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Hegelian Priorities in Christendom: A Reconsideration

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Abstract

Arguments from the nineteenth century concerning whether Hegel was an atheist or a theist are still ongoing. This paper examines Hegel's philosophical and theological milieu, his influence on the history of philosophy and on politics, his unique interpretation of the unity of theology and philosophy, and his unusually sanguine interpretation of the relationship between church and state, along with special problems he discerned in the emergence of democracies.

In graduate courses I have taught on G. W. F. Hegel, I usually start off soliciting opinions from students, to see if they have been affected by any Hegelian prejudgements or stereotypes. The responses I get are varied. Some may have heard of Hegel's reputation for being difficult or even incomprehensible; some may have come across criticisms of Hegel's alleged secularism or gnosticism by Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, Karl Löwith, and others; those with a background in Anglo-American analytic philosophy may have an image of Hegel as an other-worldly idealist; or a student may have been exposed to some of the nineteenth-century satirical plays about Hegel, such as Lindner's *The Absolute Boot*, with comical images of Germans trying to interpret ordinary realities in sophisticated Hegelian fashion.

Such responses give me an opening for clarification. I try to relieve anxieties about Hegel's alleged incomprehensibility by pointing out, first of all, that rumors of Hegel's difficulty are much exaggerated. One avoidable obstacle to reading Hegel is his special technical terminology: he uses terms like "concept," "reason," "abstract," "concrete," "individual," etc., in ways completely different from our ordinary usage; thus I include glossaries in some of my books on Hegel. Also, I point out, it is important to understand Hegel's special interpretation of the history of philosophy. According to Hegel, the entire history of Western philosophy since Parmenides has been concerned primarily with the relationship between thought and being, and this concern has come to a head in modern philosophy after Descartes's famous "I think, therefore I am"—a new approach, focusing on existence *within subjectivity*. The "Copernican revolution in philosophy," initiated by Kant, was the next logical step after Descartes, beginning not with being, but with the structures of thought (i.e., subjectivity). And the subsequent *auseinandersetzung* with Kant is where we catch up with Hegel.

Kant famously argued that all traditional metaphysics, concerned with ideas about God,

cosmology, the human soul, and freedom, was an invalid attempt to go beyond the limits of our subjective powers of knowing; and ethics, according to Kant, had to be based on purely subjective rational considerations—a "Categorical Imperative" that requires us to test our personal moral maxims for logical consistency, to see whether or not we individually could consistently wish all humans to have the same maxims.

Hegel saw such Kantian challenges to traditional metaphysics and ethics as problems that needed to be addressed. Thus he begins his encyclopedic system of philosophy with a reestablished metaphysics allegedly unassailable by the Kantian critique (the first two-thirds of his "Logic"), and in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* characterizes Kant's ethics as a "nest of contradictions," arguing that an ethics of "pure rationality," without indebtedness to natural inclinations, is a *Moralität* prone to subjective distortions; that, in a true ethics (*Sittlichkeit*), natural human inclinations are the necessary springboard to a viable ethics; and furthermore, that the dialectic of rights and duties in the individual conscience must be coordinated with the incessant dialectic of rights and duties in society at large.

Hegel's Influence

The French existential phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), once observed that

> Hegel is at the origin of everything important that has been done in philosophy in the past century. . . . One could say without paradox that giving an interpretation of Hegel is to take a position on all the philosophical, political and religious problems of our century.[1]

There are good grounds for this assertion. Even if Hegel was wrong on many things, it is important to have some understanding of what he was about—at least because of his influence on the history of philosophy, and on history itself.

Karl Marx, for example, in his Postface to the second edition of *Capital*, explicitly acknowledges his indebtedness to Hegel: "When I was working at the first volume of *Capital . . .* I openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker." Mark Meaney's *Capital as Organic Unity: The Role of Hegel's Science of Logic in Marx's Grundrisse*[2] leaves us with the impression that Marx may have even had Hegel's *Logic* next to him on his desk, as he developed his theory of capital.

