

## Hegel, Lutheranism And Contemporary Theology

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### I

Hegel's status as a theological thinker has long been a disputed question amongst the theologians, and a variety of views have long been taken. What was unquestionably the most common theological assessment of Hegel during much of the twentieth century derived from the prominence of the philosophy of Kierkegaard, according to whom the crooked paths of the Hegelian conceptual wilderness must yield to the straight and narrow way of subjective authenticity in religious faith. Kierkegaard, however, has gone somewhat out of fashion recently in theological circles, so that although a broadly Kierkegaardian hostility to "the system" is still discernible amongst a great many who still follow at a respectable distance, his negative assessment of Hegel is today very probably at its lowest ebb since about 1920.

The second of the major alternative theological assessments of Hegel will be no less familiar. According to this view, Hegel is a champion of the decline and fall of the traditional Christian doctrine of divine transcendence, and a prophet of pure historical process as the *locus* of the divine. This thesis is hardly new it could fairly be said to represent, for example, the kernel of D.F. Strauss' early reading of Hegel's theological legacy but it has continued to be highly influential in some theological circles. In the 1960s, for example, it constituted a major theoretical strand underlying the American theology of the "death of God," especially through the influence of Thomas J.J. Altizer.<sup>1</sup> The same tendency appeared independently in German theology at the same time, particularly in the work of Dorothee Sölle, who also, interestingly, advocated a sympathetic reassessment of the wider Idealist tradition in this connection.<sup>2</sup> Today, the "Christian atheism" of the death of God movement is upheld in America by only a remnant of the original school, but Sölle's call for an "atheistic doctrine of God" still echoes remarkably deeply in the souls of students of German Protestant theology. (Unfortunately, her call for a revision of their relationship with Idealism is less often heard.)

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (London: Collins, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> Dorothee Sölle, *Atheistisch an Gott glauben* (Olten: Walter, 1968).

The third major theological approach to Hegel that I wish to mention is of a very different sort, though again, we have long since become accustomed to the point made. Beginning with the advent of liberation theology in Latin America in the 1960s, a range of neo-Marxist assessments of Hegel found their way into theology. These have generally been of the history-walks-on-its-feet variety, though sharpened somewhat by way of critical theory and the philosophy of Ernst Bloch in particular. This theological view of Hegel, however, is predominantly derivative and indirect, for the liberation theologians cannot in all honesty be said to have tackled Hegel directly. For this reason, their views are of less importance than that of either the existentialist theologians, or the death of God movement.

There has, however, long been a fourth approach to Hegel to be found amongst the theologians, an approach which admittedly has been critical of major aspects of the overall Hegelian vision, but which nevertheless has attempted to engage with Hegel's philosophy as a key source both for the rehabilitation of the discipline of theology in modern intellectual culture, and for the constructive development or redevelopment of Christian doctrine itself. In this tradition, unlike any of those cited above, Hegel has been understood along broadly classical theological lines. The most obvious representatives of this view are the now almost forgotten "old Hegelians" of the nineteenth century, whose concerns are to some extent also reflected in the writings of the "British Hegelians" of the early twentieth century. Both groups are now surely extinct, at least as classes of thinkers, but interestingly, something of their theological project can be seen perpetuated in a range of much more recent theological sources. Indeed, of the differing responses to Hegel available on the theological scene at present, I would suggest, this is clearly the most important and even the most influential. The movement looks to Hegel's philosophy to provide conceptual tools for the development of what is claimed to be a fully and integrally Christian conception of God.<sup>3</sup>

That such an approach to Hegel should have developed is not especially surprising, since the possibility of a theological reading of Hegel is well established. Admittedly, the thesis is controversial, and the bitter religious controversies which raged for twenty years among Hegel's followers after his death do muddy the waters very considerably. Nevertheless, Hegel did begin his scholarly career as a seminarian at the Protestant *Stift* in Tübingen, and it is at the very least plausible to say that he ended his system by defending the truth and legitimacy of the Christian religion as religion, even taking up its most fundamental theological claims into his philosophy.

Much is made, of course, of Hegel's hostility in his early years to the theology of the Lutheran theologians under whom he studied. The Tübingen curriculum, it is true, seemed to the young Hegel to be oppressively traditional. Though honest efforts of a sort were made to be open to the new learning, this was mainly done in a defensive way, so as

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<sup>3</sup> A representative list of sources might include Hans Küng, *The Incarnation of God*, trans. J.R. Stephenson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987); Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, trans. V. Green (London: Burns & Oates, 1977); Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, trans. D.L. Guder (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Grundfragen systematischer Theologie. Gesammelte Aufsätze 2* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1980); and John Macquarrie, *In Search of Deity* (London, SCM Press, 1984).

