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## The Speculative Trinity: A Thomistic Reflection on Hegelian Theology

For Hegel, the Trinity is the ultimate truth about reality: it is the theological doctrine which implicitly contains within itself the structure and narrative arch of the entire cosmos. Hegel's Trinitarian philosophical theology is the centerpiece of his entire intellectual project, summing up his dialectical logic, philosophy of nature, and philosophy of spirit in a singular dogmatic proclamation. But this particular Trinity, in the end, shows itself to be a Hegelian, not a Christian, dogma. Hegel's speculative theology, of which the Trinity is the intellectual center, is a radical re-description of the Christian narrative that absorbs Christianity into the logic of a philosophical world picture which cannot accommodate its truth claims. The foundational error in Hegel's theology is the 'identity thesis': the claim that the content of religion and philosophy are identical. In subsuming religion into the philosophical Notion, Hegel does away with its essence; grace gives way to dialectic. Hegel's speculative Trinity therefore serves as a point of departure for a meditation on the role of philosophy in theological discourse and the relation of speculation to contemplation. It will finally be argued that St. Thomas Aquinas, not Hegel, is the pristine example of a thinker who best understands the role of intellectual analysis within the theological enterprise, an enterprise that always points towards union with God, that is, towards the life of grace. In a way then, this paper seeks to address that famous question posed by Karl Barth: "Why did Hegel not become for the Protestant world something similar to what Thomas Aquinas was for Roman Catholicism?"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1973), 384.

Trinitarian theologies must always resort to particular models in analyzing the data of revelation in order to render the content of dogma intelligible to the human mind; such models usually take the form of particular philosophical categories and frameworks. It is no doubt that for Hegel his model of choice is his very own dialectical logic, a method of conceptualizing reality in terms of the dynamic movement of thought as it becomes trapped in contradictions and passes into resolution by being synthesized into a higher category.<sup>2</sup> Hegel is clear that his dialectical method is ontologically totalizing in its scope: it applies to all of being.<sup>3</sup> The dialectical method is primarily Hegel's way of establishing a critical ground for metaphysics in the wake of Kant's critical idealism.<sup>4</sup> The idea is that if we examine any of the categories that are involved in the constitution of experience with enough scrutiny, we will find that they by necessity pass into their opposite and fall into contradiction; but they eventually are resolved into a greater unity which, in light of itself, clarifies the prior logical moments. This process continues, taking the last moment of resolution as its new starting point, until it reaches its completion in a category which is absolutely unconditioned and contains all of the prior categories within itself: the Absolute Idea,<sup>5</sup> which, along with *Geist* or Spirit, is Hegel's preferred term for God. As Hegel tells us, the "definition of God [is] that he is the *absolute idea*—i.e., that he is *spirit*."<sup>6</sup> Hegel makes himself clear that his particular form of logic is not merely a way of understanding the categories of human thought, but an entryway into the eternal movement of

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<sup>2</sup> For Hegel's own description of the dialectical method, see: G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline Part I: Science of Logic*, trans. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), §79-83, 125-134.

<sup>3</sup> For a contrasting view, see: Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 6. For a defense of the ontological character of Hegel's logic see: Stephen Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel's Logic: From Being to Infinity* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2006), 115-143.

<sup>4</sup> See: Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York/London: Routledge, 2005), 155-169.

<sup>5</sup> Hegel, *EL*, §236-7A, 299-300.

<sup>6</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on Philosophy of Religion Volume III: The Consummate Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 66.

the divine reality: “*This realm is truth unveiled, truth as it is in and for itself.* It can therefore be said that this content is *the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature.*”<sup>7</sup>

The motor of Hegel’s dialectic is *Aufhebung*, usually translated as sublation. It has a twofold meaning: “it is at once a *negating* and a *preserving*.”<sup>8</sup> Sublation is the overcoming of contradiction, of otherness, in the harmony of identity and reconciliation. The Hegelian dialectic develops immediate thoughts by allowing them to pass into their opposite, into a negation, and then to arrive at the “*speculative or the positively rational*” moment, which “grasps the unity of the determinations in their opposition.”<sup>9</sup> The first two moments are preserved because they still exist in the higher category but are negated because they have been transcended therein. It is this process of immediate abstraction, negative otherness, and return to unity which, for Hegel, represents the life of God. The dialectical “play of self-maintenance” is constitutive of God’s self-conscious personhood and characterizes the divine self-emptying, the journey into absolute otherness (negation) and the return to internal unity through sublation.<sup>10</sup> Here, we have the philosophical core of the Hegelian interpretation of the Trinity. Expressed “in the mode of sensibility,” that is, in its representational form, “it is eternal love.”<sup>11</sup> The divine idea’s dialectical dance with itself, is expressive of what, in religious language, we call love:

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<sup>7</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 21.34, 29.