A similar indebtedness to Hegel characterizes a completely different strand of nineteenth-century philosophy, from the Christian existentialist Kierkegaard, who belatedly, and in spite of reservations about Hegel's treatment of individuality, declares:

> His philosophical knowledge, his amazing learning, the insight of his genius, and everything else good that can be said of a philosopher I am willing to acknowledge as any disciple.—Yet, no, not acknowledge—that is too distinguished an expression—willing to admire, willing to learn from him.[3]

In the twentieth century, in Continental philosophy, phenomenologists, existentialists and post-structuralists have attempted to take up where Hegel left off: Heidegger lectured on Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Sartre critiqued Hegel's theory of the relationship of *en soi* to *pour soi* in his magisterial *Being and Nothingness*, and Derrida attempted to "deconstruct" Hegel's alleged "logocentrism" in *Glas* and other works. Anglo-American philosophical currents were also affected; the reaction against Hegelian idealism around the beginning of the twentieth century, led by Bertrand Russell, paved the way for analytic philosophy, positivism and linguistic philosophy.

In politics, Hegel's influence loomed large in the diverse and incompatible arenas of communism, fascism, *and* democracy. Marx's explicit movement to communism had taken place with his 1843 commentary on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, and Marx studied Hegel's works assiduously—especially (of all things!) Hegel's *Science of Logic*; Stalin, Lenin and Engels, following in Marx's footsteps, wrote on Hegelian logic, claiming to have discovered therein secrets of "dialectic" which could be applied to the material and social world. Peter Viereck in *Metapolitics* traces the influence of Hegelian philosophers in Naziism, which took advantage of the Hegelian emphasis on the "organic" nature of the state. But democratic political philosophers such as Bosanquet, Oakeshott, and, more recently, Fukuyama, have also found inspiration in Hegel's idealistic construal of liberalism.

New Initiatives in the Philosophy/Theology Interface

Hegel's initial career-objectives focused on becoming a Lutheran pastor, as he entered the seminary at Tübingen. In his posthumously-published theological writings from that period,[4] he indicates qualms he had at this period about "positive religion" (that is, a Christianity which compromised its spiritual moorings by focusing too much on man-made rituals and doctrines), and he advocates recapturing the "spirit of Christianity." He contrasts the demeanor of Lutherans fearing disease from other members of their congregation, as they take the cup at the Lord's Supper, with the spontaneous and joyful religious rites of the ancient Greeks; and he asks rhetorically why Lutheran bishops would still conduct the ritual of washing the feet of the congregation as a sign of "service," when in reality servants in the modern world no longer perform such actions. He saw the essence of Christianity as consisting in love—not as an

abstract ideal, but as a spirit consolidating a community and expanding naturally beyond the bounds of the community even into the body politic. The main "problematic" for Christianity, in Hegel's eyes, had to do with implementing the "Kingdom of God" spoken of in the Gospels.

Strongly influenced by the French and German Enlightenment, Hegel was interested in overcoming the "myths" of religion, especially accounts of miracles. After graduation from the seminary at Tübingen, like Thomas Jefferson, David Strauss, Ernest Renan, and others in that era, he wrote a "Life of Jesus,"[5] portraying Jesus as the founder of a "virtue-religion," and reinterpreting Jesus' alleged "miracles." After working for some years as a private tutor, Hegel finally opted for a career in philosophy. But to the end of his life, (once, in response to someone's complaint to authorities about Hegel's bias against Catholics), Hegel made frequent affirmations of his fidelity to Lutheranism.