to provide an opening through which to reintroduce the old scholasticism.<sup>4</sup> The theory (developed along broadly Kantian lines) was that what reason could not criticise could thereby be left intact! One senses that Hegel's teachers saw the brewing intellectual storm as one that ultimately would blow over the ship of faith, so long as here and there the sails were furled and the holds barred. This was obviously less than satisfactory as a response to the Enlightenment challenge. It is not surprising that in 1794, the year after his graduation, Hegel would write to his fellow seminarian Schelling, complaining of the stifling intellectual atmosphere of Tübingen theology: "Nowhere is the old system transmitted so rigidly as it is there...."<sup>5</sup>

Yet, however disillusioned Hegel became with Lutheran orthodoxy as a young man, and however much he could be said to have turned instead to Kant, the Revolution and Romanticism, the extent of his rebellion against religion even in this youthful period is often overstated. Hegel did not become a pastor, it is true, but he did complete his seminary studies, which evidently served him reasonably well in life (more of this shortly). Furthermore, one has to reckon with the fact that many of the works produced by the "disillusioned" young theologian are overtly theological in character, conforming broadly to what other theological progressives at the time thought. Such thinkers would go on doing so, in fact, often without in any way attempting to extricate themselves from the institutional structures of Protestant Christianity, for the best part of the next two centuries.

Hegel certainly moved on in his thinking, but he also, I would like to suggest, carried key aspects of his youthful theology with him in his work to the end. First of all, elements of the theology of moral beauty worked out in Hegel's early theological essays survive in the mature position, in fact as late as the Berlin *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. For example, in commenting on the human view of Jesus (as opposed to the standpoint of faith which represents what is "new" in the mature, speculative standpoint), Hegel speaks glowingly of the "colossal boldness" of the moral teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>6</sup> I wish to go further than this, however, and raise the suggestion that it is precisely the scholastic Lutheranism of the *Stift* that *makes sense of* the "religious" content of the speculative position that Hegel reached in his maturity, and that makes sense of things in the mature position that cannot otherwise be easily explained. Though he was not unaware of the limitations of the theology in which he was educated, therefore, or uncritical of it, one can rightly speak of the young Hegel's theological education being "taken up" into his final standpoint. Hans Küng's largely biographical study of Hegel, *The Incarnation of God*, goes to far as to make the case that it was precisely the tension between the Enlightened convictions of the young Hegel and his native Lutheranism that set up the basic problem of Hegel's philosophy in his maturity, namely, how to reconcile Christian faith (especially in its Lutheran form) and Enlightened philosophy. This is also the thrust of a critical but perceptive essay by Karl

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<sup>4</sup> See the account of the theology of Hegel's dogmatics teacher C.G. Storr in Küng, *op. cit.*, pp. 34ff.

<sup>5</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Briefe von und an Hegel*, ed. J. Hoffmeister, 4 vols. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1961), xxvii, 12, cited by Küng, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, trans. R.F. Brown *et al.*; ed. Peter C. Hodgson, 3 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), III, p. 319.

Barth, which ought perhaps to be better known among theologians and philosophers alike.<sup>7</sup>

## II

Unfortunately, Hegel's direct references to Luther and Lutheranism are infrequent, and surprisingly so, given the views just presented. Without some independent access to the theological issues at stake, therefore, even philosophically educated readers are likely to overlook the depth of the religious ideas in question in Hegel's philosophy. The situation of the philosopher in approaching Hegel, we might say, is similar to that of the theologian who approaches Hegel: much that he says in relation to Kant, for example, will frequently pass the theologian by, simply because Kant is not explicitly mentioned in the text, but is instead alluded to in the distinctive, difficult idiom of Hegel's philosophical prose. The problem with reading Hegel is often that he assumes that the reader knows as much as he does, or readily grasps the issues in the logical form in which he presents them, whereas this is obviously not always the case.

There is, however, one main exception to this general rule, and it is one that is of great importance for our own discussion, for it is just this exception that sparks the interest of those contemporary theologians who have attempted to draw on Hegelian philosophy in their development of the Christian doctrine of God. I refer, of course, to the theme of the death of God, which has earlier been mentioned in connection with its peculiar treatment in the theologies of Altizer and Sölle, but which is addressed by Hegel in a rather different way in a variety of works spanning the whole of his philosophical career. The death of God, it should be remembered, is susceptible to a basically classical theological exposition by way of direct christological reference: on the cross, the Son of God in some manner "dies." Although such exposition is a matter of considerable controversy in the tradition, it is nevertheless a matter of christological orthodoxy to say that death has been experienced by the Son of God *as man*, i.e., in the human nature assumed. This entirely orthodox christological reference is the key to understanding its particular importance in the contemporary theological context, where it is employed in more constructive, but also more radical fashion in the field of the doctrine of God.

Hegel himself writes of the death of God a number of times. The theme appears, for example, in an early essay from the Jena period, *Faith and Knowledge*, which announced the theme of the speculative Good Friday in its closing, summative sentence.<sup>8</sup> This language would be mirrored in the better-known "Calvary of absolute Spirit" which appears in the conclusion of the *Phenomenology*.<sup>9</sup> The latter is obviously of great importance in the present context. In an earlier section of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel had

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<sup>7</sup> Karl Barth, "Hegel," in Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Brian Cozens and John Bowden (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1972). Cf. my essay, "Divine Freedom in Hegel," *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 61 (1995), 265-271.