<sup>8</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §113, 68.

<sup>9</sup> Hegel, *EL*, §82, 132.

<sup>10</sup> Hegel, *PR III*, 195. For Hegel, the dialectical interplay of otherness and identity is constitutive of the infinite divine personality, characterizes God’s absolute freedom (His ability to enter into negative otherness while maintaining positive self-hood), and speculatively defines the Biblical notion of *kenosis*: “Personality or freedom is truly [present] precisely in its infinite being-for-self; its very concept is thus the determination of identity-with-self and of universality. Speculatively understood, this [is] self-emptying precisely at its highest level; this eternal movement [is] its concept” (*PR III*, 85).

<sup>11</sup> Hegel, *PR III*, 276.

When we say, "God is love," we are saying something very great and true...For love is a distinguishing of two, who nevertheless are absolutely not distinguished for each other. The consciousness or feeling of the identity of the two—to be outside of myself and in the other—this is love. I have my self-consciousness not in myself but in the other...This other, because it likewise exists outside itself, has its self-consciousness only in me, and both the other and I are only this consciousness of being-outside-ourselves and of our identity...This is love, and without knowing that love is both a distinguishing and the sublation of the distinction, one speaks emptily of it. This is the simple, eternal idea.<sup>12</sup>

Love, therefore, is a representation of what for speculative thinking is a dialectical unity with otherness. Hegel is clear that this dynamic is ‘eternal’ insofar as it is the inalterable process of the movement of God at the base of reality. But the trinitarian dynamic is in no way confined to the realm of divine transcendence; for Hegel, the immanent Trinity, the dialectical movement of the eternal divine idea in-of-itself “*overreaches* the other side”<sup>13</sup> The movement of history, the realm of nature and man, is a part of the divine life itself; God’s holistic dialectical reconciliation with otherness takes place in and through creation and salvation history. The immanent and economic Trinity, for Hegel, are deeply intertwined, both moments within a larger trinitarian whole. Cyril O’Regan, expressing this concept succinctly, has dubbed Hegel’s Trinity ‘the inclusive Trinity,’ articulating the idea that the trinitarian dynamic extends to, and involves, the finite world.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 276.

<sup>13</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion Volume I: Introduction and the Concept of Religion*, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 325.

<sup>14</sup> See: Cyril O’Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), chap. 6.

It seems to be the case that for Hegel, the immanent Trinity turns out to be merely the first moment of the trinitarian life—here, it is understood as “the silent abode of the thinking spirit,” the “element of pure ideality and universality,” in which “God is immediately present to himself through his differentiation,” through the dialectic of self-reconciliatory love.<sup>15</sup> But, strangely, Hegel also denotes the abstract inner dialectic of the divine life as ‘the *kingdom of the Father*,’ indicating that the Hegelian understanding of a divine Persons is radically unique. The Father, for Hegel, is not one *hypostasis* eternally related to other *hypostases*, but is rather the religious symbol which demarcates the abstract universality of the dialectic.<sup>16</sup> That is, the Father is what we would normally call Hegelian dialectical logic apart from its manifestation in the world.

It becomes immediately clear that Hegel, despite his fondness for the triadic form of the Trinity, has a certain distaste for the classical, dogmatic formulation of it, which he sees as representationally true but philosophically insufficient—the image of one God as three Persons, the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, “is a childlike relationship, a childlike form.”<sup>17</sup> In analyzing the “dogmatic image” expressing “that God as Father eternally begets his Son,” Hegel states that “all of this “doing” is God himself; God is only the totality, and taken abstractly as the Father, he is not the true God.”<sup>18</sup> God, for Hegel, must be understood as *one* personality, and once the understanding brings “the determinate category of number into play”—once it attempts to divide God into three Persons—we are left with “three gods, [in which case] subjectivity would be lost.”<sup>19</sup> God cannot be three subjects; He is a singular infinite

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<sup>15</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 362.

<sup>16</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 362.

<sup>17</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 194.

<sup>18</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 363-4.

