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THE INCARNATION IN HEGEL'S *PHENOMENOLOGY OF*  
*SPIRIT* AND *LECTURES ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF*  
*RELIGION*

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## INTRODUCTION

**I**S HEGEL REALLY PRESENT in modern theology? This question is what originally attracted me to the study of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*,<sup>1</sup> where he touches upon many Christian mysteries (such as Incarnation, Trinity, creation, reconciliation, etc.)<sup>2</sup> in his very particular way.

Why I thought it useful to offer an explanation of Hegel's doctrine on the Incarnation was so that the reader may be empowered to identify Hegel's influence in modern accounts of this mystery. Even if, in my view, Hegel's interpretation of revealed religion differs greatly from Catholic Doctrine, it is not surprising to find the presence of some of his concepts in modern theology. In truth, what matters is not the theologian's self-identification as Hegelian or as non-Hegelian, but whether or not the theologian adopts Hegel's concepts.

This paper offers an explanation of the internal dynamism of Hegelian concepts and their relation to Christian doctrine in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This research may help to show in what way it is possible to explain Christian religious doctrine with a philosophy other than the Thomistic one and how, at least in Hegel's case, religious doctrine is changed and re-

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Arnold V Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). In the following, this work is referenced as *Phenomenology* with citation of the paragraph number. When referring to the page number (for the analysis of Findlay), the word "page" is added. In this research, I have also considered some sections of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: One-Volume Edition: The Lectures of 1827*, ed. Peter Crafts Hodgson, trans. R.F. Brown, Peter Crafts Hodgson, and J.M. Stewart (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) ; in what follows, this book will be referenced simply as *Lectures*. The present article is a revision of a research paper I submitted for the philosophy course "Hegel" (Rebecca Comay, "Hegel" (University of Toronto, 2014)). I remain very grateful to Professor Comay for her guidance and her suggestions. A special thank you to my copy editor, Nancy Marrocco, for her corrections and valuable advice.

<sup>2</sup> See especially the section on revealed religion, that is, Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 453-479.

duced to an erroneous philosophical content. Also, an attempt is made to show the internal “coherence” of this Hegelian re-reading of Christianity so that theologians may become more cautious about accepting an explanation of Christian doctrine simply because the Christian language is preserved in that explanation.

I focus on Hegel’s doctrine of the Incarnation. This doctrinal point, because of its essential connection with Hegel’s understanding of other religious mysteries, may serve as a helpful introduction to Hegel’s understanding of revealed (Christian) religion.

For Hegel, Jesus is both God and man: the Infinite and the finite come together in the incarnate Son of God. How does Hegel explain this union of the human and the divine in Jesus? For Hegel, in what sense is Jesus God? Hegel claims also that Jesus is unique and that his death and resurrection help us to become children of God. What does Hegel mean?

To begin, I introduce the Incarnation’s double aspect in Hegel’s thought: as religious expression and as philosophical truth. Secondly, I try to delve into Hegel’s doctrine on the Incarnation in the context of his doctrine on Spirit and in relationship with other religious mysteries as he interprets them. Thirdly, I explore the relationship between modern philosophy’s turn to the subject and Hegel’s doctrine on the Incarnation.

## **I. THE INCARNATION IN HEGEL’S THINKING: RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY**

For Hegel, the mystery of the Son’s Incarnation does not depend on God’s freedom, as if God could have ordered things otherwise; neither is this mystery purely “theological”, as if the only way to find out about the Incarnation were God’s historical revelation. The religious doctrine about God’s Incarnation in Jesus is, in Hegel, an underdeveloped (“picture-thinking”) expression of a necessary event in the Absolute Spirit’s movement

towards its self-realization.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the reality of Incarnation is not something foreign to the realm of philosophy, but exactly the opposite: the Incarnation is something that can be properly explained only in philosophy, a content which obtains its proper form only in philosophy. Hegel says: “Religion also appears as positive in the entire content of its doctrines. But it should not remain in this form; it should not be a matter of mere representation or of bare remembrance.”<sup>4</sup> Also: “In religion, the truth has been revealed as far as its content is concerned; but it is another matter for this content to be present in the *form* of the concept, of thinking, of the concept in speculative form.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, religion’s limitation is that it hangs onto the figure of Jesus as something objective, as something over against consciousness: in this way, religion obscures the real meaning of Jesus’ event, namely, the revelation of the union of the divine and the human *in every human being*.<sup>6</sup>