<sup>8</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. George Lasson *et al.* (Leipzig: F. Meiner, 1917-), I, pp.345-346.

<sup>9</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 808.

written of the process by which Substance becomes Subject as "the painful feeling of the Unhappy Consciousness that *God Himself is dead*" (777). The unhappy consciousness is best understood as a feature of every logical form taken by thought in its development, rather than just one stage along the way. At this juncture, however, consciousness has met with the full implications of the "death of the Mediator," through which, Hegel argues, the idea of the unity of God with radical otherness is realised. This idea involves far more than simply faith's affirmation of the saving act of God in Jesus Christ. Rather, Hegel speaks of the systematic implications of the thought of the death of the Mediator, and in particular of the painful theological discovery that this death, consistently thought through, requires the development of nothing less than a concept of God which can accommodate death. This can only be done through a painful sacrifice in the world of theological thought itself, a process by which the cherished idea of the radical transcendence of God is in a sense preserved only by way of its relinquishment, that is to say, only by surrendering it to a conception which can withstand the utter alienation of death.

Hegel's description of the pain involved in this realisation is interesting, and connects what he says to a range of themes in Christian spirituality. The unhappy consciousness is, in a manner of speaking, a kind of dark night of the soul. All religious ideas, it has to be recognised, are hard won, and their relinquishment is therefore always a costly business. The new light breaking through will seem like darkness, for example, so long as it is measured by the old standards. Nevertheless, the negativity in question is fundamentally a product of the inbreaking of the truth of God upon the heart and mind, and so a mode of the presence of God rather than a mark of his absence. Such development is integral and organic to the Christian theological tradition, most obviously on its mystical side, which Hegel apparently grasps in some depth. However this may be, the result is that the abstraction of the metaphysical concept of divine being is thus overcome, and the concrete unity of God as Spirit for Hegel, the trinitarian conception is ultimately embraced. What is thus advocated, and what emerges ultimately from this Calvary of absolute Spirit, is meant to be a deeper and purified conception of God. The result is that spiritual transcendence is no longer distinct from immanence, but is to be thought *together with it*. What emerges is a thoroughly modern view of God, a view clearly intended to be post-enlightened, but also, equally, one which has emerged naturally from the inner logic of the religious picture of God inherited from a previous age.<sup>10</sup>

There is no doubt that what is thus attained represents a remarkable conception of God, one, for example, in which the divine is not only transcendent, but is also the ultimate reality in the depth of things, whether history, or consciousness, or Jesus Christ (a name that is strangely never mentioned in the *Phenomenology*!). Only in this way could God be placed again at the centre of philosophy or for that matter, it would appear, at the centre of theology too. On the other hand, it is extraordinarily difficult for the theologian, in approaching the bewildering argument of the *Phenomenology*, to make an informed response to the question that we face: Is this really Christian orthodoxy, as Hegel appears to claim? Or does it instead represent a reductionist call for the grandest of all the modernist programmes of religious demythologisation, on the grounds that what is

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Küng, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

uncovered is a quasi-naturalistic "christ-principle" which operates independently of religious revelation and theology, but which nicely explains the emergence and the power of both? D.F. Strauss, who valued the *Phenomenology* highly, provides a clear indication of one of the possible directions in which one could move theologically at this point. It is clear that this is a possibility that is still available to us.

At this point, therefore, it is wisest to take refuge in the wider Hegel *corpus*. Two further references to the theme in question can be cited, the first from the *Encyclopaedia* and the second from the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. The importance of the former work in general for our purposes is that it shows that Hegel intends a genuine development of the Christian concept of God in his philosophy, a development involving no move towards religious reductionism, but rather, the development of an advance on the standpoint of natural religion in Enlightened philosophical theism. As to the question of the christological reference we are pursuing, the relevant passage in the *Encyclopaedia* is again extremely dense, but the point made is nevertheless of interest: the divine, Hegel argues, is "actualised out of its abstraction into an *individual* self-consciousness. This individual, who as such is identified with the essence (in the Eternal sphere he is called the Son) is transplanted into the world of time, and in him wickedness is implicitly overcome."<sup>11</sup> The last phrase is less than transparent, but it is most likely a reference to the classical christological theme sometimes called the "wonderful exchange," according to which what was achieved by Christ was the overcoming of death by Life, the overcoming of evil by Righteousness, and so on. Such a "*Christus victor*" soteriology has frequently been identified in modern times as a distinctive feature of the theology of Luther.<sup>12</sup> It is in fact, however, a much more general soteriological theme which, where it appears, is always strongly incarnational, in that it regards the event of salvation as located decisively at Bethlehem, and in that it interprets the content of soteriology in relation to the coming of the Son of God in the flesh. This represents a rather different approach to salvation than is characteristic of some Christian thought, which prefers to focus on the event of the cross, and which tends to view the rest in *its* light (a good example being Anselm's famous *Cur Deus-homo?*). To say that wickedness is implicitly overcome is to say that human nature has been raised above wickedness by God's action in the whole complex of the birth, growth, life, obedience, death, resurrection and ascension of the God-man. The theological question is then how we come to have a share in what has been accomplished in him, how it is that what is done "in principle" in the sphere of human nature can come to have a life-giving impact on humanity. On some views, we come to be so affected purely by being human, since human nature as such has been raised to a new dignity in Christ; on other, somewhat less generous but certainly more common views, it comes about by the awakening of faith, or by participation in the sacraments. These are the major alternatives offered in the Christian theological tradition. Such an approach to the basic mystery of salvation is not, therefore, unique to Hegel, but is integral to important sources in patristic and mediaeval theology, to the theology of Luther, and indeed, to the theology of all the magisterial Reformers.