<sup>19</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 82.

subjectivity constituted by three interdependent dialectical spheres which play themselves out in time.<sup>20</sup> Hegel thus translates the language of divine Persons into the language of ‘elements or kingdoms’ which seem to symbolize narrative arcs within the dialectical unwinding of Spirit from ‘eternity’ into history; the Person of the Father therefore designates the inner essence of God, that is, dialectical logic in its abstract universal form apart from its external appearance in nature.

The “*kingdom of the Son*” then is precisely this external appearance, the Father’s differentiation of Himself into the external world<sup>21</sup>—it is God’s element “of *particularity*, of *representation*.”<sup>22</sup> Hegel tells us that “the Son, which in the first sphere was the other as undifferentiated from the First, comes now to be determined as something external, as world and nature.”<sup>23</sup> The eternal dialectic externalizes itself in the natural world—it begins its re-enactment of the internal trinitarian play of love in physical reality. God becomes other to Himself, and this “other, released as something free and independent, is *the world* as such.”<sup>24</sup> The differentiation within the logical idea, which in its eternal aspect “was only a show [*Schein*],” now becomes existentially concrete, and this concretization “consists in the determination of the Son.”<sup>25</sup> Hegel therefore identifies the self-differentiation of the Son from the Father, the initial concrete realization of dialectical logic in external reality—the positing of *Geist*’s other which nonetheless remains a moment in itself—with *creation*: “we have the creation of the world, the form in which

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<sup>20</sup> Of course, the classical conception of the divine Persons in no way implies that God is three centers of subjective conscious activity, but rather that the one God is trinitarian in three subsistent relations, each of which is identified completely with the singular divine essence. See: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), I, 39, 1, co.

<sup>21</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 362.

<sup>22</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 363.

<sup>23</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 363.

<sup>24</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 292.

<sup>25</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 365.

the Son actually becomes the other.”<sup>26</sup> Hegel therefore calls the Son, “the creator of the word,” and the “Demiurge.”<sup>27</sup> But he is careful to point out that “this is not a particular person; [it is] God in general, the universal (therefore the Father), who [stands] (over against) objectivity, world, (other-being).”<sup>28</sup> Creation, the kingdom of the Son, is simply the self-particularization of the Father (the realm of abstract and universal dialectical logic) into tangible material reality, wherein Spirit becomes other to itself yet maintains a certain unity with itself; it has nothing to do with a determinate moment in time in which the world came to be.<sup>29</sup>

Within the kingdom of the Son i.e. the ‘created order,’ we have a particularly intense manifestation of God’s unity with the world, His other, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, Who is the absolute idea, Spirit, realized “for humanity only in the form of *this* single individual, and only *one* such individual—“this” individual—[is] the *infinite* unity ([in this] subjectivity, in a “this” [of this kind]).”<sup>30</sup> Hegel is at pains to stress that the Incarnation is a unique event, and takes place only in one particular person, the God-man Jesus Christ. His Christology, however, blurs the lines between demythologized philosophical re-description and classical orthodoxy. There is no talk of two natures, divine and human, in a hypostatic union; rather, we are told that “the unity of divine and human nature [means] that humanity implicitly bears within itself the *divine idea*, not bearing it within itself like something from somewhere else but as its own substantial nature.”<sup>31</sup> There seems to be some sense in which, even though the unity of divine and human natures is especially pronounced within the person of Jesus, this unity is already

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<sup>26</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 365.

<sup>27</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 89.

<sup>28</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 89.

<sup>29</sup> Hegel tells us: “If we ask whether the world or matter is eternal, exists from eternity, or whether on the contrary it has a beginning in time, this question belongs to the empty metaphysics of the understanding” (*PR* III, 88).

<sup>30</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 114.

<sup>31</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 109.

implicitly present within man: finite spirit (humanity) is always united to absolute spirit (God). Jesus only makes this union more explicit in his person. Hegel also asserts that “the unity of divine and human nature has a significance not only for the definition of human nature but just as much for that of the divine.”<sup>32</sup> The Incarnation affects God as much as it affects man.