In his philosophy, he never left theology far behind. Like Aquinas, it would be difficult to put Hegel into some neat "philosophy" or "theology" category. It was partly because of this that theologian Karl Barth has called Hegel "the Protestant Aquinas."[6] To be sure, Hegel did not give much attention to Thomas Aquinas himself, in his lectures on the history of medieval philosophy; nevertheless, in spite of frequent criticisms of Roman Catholicism, he evinces grudging admiration for Catholic theologians:

> The philosophical or speculative element is much greater in Catholic dogmatics. In the Protestant doctrinal system or in Protestant dogmatics . . . the content is, on the contrary, more historical in kind or more vested in a historical form, with the result that the doctrine becomes arid. In the Catholic church the linkage of theology with philosophy has in substance always been preserved.[7]

He then argues that the "modern principle" that the content of the New Testament should be treated "with the methods of philological and historical criticism" is "a perverse approach" in seeking the truth of the Christian religion.[8] And he supports a position that now may seem a bit extreme: namely, that "theology continues to be through and through the same thing as philosophy and it cannot separate itself from philosophy."[9] However, there are theologians who consider this an approach worth cultivating. Hans Küng, for instance, in his *The Incarnation of God*, expands on Hegel's philosophical/theological interpretation of the Incarnation, and Cyril O'Regan in *The Heterodox Hegel* offers a largely sympathetic excursus on Hegel's multiple philosophical investigations of traditional Christian doctrines.

But as Hegel began working out his "System" toward the onset of the nineteenth century, the traditional Scholastic view of philosophy as the "handmaiden of theology" was inverted—not in the sense that theology became subordinate to philosophy, but in so far as theology became

an indispensable impetus to philosophy. As mentioned above, Hegel viewed the history of philosophy in terms of successive attempts to bring together being and thought—a goal that (as Hegel interprets it) has also been the earmark of religion, and has been achieved most successfully in the Christian religion. In modern philosophy, according to Hegel, approximations to that same goal had also, providentially, been made; and Hegel saw his own vocation as a philosopher in furthering (or even completing) this process through a systematic speculation on the truths of the Christian faith. Concrete traditional Christian doctrines provide for the philosopher *Vorstellungen,*"picture-thoughts" which need to be explored conceptually for philosophical truths. "Speculation," it should be emphasized, had no pejorative connotation for Hegel, as it often does now; and the process of speculating on Christian doctrines is a keynote of all his major works.

Thus Hegel characterizes his 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit* as an intellectual passion-play, a reenactment of the "Golgotha of the human spirit,"[10] tracing the philosophical quest for an "absolute" standpoint beyond the dichotomies and alienations of realism, idealism, and other "-isms." Toward the end of this work, this "absolute" standpoint is charted by Hegel as finally emerging in the aftermath of a journey passing through ancient "nature-religion" and Hellenic "art-religion" to Christianity, the "absolute religion." He focuses on the Virgin Birth as symbolizing the universal experience of individual self-consciousness uniting with the divine substance.[11]

Hegel's later works are a continuation of the same overall philosophical/theological project. He describes his *Science of Logic* as a speculative investigation of "the life of God before the creation of the world",[12] nature, in his *Philosophy of Nature*, is the external son of god ("the son of God, but not as the Son, but as abiding in otherness—the divine Idea as held fast for a moment outside the divine love"[13]); political philosophy is the investigation of the "march of God" in the progressive development of human society.[14] His *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, published posthumously in three volumes, are credited with establishing the Philosophy of Religion as a distinct and mainstream area of scholarship. And at the outset of his posthumously-published *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, he criticizes theologians who give mere pious affirmations of Divine Providence, without trying to show its workings in the real world. Hegel then gives a particularly clear indication to his students of his own theological/philosophical approach:

> God wishes no narrow-hearted souls or empty heads for his children; but those
> whose spirit is of itself indeed, poor, but rich in the knowledge of Him; and who

regard this knowledge of God as the only valuable possession. . . . It was for awhile the fashion to profess admiration for the wisdom of God, as displayed in animals, plants, and isolated occurrences. But, if it be allowed that Providence manifests itself in such objects and forms of existence, why not also in Universal History? . . . Our mode of treating the subject is . . . a Theodicaea—a justification of the ways of God.[15]