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<sup>11</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. William Wallace and A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), §569.

<sup>12</sup> Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor*, trans. A.G. Herbert (New York: Macmillan, 1931).

In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, our theme receives a series of successive and much fuller formulations. For the sake of economy, I shall take one of these as representative of the rest. In the *Lectures* of 1827, which have already been cited in connection with the "human" view of Jesus in the rational theology of the Enlightenment, Hegel treats the death of Christ as the point of transition in religious consciousness to the genuinely religious sphere.<sup>13</sup> This transition, he goes on to argue, is to be understood as a function of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit: "The relationship [of believers] to a mere human being is changed into a relationship that is completely altered and transfigured by the Spirit, so that the nature of God discloses itself therein, and so that this truth obtains immediate certainty in its manner of appearance" (pp.324-5). This is a statement both of Lutheran orthodoxy as it appears, for example, in the comments on the third article of the Creed in Luther's *Kleiner Catechismus* and of Hegel's own speculative grasp of the content of the Christian religion. Faith itself is presented in religious terms as the act of grasping the truth subjectively through the gift of God in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the community.<sup>14</sup> It is only thus that the church believes or can believe, or as Hegel puts it, only thus that the history of Jesus "receives a spiritual interpretation" (p.326). It might well be added that it is only thus that God is truly known, as the trinitarian or "speculative" conception of God is embraced, and the abstract and therefore inadequate idea of God in Enlightenment theology transcended.

It is only now that the well-known reference to the "Lutheran hymn" is introduced:

But this humanity in God and indeed the most abstract form of humanity, the greatest dependence, the ultimate weakness, the utmost fragility is natural death. "God himself is dead," it says in a Lutheran hymn, expressing an awareness that the human, the finite, the fragile, the weak, the negative are themselves a moment of the divine, that they are within God himself, that finitude, negativity, otherness are not outside of God and do not, as otherness, hinder unity with God. Otherness, the negative, is known to be a moment of the divine nature itself.... This is the explication of reconciliation: that God is reconciled with the world, or rather that God has shown himself to be reconciled with the world, that even the human is not something alien to him.... (pp.326-7)

Hegel's reference to a *Lutheran* hymn is not accidental. The reason for this lies in a basic feature of classical Lutheran orthodoxy, which places a strong emphasis on what is called the *communicatio idiomatum*. The *communicatio* doctrine has a long history, emerging both in Alexandrian and Western theological sources amid the christological debates of the patristic period, but it has a particular status in Lutheran theology that we need to note. The doctrine refers to the sharing of qualities between the two natures of Christ, so that it becomes possible to say, for example, that the *Son of God* wept at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11.35), or that *Jesus of Nazareth* is rightly worshipped as Lord and God

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<sup>13</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, III, p.322ff.

<sup>14</sup> On the relation between faith and the doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit in Lutheran and Reformation theology, see my *Light of Truth & Fire of Love* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), pp.86-95.

(John 20.28). On some versions of the doctrine, the *communicatio* is interpreted as purely a manner of speaking, since on metaphysical grounds it is assumed that there is no real participation by the divine nature in the human, or by the human in the divine; on other versions, the transfer of qualities from the one nature to the other is understood in a more realist sense as a literal participation of the human nature in the glories of the divine, and of the divine in the humiliation of the human nature. Lutheranism is characteristically "robust" in this latter sense in its treatment of the *communicatio* doctrine, and it has been so deliberately and consistently over a long period of time, particularly through its polemical relationship with the Reformed tradition. It is precisely this doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* which enables Lutheran sources to speak of the "death of God," for though in the strict sense God cannot die, the attributes of the human nature assumed by the Son of God in the incarnation can rightly be predicated of the Son of God himself, and hence of the divine nature.