The same dynamic holds true for the Crucifixion, in which the God-man is put to death, reconciling the world to Himself by putting death to death in his very dying—it is a negation of a negation, to use dialectical language. This is “the highest divestment of the divine idea,” a “monstrous, fearful picture [*Vorstellung*], which brings before the imagination the deepest abyss of cleavage.”<sup>33</sup> In the Crucifixion it is not Christ’s human nature which dies; it is God Himself, Who in sojourning into the deepest depths of finitude, shows that “even the human is not something alien to him, but rather that this otherness, this self-distinguishing, finitude as it is expressed, is a moment in God himself.”<sup>34</sup> Hegel expresses his innovative (we might call it) reading of the Passion narrative with recourse to a Lutheran hymn:

"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 involves the highest "idea" of spirit. In this way what is external and negative is converted into the internal. On the one hand, the meaning attached to death is that through death the human element is stripped away and the divine glory comes into view once more—death is a stripping away of the human, the negative. But at the same time death itself is this negative, the furthest

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<sup>32</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 110.

<sup>33</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 125.

<sup>34</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 327.



extreme to which humanity as natural existence is exposed; God himself is [involved in] this.<sup>35</sup>

In dying, Spirit “contains the negative within itself,” and “[is envisaged] as reconciled, as love; this [involves] the exaltation (of human nature) to heaven, where the Son of Man sits at the right hand of the Father, and the identity and the glory of divine and human nature appear to the spiritual eye in the highest possible way.”<sup>36</sup> The death of Christ is therefore a dramatic reversal of human frailty which points towards the Resurrection, the Ascension, and Pentecost, all of which Hegel conflates into a single moment. The point seems to be that in the Crucifixion, God destroys finitude by passing through it, dialectically reconciling humanity to himself in the community of faith, in the cultus, a unitive harmony which constitutes the ‘Person’ of the Holy Spirit. Humanity is exalted—it ‘ascends into heaven’—by being united with God by virtue of His having drunk the cup of finitude to the dregs (in death), fully identifying Himself with man. There is no mention of an empty tomb, of the physical Christ in a glorified body, or of eyewitness accounts; the significance of the Resurrection and the Ascension is the faith of the community, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

We thus reach the consummation of the Godhead’s dialectical journey in the “*kingdom of the Spirit*,” the “self-conscious awareness of human beings that they are reconciled with God, and the fulfillment of this consciousness in church and cultus.”<sup>37</sup> Here, man knows himself to be one with God by his participation in the community of faith, in the church. But this is more than just man’s consciousness; it is also “God knowing himself in this other.”<sup>38</sup> The existence of the Christian religion, therefore, is *itself* a moment within the Trinity—the Holy Spirit is nothing

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<sup>35</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 326.

<sup>36</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 132.

<sup>37</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 363.

<sup>38</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 371.

other than God's self-consciousness in the faith of Christian believers. The substantive reality of true religion, for Hegel, is precisely this, God's self-awareness of His unity with finite spirit in the church:

“The content of religion is that God is simply object to himself, but is purely and simply identical with himself in this differentiation; and so he is spirit, *absolute* spirit. Consciousness knows itself to be entwined in this content; it knows itself as a moment of this movement; it knows God only insofar as God knows himself in it.”<sup>39</sup>

We thus have the completion of Hegel's Trinity, which consists of a dialectic within God that encompasses the totality of the real, including the finite world. The Idea, having gone out of its abstract universality (the Father), posited itself as other in creation (the Son), and reconciled this otherness, dialectically, in the community of the church (the Holy Spirit), shows itself to be the full reality of the trinitarian God. It seems that salvation history, for Hegel, is just as much the salvation of God as it is of man.

How are we to understand the Hegelian trinitarian metanarrative in relation to Christian orthodoxy? Peter Hodgson maintains that the Hegelian Trinity does in fact accord with orthodox trinitarian theology, since “the divinity of God for [Hegel] is not diminished but enhanced in the second and third moments of the divine life.”<sup>40</sup> He compares Hegel's version of the Trinity to Augustine's, claiming that it coheres with his “trialectical model of subject and object mediated by a third.”<sup>41</sup> But despite the shared use of a psychological analogy between Augustine and Hegel (we shouldn't be slow in pointing out that the psychological models employed by the two

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<sup>39</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 359.

<sup>40</sup> Peter C. Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology: A Reading of the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 134.