Hegel then goes on in his lectures on history, starting with China and other ancient civilizations, then through Greek and Roman and Germanic history, developing his thesis that the ineluctable flow of the human spirit has been away from hegemonies in which one man was free, then to aristocracies and oligarchies in which an elite group or groups attained freedom, and finally to the modern concept of a free society, whose ultimate quest is for *all* humans to be free[16] (this is the insight which gave rise, with considerable modifications, to Francis Fukuyama's 1992 interpretation of the collapse of the Soviet Union, *The End of History and the Last Man*).

As Cyril O'Regan and others have noted, Hegel harbored a special admiration for the theology of the German mystic, Jacob Boehme, who is famous for attempting to systematically portray the workings of the Holy Trinity in creation, throughout nature, and in the workings of the human spirit. One instance of Hegel's admiration for this Trinitarian methodology is his characterization of "triplicity" as the "absolute method"—not in terms of (the frequently-heard Hegel-stereotype) "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" terminology used by Hegel's contemporary, Fichte—but in the conceptual analysis of movements from "in-itself, for-itself, in-and-for-itself," "universal, particular, individual," and other triads. Hegel's Trinitarian interest became most evident in his treatise on the proofs for the existence of God, when, after criticizing the "ontological proofs" which attempt to establish God's existence from the concept of a "being than whom nothing greater can be thought," he develops his own Trinitarian version of the proof, as Patricia Calton shows in *Hegel's Metaphysics of God: The Ontological Proof as the Development of a Trinitarian Divine Ontology*. There is a legend that St. Augustine, meditating on the Trinity while walking along the seashore, was warned by an angel that he would never be able to comprehend the mystery. In contrast, Hegel was optimistic about finding rich philosophical meaning in that doctrine.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Hegel, who in his seminary days, thought it necessary to get beyond the "positive" trappings of doctrine and ritual in orthodox Lutheranism, found the proper vocation of the theologian to consist in philosophical contemplation as the highest and most mature type of religious worship:

> The inwardness of the heart's worship and our pictorial thinking is not the highest form of inwardness. As this purest form of knowledge we must recognize untrammeled thinking in which philosophy brings to our minds the same content [as in religion] and thereby attains that most spiritual worship in which thinking makes its own and knows conceptually what otherwise is only the content of subjective feeling or pictorial thinking.[17]

Church and State

The early interest of Hegel in the Christian belief in the Kingdom of God did not flag after his seminary days, but continued and even broadened. As I have brought out in my 1993 book *Democracy and the "Kingdom of God"*, the majority of theologians today consider the "Kingdom of God" to be the most important "symbol" of the Gospels, although there have been ongoing disputes about the interpretation of the Kingdom in terms of its presence now vs. its relegation to a hereafter.[18] Is the Church the Kingdom of God already present in the world, as Augustine and other patristic theologians thought? Or is the Kingdom to be attained only with the second coming of Christ? or only in the next world? Hegel in great measure agreed with Augustine, observing in his Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion that, "the church is the kingdom of God, the achieved presence, life, preservation, and enjoyment of the Spirit."[19] But this kingdom, in Hegel's view, will necessarily spill over into the community at large and validate the worldly realm.

> When the Kingdom of God has won a place in the world and is active in penetrating worldly aims and interests and therefore in transfiguring them, when father, mother, brother, meet in the community, then the worldly realm too for its part begins to claim and assert its right to validity.[20]

As mentioned above, with reference to Hegel's philosophy of history, all of history is interpreted by Hegel as an evolution to greater and greater subjective freedom, leading in the modern world to the emergence of the "free state." Roman Catholicism, in Hegel's view, had been for Christians an impediment in the achievement of this goal, because of the dichotomies which it allegedly perpetuated between priesthood and layperson, the spirit and the flesh, the Church and the world. But Lutheranism is extolled by Hegel as the champion of the true Christian spirit, finally bringing about the resolution of such dichotomies. For example, Hegel offers the following contrast of the historically emerging Lutheran spirit with the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, which were central to Catholic religious orders:

> Once the divine spirit introduces itself into reality, and reality emancipates itself to spirit, then what in the world was a postulate of holiness is supplanted by the reality of moral life. Instead of the vow of chastity, marriage now ranks as the

ethical relation; and, therefore, as the highest on this side of humanity stands the family. Instead of the vow of poverty (muddled up into a contradiction of assigning merit to whosoever gives away goods to the poor, i.e. whosoever enriches them) is the precept of action to acquire goods through one's own intelligence and industry,—of honesty in commercial dealing, and in the use of property—in short, moral life in the socio-economic sphere. And instead of the vow of obedience, true religion sanctions obedience to the law and the legal arrangements of the state—an obedience which is itself the true freedom, because the state is self-possessed, self-realizing reason—in short, moral life in the state. Thus, and thus only, can law and morality exist.[21]

In other words, the Protestant Reformation had laid the foundation for the universal attainment of freedom in and *with* the secular realm:

In the Protestant state, the constitution and the code, as well as their several applications, embody the principle and the development of the moral life, which proceeds and can only proceed from the truth of religion, when reinstated in its original principle and in that way as such first become actual. The moral life of the state and the religious spirituality of the state are thus reciprocal guarantees of strength.[22]

The Protestantism that Hegel had in mind was the extremely community-oriented Lutheranism prominent at that time in Germany; and Hegel was optimistic about the close and mutually constructive relationship between state and church that would result:

The state discharges a duty by affording every assistance and protection to the church in the furtherance of its religious ends; and, in addition, since religion is an integrating factor in the state, implanting a sense of unity in the depths of men's minds, the state should even require [!] all its citizens to belong to a church—*a* church is all that can be said, because since the content of a man's faith depends on his private ideas, the state cannot interfere with it.[23]

In retrospect, we can see that the political problematic that Hegel was dealing with contrasts remarkably with the problematic *we* are most conscious of—not the separation of church and state, but the harmonious union and cooperation between church and state, between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world—already achieved in principle through the breakthroughs of Protestant Christianity, which has "rolled up its sleeves" and worked to transform the world, rather than escape from it or dictate to it (Hegel's stereotype of medieval Catholicism). Such an ideal will seem idyllic to Americans, influenced by a constitutional bill of rights which evinces intense consciousness of the dangers of a too-close relationship between church and state. On the other hand, it may be worthwhile to contemplate what might be the result if those standing on each side of the proverbial "wall of separation between state and church" were able to aggressively and systematically cultivate areas of mutual cooperation.

Democracy, Reconsidered

Hegel, although a serious apologist for a "free modern state," was no fan of democracy. Political philosophers from within democracy, such as John Stuart Mill, have warned about the possibility of a "tyranny of the majority" which always has the potential to subjugate or endanger minorities in any established democracy. Hegel's qualms about democracy were somewhat similar. In a democracy, Hegel saw the ever-present possibility of the "preponderating majority of freemen," after having attained their goal of participation in the sovereignty of the state, basing their influence "on the principle of multeity or mere numbers." But even this, in Hegel's view, was not the major weakness with democracies. Hegel's primary reservations about democracy stemmed from his metaphysics, which envisioned an "organic" union of "nature" and "spirit" in politics, as in other areas. In other words, a successful political constitution, as Hegel conceptualized it, would be one which is based on the natural associations or groupings which have developed historically in a society, and which are able to be elevated to a higher "spiritual" unity, ideally operating after the pattern of an organism (this notion of a "political organism," of course, was the aspect that Hitler's philosophers latched onto, and exploited for their own purposes). One of Hegel's counter-examples of the *failure* to coordinate nature and spirit was Napoleon's attempt to impose a well-thought-out, liberal constitution *per impossibile* on Spain.