An important debate concerning the extent of the *communicatio* took place in the aftermath of the Reformation between the Lutherans Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586) and Johann Brentz (1499-1570). Both admitted that each of the two natures of Christ must share in the attributes of the other. Chemnitz, however, took a more reserved line, maintaining that the participation was mainly potential and only actual insofar as the will of God allowed it to be so, for the sake of some particular purpose or use. For Brentz, on the other hand, the participation of the human nature in the divine and *vice versa* is far more extensive, being taken as a fundamental ontological feature of the "hypostatic union," the union of divine and human natures in the *persona* or *hypostasis* of the Son. Thus, for example, the *exaltatio* of the human nature is co-extensive with the *exinanitio* of the divine in the incarnation. In other words, the human nature of Christ enjoys constant omnipotence and omnipresence by virtue of its union with the divine in the *hypostasis* of the Son of God, while the divine nature of Christ can legitimately be said to have experienced grief at the tomb of Lazarus. It was the theology of Brentz, significantly, which was followed subsequently in the school of Tübingen, which became the champion of his views in scholastic Lutheranism.

In general, therefore, Lutheranism affirms the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* as consistently and as persistently as it is possible to do, and nowhere more strongly than in Tübingen. Indeed, the same tendency can even be said to continue today in the work of a man such as Eberhard Jüngel (who is also, interestingly enough, the current *Rektor* of the Tübingen *Stift*). The theme, therefore, runs very deep in Lutheran thought. Luther himself famously spoke in the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518) of the futility of recognising the invisible majesty and glory of God (the *theologia gloriae*), without comprehending the visible and manifest God found in the humility and shame of the cross (the *theologia crucis*) (thesis 20). The same basic insight underlies the so-called "*totus intra*" interpretation of the relationship of the divine to the human nature of the concrete man, Jesus Christ, which has an important place in Luther's christology: the divine Son of God lies in the manger, for example, *totus intra*. It was from this same insight that the Lutheran theology of the *kenosis* of the Son of God developed, first in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and then again, but this time following Hegel almost as much as Luther, in nineteenth century Lutheran sources. The mirror image of this



doctrine is found in the distinctive Lutheran view of the relation of the human nature of Christ to the divine, which in some of its formulations has been judged to verge on the Eutychian heresy, according to which the flesh of Christ is swallowed up in the divinity. This issues in the controversial Lutheran theory of the eucharistic presence, according to which the words, "This is my body" are to be taken with complete seriousness on the grounds that the body of Christ is made ubiquitous by virtue of the *assumptio carnis*. The Lutherans may have sought to appeal to no miracle other than the incarnation in order to explain the eucharistic presence, but this does not mean that their position was metaphysically neutral!

Thus a certain recognition of the depth of the involvement of God in the human predicament, and a corresponding stress on the *communicatio idiomatum*, is a distinctive feature of Lutheran orthodoxy. This definitely sets it apart, for example, from the principled Calvinist resistance to any "confusion" of the divine and the human, *especially* in Christ (*totus intra et extra* was the paradoxical Calvinist riposte to the Lutherans). Calvin himself, exasperated after years of unsuccessful attempts to engage in constructive dialogue with Lutherans on this question, finally went so far as to state flatly that because this principle of the distinction of the natures had been so compromised in Lutheranism (particularly as represented by the followers of Brentz) that it was in greater error in its conception of the eucharist than were the "sounder" mediaeval schoolmen, since at least the latter did not make Christ's flesh out to be physically omnipresent, thus compromising the authenticity of his humanity.<sup>15</sup>

The Lutheran strategy is, then, fraught with very definite theological risk. For our purposes, however, the important point is that the *communicatio* doctrine as interpreted in Lutheranism represents a distinctive and important feature of the Lutheran theological tradition, particularly in the period of Lutheran scholasticism. It would seem to be no accident, therefore, that it is upon this tradition that Hegel draws in his discussion of the death of God; in fact, there was no other available tradition on which he could have drawn in the development of this theme, since the assertion of the *communicatio* is a distinctive theme in Lutheranism, and since Lutheranism is the most consistent of all (non-Lutherans would tend to say the most extreme) in its affirmation of the principle.

### III

For such reasons, the philosophy of Hegel has long simmered away somewhere in the minds of many a Lutheran theologian. Today, however, it is important to recognise that it is not only Lutherans who make reference to Hegel. The work of Hans Küng, for example, has already been mentioned, but Küng, of course, was at the time of writing *Menschwerdung Gottes* a Roman Catholic theologian in good standing in the Catholic Faculty at the University of Tübingen. An equally interesting case is that of his then-colleague Walter Kasper, now a Bishop in the German Catholic hierarchy, who likewise

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<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), IV.xvii.30.