<sup>41</sup> Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology*, 134.

thinkers differ dramatically), it is difficult to maintain that Hegel's God is anywhere in the realm of the Christian tradition of which Augustine is a member. The God of Christian orthodoxy is not completed by creation and reconciliatory worship; He is utterly transcendent, in need of nothing from creatures, and ontologically distinct from the world in the most radical way. To be sure, the Christian God is intensely immanent to the world insofar as He is the cause of every creature's being, and metaphysically supports the whole of contingent reality by his creative power.<sup>42</sup> But He is no way dependent on the world, not in need of existential, concrete manifestation in—and reconciliation with—the created order. In fact, Hodgson's acknowledgement that the Hegelian God's divinity is 'enhanced' by the second and third moments of the trinitarian dialectic is precisely what makes Him so radically distinct from the Christian one, the God Whose divinity can never be enlarged by interaction with finite creatures—the God who is the infinite plenitude of actuality and subsistent being in-of-Himself apart from His free gift of creation. For this reason, William Desmond rightly claims that Hegel's God is not the wholly transcendent God of the Christian faith but is a philosophical counterfeit whose supposed 'transcendence' really amounts to a self-completing holistic immanence found in human self-transcendence; here, he echoes—rightly so, in my estimation—Kierkegaard's critical pantheistic reading of Hegel.<sup>43</sup> In Hegel, divine and human consciousness converge so radically that God's self-knowledge is His self-knowledge in us; in Hegelian theology, the ontological distinction between God and creatures collapses completely.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> St. Thomas, for instance, asserts: "Therefore as long as a thing has being, God must be present to it, according to its mode of being. But being is innermost in each thing and most fundamentally inherent in all things since it is formal in respect of everything found in a thing. Hence it must be that God is in all things, and innermostly" (Aquinas, *ST I*, 8, 1, co.).

<sup>43</sup> William Desmond, *Hegel's God: A counterfeit Double?* (London/New York: Routledge, 2017), 2-7, 10, 15, 66, 73-4, 107-8, 122, 131.

<sup>44</sup> For a similar criticism, see: Declan Marmion and Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *An Introduction to the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 154.

The distinction of Persons in the Trinity, likewise, has been all but obliterated by Hegel's speculative rewrite. Hegel, ignoring the nuanced treatment of Divine Persons in thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas—who are careful in affirming both the plurality of Divine Persons and the unity of the Divine Essence—sees any attempt to establish a legitimate distinction of Persons within the Godhead as an inevitable road to tri-theism. God, Hegel tells us, must be one God, one personality, one center of subjective experience—one Person.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the dialectical interplay of the three elements of his logic is precisely what constitutes God's unified personality in the first place; for this reason, some have argued that Hegel's trinitarian account provides us with a valuable model for the structure of the 'I' which overcomes naive realism and pure subjectivism, incorporating mutual recognition and relational re-cognitive structures into its account of the self.<sup>46</sup> This may very well be true; but despite the alleged merits of Hegel's dialectical understanding of self-personhood, it still remains the case that Hegel's God has no room for a plurality of divine Persons, a central tenet of the Christian Trinity. Hegel's 'trinitarian' God is radically mono-personal; Persons have been transformed into nothing more than spheres or stages within the divine life as it comes to self-consciousness in history. Such an understanding of the Divine Persons is radically incoherent with the Christian trinitarian claim.

Hegel also seems to wildly alter the meaning of the central truth of Christianity: the Resurrection of the Incarnate God. While reading Hegel—with his constant avowals of the unity of divinity and humanity and his suspicious neglect of the literal rising of Jesus—one cannot

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<sup>45</sup> Hegel assumes a univocal conception of personhood in God and creatures and adopts the modern understanding of person (a locus of conscious activity) instead of the classical one (an individual substance of a rational nature). Operating with Hegel's conception, it is understandable why one would suppose tri-theism is an inevitable consequence of establishing a plurality of Persons in the Godhead. The classical conception, however (along with a well worked out theory of analogy), is much more amenable to the maintenance of trinitarian monotheism.

<sup>46</sup> Paolo Diego Bubbio, "Hegel, The Trinity, and the 'I'," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* Vol. 76, No. 2 (October 2014), 129-150, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/24709220>.

