Bacon as a religious Christian scientist.

The second thinker to present an interest from the standpoint of the philosophy of religion is Bacon's younger contemporary and friend [Hobbes](#), known chiefly for his political views. He was the first modern philosopher to be stigmatised as an atheist. The learned gentlemen, it is true, have long argued the point: was he really an atheist? I have settled the argument by pointing out that he is just as much a theist as an atheist: like modern thinkers in general he posits a God, but this Hobbesian God is to all intents and purposes no God at all; for Hobbes identifies reality with corporeity, so that according to his own philosophical principle his God, to whom he is unable to impute any corporeal predicates whatever, is a mere word and no being at all. The third significant thinker, though from the standpoint of religion he does not essentially differ from the first two, is [Descartes](#). However, I did not deal with his attitude toward religion and

theology until later, in my *Leibniz and Bayle*, because it was only after the appearance of my first volume that Descartes came to be proclaimed the model of the religious, and specifically Catholic, philosopher. But I showed that Descartes the philosopher and Descartes the believer were two diametrically conflicting individuals.

The most original, and as regards the philosophy of religion the most significant, figures I treated in the same volume are [Jakob Böhme](#) and [Spinoza](#), both distinguished from the other philosophers mentioned by the fact that they not only describe the conflict between faith and reason, but that each sets forth independent doctrines concerning the philosophy of religion. The first, Jakob Böhme, is the idol of the philosophising theologians or theists, the other the idol of the theological philosophers or pantheists. Böhme's admirers have recently advertised him as the best antidote to the poison of my ideas – the ideas underlying the present lectures. In connection with the second edition of my book, however, I re-examined Böhme in detail. And my renewed study merely corroborated my first conclusion, namely, that the secret of his theosophy is on the one hand a *mystical* philosophy of nature and on the other hand a *mystical* psychology; and accordingly that his work does not refute but rather substantiates my view that all theology consists in two things: a doctrine of nature and a doctrine of man. The same volume concludes with Spinoza. He is the only modern philosopher to have provided the first elements of a critique and explanation of religion and theology; the first to have offered a positive opposition to theology; the first to have stated, in terms that have become classical, that the world cannot be regarded as the work or product of a personal being acting in accordance with aims and purposes; the first to have brought out the all-importance of nature for the philosophy of religion. I was glad to express my unstinting admiration and respect for him; I found fault with him only for continuing, under the influence of the old theological ideas, to define this being who does not



act with purpose, will, or consciousness as the most perfect being, in short, as the Godhead, and so barring himself from a development which would have led him to look upon conscious man as a mere part or – to employ Spinoza's term – a mode of the unconscious totality, and not as its summit and fulfilment.

The opposite pole to Spinoza is [Leibniz](#), to whom I have devoted a special volume. If Spinoza is to be honoured for having made theology the handmaiden of philosophy, the first modern German philosopher earned the honour, or dishonour, of having once again tied philosophy to the apron strings of theology. In this respect Leibniz, in his celebrated *Theodicy*, outdid all others. It is generally known that Leibniz wrote this book out of gallantry toward a Queen of Prussia whose faith had been troubled by Bayle's doubts. But the lady for whom Leibniz really wrote and whom he really courted was theology. Even so, the book did not suit the theologians. Leibniz sat on the fence between the two parties, and for this very reason satisfied neither. He wished to offend no one, to hurt no one's feelings; his philosophy is a philosophy of diplomatic gallantry. Even the monads, the entities of which in his view all sensible beings consist, exert no physical influence on one another, lest any of them suffer injury.

But a man who is determined to offend no-one – even unintentionally – can have no energy, no force; for it is impossible to take a step without trampling on some creature or other, or to drink a sip of water without swallowing a quantity of small organisms. Leibniz is an intermediary between the Middle Ages and modern times; he is, as I have called him, the philosophical Tycho Brahe, but precisely because of his indecision he remains to this day the idol of all those who lack the energy to make up their minds. Already in my first edition of 1837, I not only criticised Leibniz's theological attitude, but took the occasion to criticise theology in general. The standpoint from which I criticised it was Spinozan, or

abstractly philosophical; I drew a sharp distinction between man's theoretical and practical attitudes, identifying the former with philosophy, the latter with theology and religion. In his practical attitude, I said, man relates things only to himself, to his own profit and advantage; in his theoretical attitude he considers things only in relation to each other. Consequently, I went on, there is a necessary and essential difference between theology and philosophy; to mix the two is to mix essentially different attitudes, and the result can only be a monstrosity. Reviewers of my book were greatly disturbed by this distinction; but they overlooked the fact that Spinoza in his *Theologico-Political Treatise* already considered and criticised theology and religion from the same standpoint, and that if even Aristotle himself had criticised theology, he could not have criticised it differently. As a matter of fact the standpoint from which I criticised theology at that time is not that of my later works; it was not my ultimate and absolute standpoint, but only relative and historically conditioned. Accordingly, in the new edition of my *Exposition and Critique of Leibniz's Philosophy*, I criticised Leibniz's theodicy and theology, as well as his related pneumatology, or doctrine of the spirit, in a different way.