takes up Hegelian themes in his theology. According to Kasper, the great advantage of employing Hegelian philosophy in Christian theology is that it enables us to conceive of God more Biblically! This the older theological tradition was unable to do because of the limits of the philosophical tools at its disposal.<sup>16</sup> The great problem it faced was to understand how it is *conceivable* that the eternal Son of God should have assumed flesh and died a human death. How, Kasper asks, can faith seek understanding at this point? In a variety of ways, classical theology attempted to acknowledge this mystery, but it was never able to shake off the crippling effects of one of the central ideas that it borrowed very early on in its development from Middle Platonism: the idea that such involvement with the creation is something that is in the strictest sense alien to God. Kasper cites a variety of attempts to understand God in what he sees as a more satisfactory, and more explicitly christological sense. The primitive christologies of Ignatius of Antioch and Tertullian, for example, attempted simply to acknowledge the paradoxical force of the idea that the eternal Son of God for our sake subjected himself to suffering and death. Kasper also has particular praise for Luther's *theologia crucis*, which, he says, was an attempt to break through the mediaeval system of theological metaphysics, on the basis of which God could not be found on the cross. But according to Kasper, the greatest single attempt to understand God in this christological sense to be found in the whole of the Western intellectual tradition is none other than that of Hegel. In Hegel, it belongs to the concept of the Absolute that it empty itself into its opposite. Only in this way is the Absolute in fact absolute, that is to say, only thus is it wholly free or self-determined. The important point here for Kasper is that in Hegel, God's very being is conceived in terms of the idea of a freedom which is mediated through self-surrender and self-emptying (181-185). The concept of God as "subject," or, as Kasper prefers, "person," is thus affirmed over against what is seen as a self-enclosed, abstract concept of divine substance. Thus, for Kasper, Hegel provides the necessary conceptual tools by which theology can relate God to history and specifically to the suffering of Jesus. Crucially, however, Kasper argues that Hegel's insistence that the logic of the Absolute is accessible to speculative reason is entirely misplaced; according to Kasper, it is love rather than logic which leads to the movement from eternity into time, a love which is known exclusively from and in the temporal events of revelation.

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of this last point for a proper understanding both of what is made of Hegel in recent theology, and of what is wrong with it. Hegel himself, of course, is as capable as anyone of affirming the love of God in the God-man. In Hegel's hands, however, the theme of the love of God is not something incompatible with philosophical thought, for God is supremely rational, and has given himself to be known. Hegel himself writes in this connection that "without knowing that love is both a distinguishing and the sublation of the distinction, one speaks emptily of it."<sup>17</sup> Recent theology takes a different path, even where relatively sympathetic assessments of Hegel are a given. I have written about this extensively elsewhere,<sup>18</sup> and

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<sup>16</sup> Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, trans. V. Green (London: Burns & Oates, 1986), pp. 176-181.

<sup>17</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, III, p. 276.

<sup>18</sup> Gary D. Badcock, "Divine Freedom in Hegel" ; "Whatever Happened to God the Father?" forthcoming in *Crux*; "The God of the Covenant," forthcoming in Jonathan Clatworthy *et al.*, eds., *Covenant Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001).

do not wish to repeat myself unnecessarily in the present context, but briefly, the standard reading of Hegel which is current in theology derives from the massive influence of Karl Barth, combined, perhaps, with the general "anti-metaphysical" character of much contemporary theology, which makes it extraordinarily resistant to philosophical thought of the full-blooded Hegelian variety. For our purposes in the present context, a brief reference to the Barthian position will have to suffice.

One of Barth's key ideas, and one that has direct relevance to his rejection of Hegel's speculative logic, is that of God as "event," a concept developed in the most fascinating manner in what is without question the logical centre of Barth's theology, the Doctrine of God of the *Church Dogmatics* volume II. Barth's theology has been nowhere more influential than at this point. For Barth, the living God of the Bible must be understood in dynamic terms as having movement, life, and even decision in himself. There is nothing static, nothing metaphysically unchanging in God beyond God's own freedom, on the basis of which Barth can claim: "To its very deepest depths God's Godhood consists in the fact that it is an event..."<sup>19</sup> Barth's doctrine of God, however, rests upon a further qualification of this event, for the event in question has a very specific character, and indeed, it could be said that it even has a specific name: Jesus Christ. For Barth, God is in himself the event in which he chooses to be open to fellowship with humanity in Christ. Or, to put the same thing another way, God is the event of election in which he chooses from all eternity not to be who he is without humankind.

It is significant that in his essay on Hegel in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, Barth also characterises Hegel's philosophy as centred in the idea of God as event.<sup>20</sup> According to Barth, in Hegel's philosophy:

... the key to everything ... [is] that reason, truth, concept, mind, God himself are understood as an *event*, and, moreover, only as an event. They cease to be what they are as soon as the event, in which they are what they are, is thought of as interrupted, as soon as a state is thought of in its place. Essentially reason and all its synonyms are life, movement, process. God is God only in his divine action, revelation, creation, reconciliation, redemption; as an absolute act, as *actus purus*. (398-399)

Barth argues here that theology needs to learn from Hegel that God can only be known in truth as the living God, going so far as to argue on this basis that a Hegel renaissance might even be a good thing for theology (416-417). However, the pivotal Barthian criticism of Hegel that we have already encountered in Kasper appears in the essay, according to which Hegel made his concept of God a function of speculative logic rather than of free grace: the "weightiest" problem in Hegel's philosophy, according to Barth, is his "failure to recognise that God is free" (420).