help but get the impression that the Christian story has been purged of its genuinely theological content and emptied of its historical power. For Hegel, it seems to be the case that God and man are not really metaphysically distinct at all, and that the God-man is nothing more than an especially unique manifestation of this truth. The proclamation of the Resurrection becomes nothing more than an affirmation of the unity of the divine with the human, of absolute spirit with finite spirit; and for the authentically Christian believer, such a reduction simply will not do. Thus, Charles Taylor notices that “while Hegel is not in the main line of descent of liberal Protestantism, he is the point of origin of another important movement towards a de-mythologized, one might say, 'de-theologized' Christianity.”<sup>47</sup> He also notes that Hegel’s constant attempt to banish the mystery of God altogether and subsume it into a philosophically totalizing paradigm is fundamentally incompatible with the Abrahamic faiths.<sup>48</sup> He sums up his critique by describing Hegel’s Christian philosophy as “an extraordinary transposition which 'saves the phenomena' (that is, the dogmas) of Christianity, while abandoning its essence.”<sup>49</sup> As other scholars have put it: Hegel’s “philosophical reinterpretation of Christian doctrines is like a prosaic rephrasing of a beautiful poem—so much suggestive meaning is lost in translation.”<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps the central crime of Hegel’s version of Christianity is its destruction of any possibility for God’s free gift of grace, the essential theme of authentic Christian faith. In identifying God with his dialectical method, Hegel abolishes God’s absolute sovereignty, making Him a prisoner to the dialectical logic inherent in Spirit’s unwinding throughout history. Grace, therefore, becomes an impossibility; revelation and salvation history can no longer function as free gifts from God but are now configured as necessary moments within the unfolding of the

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<sup>47</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 495.

<sup>48</sup> Taylor, *Hegel*, 494.

<sup>49</sup> Taylor, *Hegel*, 494.

<sup>50</sup> Marmion and Nieuwenhove, *An Introduction to the Trinity*, 155.

divine life itself. In Hegel's philosophical system, God cannot freely give to man, not in creation nor in salvation. The possibility of divine self-irregarding love is demolished, and with it man's humble dependence on God's grace for his own salvation. Karl Barth, in his own reading of Hegel, emphasizes this grave deficiency in Hegelian theology: "Hegel, in making the dialectical method of logic the essential nature of God, made impossible the knowledge of the actual dialectic of grace, which has its foundation in the freedom of God."<sup>51</sup>

At bottom, the reason that Christianity has become so disfigured by Hegel's speculative account of it is his underlying assumption that philosophy and religion have the exact same content, namely, absolute spirit.<sup>52</sup> Hegel is clear that for him "God is the one and only object of philosophy," which leads him to claim that "[one's] occupation with philosophy—or rather in philosophy—is of itself the service of God."<sup>53</sup> The Hegelian conception of the relation between philosophy and religion is that their content is strictly identical but their forms are drastically different: religion presents God in the form of representation, while philosophy examines Him in the form of speculative thought. Religion conceals its truth behind the veil of metaphors taken from the world of sense, and it is the role of philosophy to decode, as it were, these representative images and translate them into the logic of philosophical speculation: it "is the distinctive task of philosophy to transmute the *content* that is in the representation of religion into the *form* of thought."<sup>54</sup>

Hegel continually stresses that religion should fear nothing from his speculative method, since the content of religion "remains always the same" once it has been transposed into the form

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<sup>51</sup> Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 420.

<sup>52</sup> For an analysis of this 'identity thesis,' see: Besier, *Hegel*, 146-152.

<sup>53</sup> Hegel, *PR I*, 84.

<sup>54</sup> Hegel, *PR I*, 333.

of philosophical notions.<sup>55</sup> But while he clarifies that religion and philosophy are identical in the value of their truth content, he admits that philosophical thinking is objectively superior to the form of faith.<sup>56</sup> This understanding of the relation between religion and philosophy allows Hegel to slyly move the entirety of religious consciousness into a frame that alters, in radical ways, its essential meaning while claiming to preserve its truth. The result is that philosophy ends up completely tyrannizing revelatory religion. The philosophical enterprise, in Hegel's method, must always exercise its ultimate supremacy by absorbing within itself all forms of representation and forcing them into conformance with the Notion, or more precisely, with the Hegelian philosopher's conception of rationality. We spoke earlier about the structure of theology: models are employed to make sense of revelation, to render the content of faith more intelligible to the human mind; revelation, however, still remains the central focus, and models can always be discarded as soon as they are deemed unsuitable to the truth of revelation. For Hegel, however, it is clear that revelation itself serves the model; that the framework meant to make sense of revelation becomes, itself, the highest truth. Thus, by claiming that philosophy and religion have the same content but a different form, Hegel permits himself to appropriate the language of Christianity in service to a project that is antithetical to its purposes, all the while claiming that he is doing nothing more than elevating Christian consciousness to a more rational mode of understanding.