To be sure, there was a paucity of democratic states in the early nineteenth century that could serve Hegel as models. The historic eighteenth-century political maneuvers of non-native, motley groups of European immigrants in America must have seemed to Hegel like an overly cerebral attempt, with insufficient grounding in nature and historical precedents, to "invent" a constitutional government (to use Garry Wills's terminology). Also objectionable was the "one man, one vote" principle, which is foundational in democracies, and which seems to utilize a purely *quantitative* criterion for participation in government. In Hegel's view, such a government offered an example *par excellence* of a mathematically conditioned, and thus *inorganic* political society.

Hegel has been unjustly criticized as idealizing an extant Prussian monarchical form of government. Hegel's ideal government was indeed monarchical; but the model which seemed uppermost in his mind was the British style of limited monarchy, in which the monarch would be largely limited to "dotting the i's and crossing the t's" in a parliamentary government. The type of representation that Hegel opted for—trade organizations, churches, educational institutions, and other "corporations" sending representatives to parliament—did not prevail in the Prussia of his time. In other words, Hegel's political philosophy was a *reformist* ideal, in the context of the

then-prevailing Prussian hegemony.

If it be granted to Hegel that giving "natural groupings" adequate representation in government might be a healthy development, and if we look for any promising developments of that sort in current American politics, our attention might turn to lobbies and lobbyists as a "natural" ground-swell influencing our government (going well beyond Hegel's concept of "corporations," however). But more precisely—with the exception of Common Cause as a "citizen's lobby"—we might see most of these power brokers as an oligarchic, rather than a democratic, type of input.

Not infrequently in our pragmatically-oriented culture, people ask (or wonder) about the usefulness of philosophy. Hegel's response to that challenge is paradoxical: the primary "useful" contribution of philosophy is the progressive enhancement of the self-consciousness of mankind. Like Socrates, the "father of Western philosophy," Hegel saw his vocation as the investigation of the "big" questions—what is the best form of government? the relationship between faith and knowledge? the best way to coordinate religion and politics? As we look into the nuances connected with these questions, we sometimes encounter some useful "practical" insights. This is not the goal of our investigation, however, but an occasional welcome side-effect.

Notes

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Les Éditions Nagel, 1948), p. 110.
2. Mark Meaney, *Capital as Organic Unity: The Role of Hegel's Science of Logic in Marx's Grundrisse* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002).
3. *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967–1978), 2.221 (VI B 54).
4. *Early Theological Writings*, trans. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1948).
5. G. W. F. Hegel, *Three Essays, 1793–1795: The Tübingen Essay, Berne Fragments, the Life of Jesus*, ed. and trans. Peter Fuss and John Dobbins (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1984).
6. Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought: from Rousseau to Ritschl*, trans. Brian Cozens (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969), 268, 280.
7. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Brown; trans. R. Brown and J. Stewart (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 99.
8. Ibid., 101.
9. Ibid., 107.

10. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §808.

11. Ibid., §755.

12. G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik* I, in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969), vol. 5, 44.

13. Ibid., vol. 9, §247.

14. Ibid., vol. 7, §259, Addition.

15. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 15.

16. Ibid., 18.

17. *G. W. F. Hegel: Oxford University Press Translations, Hegel's Aesthetics*, I, Part I, trans. T. M. Knox (oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 104.

18. See H. Kainz, *Democracy and the "Kingdom of God"* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1993), 9ff., 38ff.

19. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 3, trans. Peter Hodgson, R. F. Brown et alii (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984–7), 152.

20. *Oxford University Press Translations*, *Hegel's Aesthetics*, part 2, section 3, chap. 2, p. 552.

21. Ibid., *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*, trans. A. V. Miller, section 2, C., (c), (g) §552, p. 286.

22. Ibid., §552, p. 291.

23. Ibid., *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox, part 3, Section 3.A, p. 168.