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<sup>19</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. T.F. Torrance *et al.*; trans. T.H.L. Parker *et al.* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), II/1, p. 263.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Barth, "Hegel," pp. 398-402, 413, 415-416, 419-420.

In fact, of course, Hegel's argument is precisely that God is free. The real point can only be, therefore, that instead of failing to recognise the freedom of God, Hegel understands this freedom differently. For Hegel, freedom is negatively the absence of dependence on an other, and more importantly, it is positively a relating of self to self, or a self-determination. According to Hegel, the very substance of Spirit is freedom, understood in this precise sense.<sup>21</sup> Freedom, therefore, is a living process which proceeds necessarily from the very logic of Spirit. Hegel's entire position rests on the confidence that this logic not only determines the divine life, but that it is also accessible to us insofar as the human and the divine Spirit are not qualitatively different. Barth, on the other hand, understands the freedom of God as an existential freedom, which, in the end, ultimately has priority even over his essence. In Barth, God's essence is a function of God's free choice, God's election.

It is interesting that Hegel too adopts the idea of God as *actus purus*, but again reinterprets it completely, moving beyond the Aristotelian metaphysics of potentiality and actuality in which it was originally located, and understanding it instead in terms of his wider philosophy of subjectivity.<sup>22</sup> Barth, clearly, follows Hegel in understanding God as *actus purus* in terms of the concrete actuality of his outreach. Where Barth differs from Hegel most clearly is in his claim that this outreach is not the outworking of what Hegel calls the "inward force" of Spirit, but rather of the freedom of God in the event of election. This view, however, leads to a fundamental problem in Barthian and post-Barthian theology, a problem acutely found in the development of post-Barthian trinitarian theologies,<sup>23</sup> which is that the denial of any identifiable rational imperative lying behind this choice means that the being of God himself appears to be made arbitrary. It is not simply that it seems that God "woke up one morning and decided to incarnate," as I recall one of my teachers, A.M. Stafford, once putting it in a memorable joke, but that God *could* have, in principle, freely elected to define his being in the invention of the steam locomotive rather than in Jesus Christ. Even the choice of the incarnation seems adventitious. What emerges is a new twist on the old nominalist doctrine of *potentia absoluta*, which now assumes the distinctive shape of an absolute existential freedom.

The problem with this theology is easily identified: it is unphilosophical, or at least insufficiently aware of its philosophically questionable character. Hegel's philosophy has indeed been used, but only as a conceptual toolbag from which, from time to time, an idea may be drawn and put to use. Unfortunately, there the usage ends. A more sober appraisal of the matter is provided by Hegel, who tells us that while religion can survive within its own sphere without philosophy, it can as such only satisfy the human spirit within certain narrow limits.<sup>24</sup> The problem is that without philosophy, religion inevitably retreats into an intellectual ghetto, while those are excluded who, by disposition, are only capable of "thinking belief." Halfway houses of a sort have been provided by existentialism or the later Wittgenstein, for example, but these are philosophical positions

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<sup>21</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, § 382.

<sup>22</sup> Hegel, *The Logic of Hegel*, § 34, and Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, III, pp. 275ff.

<sup>23</sup> See my book, *Light of Truth & Fire of Love* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 145ff.

<sup>24</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, III, p. 346.

which are ultimately unreconcilable in their foundations with the content of Christian belief. In the end, faith requires philosophical elaboration which is consistent with its own content, and since the act of thinking theologically cannot be satisfied with religion alone, a peace between faith and thought has to be attained.

It is at this point that the great weakness of contemporary theological appropriations of Hegel appears, and nowhere more clearly than in connection with the theme of the death of Christ. In Hegel, this death stands at the centre of the philosophical system, and is the key to a fully trinitarian concept of God. It can, however, only be grasped at all because it has been grasped speculatively, that is to say, from the standpoint of the total synthesis of the system. Without the system, in other words, the death of Christ is *not* the key to a renewed doctrine of God. In contemporary appropriations of Hegel in theology, by contrast, it is precisely the speculative standpoint that is rejected. However much the theology offered may speak to religious faith or open up new approach roads to the mystery of God for the heart, therefore, it lacks the power to convince the mind. It is as if we had been presented with the conclusion of a syllogism without any knowledge of its premises, and were asked to accept it as "gospel" truth.

#### IV

It would in principle be possible to address a number of issues at this point by way of a conclusion of my own, but in keeping with the theological content and tone of the discussion, I wish only to sketch out an alternative theological vision to pursue, one that arises from a recognition of the major weakness of the theology I have referred to above, but which also specifies what we might be able to draw from Hegel in order to correct it.