Going even further, Hegel claims that philosophy, by comprehending the movement of God in history, by raising the divine life into rational cognition, is the ultimate locus of God's self-consciousness; Hegelian philosophy, by welcoming God into the rationality of the

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<sup>55</sup> Hegel, *PR I*, 397.

<sup>56</sup> Hegel, *PR III*, 373.

“*speculative concept*,” is “spirit conscious of itself.”<sup>57</sup> It is philosophy which “presents the reconciliation of God with himself and with nature”<sup>58</sup>—philosophy, Hegel tells us, is “the peace of God.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, if we ask, with Charles Taylor, “how does a Hegelian philosopher *pray*?,”<sup>60</sup> the only answer can be ‘by speculatively pondering the unity of the divine and the human.’ *Latria* has been redefined as the contemplation of one’s identity with cosmic Spirit. Philosophy, therefore, not humble prayer or holy liturgy, is the highest form of worship within the Hegelian paradigm—to “this extent philosophy [too] is a continual cultus.”<sup>61</sup>

This is a radical and complete reversal of the theological enterprise; prayer has been replaced by speculation, and philosophy has usurped spiritual contemplation. Hegel represents the antithesis of genuine theological inquiry, which in its authentic expression always seeks to penetrate into the divine mystery with human reason, frail as it is, in order to grow in closer union with God, in order to be assimilated into the economy of grace. Hegel is the pinnacle of the Enlightenment project, the annexation of the territory of faith by the power of reason. But prior to the Enlightenment upheaval, theology—especially Trinitarian theology—had its root in the love of God. As Matthew Levering puts it, “For pre-Enlightenment theologians, contemplation of the triune God—a contemplative union rooted in faith formed by charity—is the primary goal of Trinitarian theology.”<sup>62</sup> It is precisely this emphasis on personal divine union, this accentuation on *theosis*, which forms the genuine heart of the theological project. Since Hegel was bereft of such motivations, since he sought *theosis* in speculative reason and not in

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<sup>57</sup> Hegel, *PR* I, 141.

<sup>58</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 347.

<sup>59</sup> Hegel, *PR* III, 347.

<sup>60</sup> Taylor, *Hegel*, 494.

<sup>61</sup> Hegel, *PR* I, 446.

<sup>62</sup> Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden/Oxford/Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 3.



humility and charity, the results of his trinitarian theology, as we have seen, destroyed the condition of the possibility for the Christian life of grace.

Saint Thomas Aquinas is one we could take as a sort of antidote to such methodological confusions. In his trinitarian theology, reason is at the service of faith; philosophical models are utilized for spiritual contemplation. Indeed, trinitarian speculation, for Thomas, is meant to be a foretaste of the beatific vision—its ultimate purpose is unity informed by love. Jean-Pierre Torrell explains how, for Aquinas, study is ordered towards prayer:

When Thomas says that theology is principally speculative, he means that it is in the first instance contemplative; the two words are practically synonymous in Thomas. This is why—we shall not be slow to see this operative in Thomas’s life—research, study, reflection on God can find their source and their completion only in prayer.<sup>63</sup>

St. Thomas himself is clear that theology, the sacred science, is a form of wisdom that transcends that of philosophy. Theology is “above all human wisdom,” and it treats God “not only so far as He can be known through creatures just as philosophers knew Him...but also as far as He is known to Himself alone and revealed to others.”<sup>64</sup> Philosophy and theology cannot be conflated: the first deals with God as the First Cause of nature while the second reflects on the eternal God Himself, grounded in His revelatory invitation to contemplative union. Philosophy and theology do not have the same content; since the latter is a chiefly prayerful exercise, an exercise defined by unitive speculation of the Highest Things, it is a wisdom which is superior to all other forms of wisdom “not merely in any one order, but absolutely.”<sup>65</sup> Aquinas’s methodological ordering of

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<sup>63</sup> Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 1: *The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 157.

<sup>64</sup> Aquinas, *ST I*, 1, 6, co.

<sup>65</sup> Aquinas, *ST I*, 1, 6, co.

the sciences is the inverse of Hegel's. For him, philosophy serves theology, and theology is consummated in prayer: it is a wisdom far beyond dialectical thinking.