Among the many problems faced in contemporary Christian theology, it seems to me, none is more pressing than the relative absence from it of the doctrine of God the Father.<sup>25</sup> The problematic character of the Father is not at all due to feminist criticism of the language involved; in fact, to give feminist theologians their due, they are virtually the only contemporary theologians who take the doctrine of the Father seriously enough to warrant a discussion. My reference is to something else, namely, the tendency to take the idea of the self-definition of God in the choice made in the divine eternity to be God in Jesus Christ and in no other way with such seriousness as to make any talk of the first person of the Trinity redundant. If one conceives of the Father in classical terms as the *fons trinitatis*, then the ultimate implication of such an approach is that however full the pool into which it flows may be, the "source" itself is empty. In other words, God has come to be so identified with Jesus that there is little or nothing left of God to discuss once the point of absolute intensity, the christological centre, has been explored.

Let me be more radical again. To say this, I wish to suggest, is merely to put into theological form the ultimate philosophical emptiness of much contemporary theology.

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<sup>25</sup> I might add at this point that the use of the term "Father" is by way of denotation rather than connotation. That is to say, "Father" is primarily a name rather than an image though it may be, of course, that as well.

The solution can be stated at this point with precision: the name of "God" has a content which cannot be reduced to the name, "Jesus Christ." I am not the first to recognise this fact, or the problems that accompany those theologies that tend to ignore it. As long ago as 1966, the Edinburgh theologian John McIntyre weighed in against the dominant Barthianism of the time (and this from within the Barthian heartlands!) with a careful analysis of the neo-orthodox slogan, "God is revealed in Jesus Christ," which had come to be accepted by virtually all theologians, everywhere, as a normative formulation. The problem with it, and with the entire logic upon which it rests, McIntyre observed, is that it makes sense only if the word "God" already has some content which is precisely the point that the Barthian tradition seeks to deny. According to McIntyre, however:

... where there is no prior knowledge or acknowledgement of God, revelation propositions have no weight. If I say to an unbeliever 'God is revealed in Jesus Christ', this proposition means no more or no less than the term 'God' means. If God has no existence, the proposition cannot assist his revelation. Propositions asserting the revelation of God presuppose some prior knowledge of God if they are to have any significance.... When we pursue this course, we begin to develop a sympathy which Protestant theology has not had for many decades now, for the proofs for divine existence. For among the many other things they may be trying to do, there is this: they are endeavouring to establish a value for the term 'God' which might make a revelation proposition not just meaningful but actually possible.<sup>26</sup>

McIntyre's criticism seems to have evoked absolutely no positive response at the time, which does not surprise me personally since I have met with a similar incomprehension from the Barthian camp on several very public occasions. Certainly no stampede back to the proofs resulted from McIntyre's intervention, but it seems to me to have been one of the more intelligent theological points made in the 1960s, and one of the points that needs to be made afresh and repeatedly today in face of the continuing dominance of what is basically a Barthian approach in so much contemporary theology. Where I would differ from McIntyre is in an insistence on an adequate account of the doctrine of God the Father rather than on the proofs as such since the proofs, properly understood, only serve the wider interests of a doctrine of God the Father, and since it is the latter that is the more firmly anchored in the theological tradition as a whole.

There is insufficient scope to develop this idea in detail at this point, though this is something that I hope to do in a future monograph. For the present, I wish only to make the unconventional suggestion that the philosophy of Hegel might well prove an important resource in enabling us to move beyond the confines of the contemporary approach. It is an unconventional suggestion mainly because Hegel is frequently thought and nowhere more frequently than in theological circles to collapse the distinction between divine transcendence (the realm of the Father) and immanence (the realm of the Son) in his philosophy of Absolute Spirit. It would, of course, be truer to say that the philosophy of Absolute Spirit preserves both elements in their distinction, while the very

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<sup>26</sup> John McIntyre, *The Shape of Christology* (2nd edn.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), pp. 173-174.

concept of "otherness," which is integral to Hegel's approach, logically presupposes such distinction from beginning to end.

What is of greatest theological importance in Hegel is precisely what is neglected, therefore, in contemporary attempts to appropriate his philosophy, for it has an even more direct bearing on the Christian doctrine of God today than does the theology of the cross. It is, in short, what allows Hegel to grasp the cross as something of philosophical interest and importance in the first place. Thus, I wish to suggest, what Hegel has to offer us is chiefly a contribution to the doctrine of God the Father (who is always, I might add, the Father of the Son and of the Spirit). This contribution looks rather different than what is made of him in the context of the fragmentary "Hegelian" tendencies of contemporary theology. Over against K ung, for example, who tells us that theological study of Hegel is to be seen as prolegomena to a new *christology*, I wish to suggest that it is precisely Hegel's insistence on the notion of the Absolute as rational through and through that needs to be rediscovered, or at the very least taken seriously, since it is this rationality in God that preserves Hegel's overall theological vision from collapsing into the pure finitude of its christological moment. The whole point, in fact, is to see that finitude as embraced by God from the standpoint of speculative philosophy, a philosophy, we might say, which gives both philosophical and theological content to the doctrine of God the Father, much as the traditional proofs do for McIntyre. In other words, it is only the recovery of a philosophy of the Absolute which will rescue the doctrine of the first person of the Trinity, and with it the Christian doctrine of the triune God, from intellectual oblivion.