For this reason, Aquinas ensures that revelation is reserved absolute primacy in the theological project. His speculations, which do utilize philosophical categories, are meant to elucidate—not dethrone—the data of revelation.<sup>66</sup> Aquinas is clear that knowledge of the Trinity is something that in no way can be attained to by natural reason.<sup>67</sup> Theology does not eventually do away with the form of revelatory truth in order to elevate it to a supposedly higher shape of knowledge; on the contrary, reason is employed merely as a tool in service to revelation, a means by which the mind can rise, in reverence, to a greater union with the God it contemplates. Reason is meant to affirm revelation; it in no way usurps it.<sup>68</sup> Aquinas is especially careful to clarify that his rationally constructed models and philosophically furnished frameworks employed in the course of his treatise on the Trinity fall radically short of capturing the Truth which it attempts to illuminate: “Divine things are named by our intellect, not as they really are in themselves, for in that way it knows them not; but in a way that belongs to things created.”<sup>69</sup> The Divine Mystery, towards which we seek union, remains inexhaustible. Aquinas's mode of theological discourse, carefully attuned to the absolute transcendence of God, is self-conscious of its own inadequacy. Opposite of Hegel, Aquinas's use of reason within theological analysis is meant to elevate our minds to an Infinite Mystery, not to pull God down to the level of human cognitive comprehension.

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<sup>66</sup> The central philosophical category employed within Thomistic trinitarian theology is the category of relation as an accident, which, along with the principle of Divine Simplicity, is especially useful for making a distinction of Persons within the Trinity while simultaneously maintaining the unity of the divine essence (Aquinas, *ST I*, Q. 28, Q.39).

<sup>67</sup> Aquinas, *ST I*, 32, 1, co.

<sup>68</sup> Aquinas, *ST I*, 32, 1, ad 2.

<sup>69</sup> Aquinas, *ST I*, 39, 2, co.

In the end, the careful and reverent approach of Aquinas's theology yields a picture of the triune God that drastically surpasses Hegel's in its soteriological significance. For Hegel, studying the Trinity ends in a recognition that one is identified with Spirit, who itself has come to full self awareness through the musings of the dialectical philosopher—this, and only this, is true worship. In the Hegelian picture, the life of grace is absent. For Aquinas, however, Trinitarian theology is grace-centric, fundamentally predicated on the idea that the Blessed Trinity, our object of theological study, seeks union with His rational creatures, seeks to dwell in us “as in His own temple.”<sup>70</sup> This, of course, is the deification involved in sanctifying grace, wherein God “is possessed by man, and dwells within him” as “the beloved in the lover.”<sup>71</sup> For St. Thomas, trinitarian reflection is oriented towards the love of God and ordered towards salvific union. Hegel's trinitarian philosophy ends in identifying oneself with an impersonal cosmic dialectic; the Thomistic contemplation of the Trinity terminates in affirming that the “whole Trinity dwells in the mind by sanctifying grace.”<sup>72</sup>

Theology, finally, is driven by the mind's impulse to know God in love, towards raising itself—or better yet, allowing God to raise it—into ecstatic union with the divine. The Hegelian method has no place for such a thing; it can accommodate *theosis* only by radically redefining it, and ridding it of the dynamic of grace that underpins true deification. We have, in our present study, borne witness to the fruits of such an approach, and thus have discovered our answer to Karl Barth's famous question as to why Hegel had never attained the title of the ‘Protestant Aquinas.’ The central divergence between Hegel and St. Thomas lies not in their particular philosophical preferences but in their fundamentally distinct theological postures. Hegel never

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<sup>70</sup> Aquinas, *ST I*, 43, 3, co.

<sup>71</sup> Aquinas, *ST I*, 43, 3, co.

<sup>72</sup> Aquinas, *ST I*, 43, 5, co.

became the analogue to Aquinas in the Protestant world because he knew not how to pray; he didn't understand the *telos* of theology. For Hegel, philosophy itself was prayer and dialectical speculation was worship. For Aquinas the intellectual journey towards God was a certain kind of prayer, but of a much different sort: the sacred science, for him, sought to know God only insofar as it could love him, only insofar as it could fall into reverent worship of a transcendent God surpassing all modes of rational inquiry. Thomistic theology, far from being a cold and detached intellectual exercise, is a form of prayer that aims towards love and delights in the life of grace—it is founded on a thirst for union with God as the soul's Divine Lover. True theology is grounded in that sentiment expressed so beautifully by Saint Bernard: "the bedroom of the King is to be sought in the mystery of divine contemplation."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> St. Bernard, *On the Song of Songs II*, trans. Kilian Walsh O. C. S. O. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), Sermon 23, no. 9, 33.

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