The Incarnation in Jesus (or Jesus’ event) is necessary in order for human beings to pass from the “natural” stage to a more developed stage of self-consciousness. Human beings living in the “natural” stage are concerned with the finite and the sensible; that is, they live only in the realm of consciousness. In order for human beings to move from consciousness to self-consciousness, the substantial unity of divinity and humanity

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3 On the necessity of the Incarnation, cf. especially Hegel, *Lectures*, 454-457, with additional notes from the lectures of 1831. On the Incarnation as “picture-thinking” expression of the *othering* of the divine Being, cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 777. On religion as picture-thinking, or as a content which does not yet possess its speculative necessity, cf. *ibid.*, 771, 776, & 802. On the necessity of overcoming religious picture-thinking for Spirit to become itself, cf. *ibid.*, 803 and Hegel, *Lectures*, 396. On the limits of religion as maintaining the distinction without sublation, cf. *ibid.*, 33 & 59. On the necessity that philosophy shows the truths of theology and religion, cf. *ibid.*, 60-61. On the collapse of philosophy and theology, cf. *ibid.*, 71.

4 *ibid.*, 396.

5 *ibid.*, 425.

6 Cf. *ibid.*, 453-457; Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 763ff & 803; Hegel, *Lectures*, 68-69.

which humanity is implicitly, must be presented as something “natural,” as something over against consciousness.<sup>7</sup> This is the meaning of Jesus’ event: the “natural” human being is awakened to the idea of the unity of God and human being by way of Jesus’ event. This unity appears before the natural human being as something finite and sensible; thus, the idea of a God-man enters human being’s consciousness. But this is not all: for the process to continue, this individual God-man must then disappear, that is to say, be superseded. This is the meaning of Jesus’ death on the Cross: the God-man disappears from before our eyes, from the realm of consciousness. In this way the “natural” human being, actually the whole community, can move to the self-realization of its own communion with the divine.<sup>8</sup> This is the resurrection in Spirit, or in the community:<sup>9</sup> the God-man is alive in the community because the whole community is now the Incarnation of God; the whole community realizes that it is one with God. Jesus revealed to human beings their own truth, their own unity with the divine. But religion, according to Hegel, wants human beings to hold onto the figure of Jesus as if unity with the divine were something particular to Jesus himself. Religion must therefore be superseded by philosophy, where human beings realize that they all are one with the Absolute Spirit.

## II. HEGEL’S DOCTRINE ON THE INCARNATION

It is very difficult to separate what Hegel has united. Those doctrinal points which are differentiated mysteries in traditional Catholic theology overlap in Hegel and are somehow unified in Spirit’s dialectical movement.<sup>10</sup> For example, the im-

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Hegel, *Lectures*, 455 (this text will be reported later).

<sup>8</sup> This communion could be seen as the “reconciliation” achieved in Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 780-787.

<sup>10</sup> The differences among the mysteries might be said to be preserved in Hegel, as Professor Comay would suggest, but only as dialectical moments of the Same (*i.e.* Spirit). In Aquinas’ theology, instead, the distinctions are

manent Trinity (i.e., the consideration of the Trinity in itself) becomes, for Hegel, only an abstract consideration of the economic Trinity (the Trinity insofar as it engages creation):

The act of differentiation is only a movement, a play of love with itself, which does not arrive at the seriousness of other-being, of separation and rupture. The other is to this extent defined as “Son” ... In the idea as thus specified, the determination of the distinction is not yet complete, since it is only abstract distinction in general. We have not yet arrived at distinction in its own proper form [and in footnote, from  $W_2$ ] To that extent we can say that we have not yet arrived at distinction.<sup>11</sup>

Also, the so-called economic Trinity is, for Hegel, a religious representation of the engagement of the infinite with the finite; this engagement can be referred to as “creation” in one respect and, in another respect, as “Incarnation.”<sup>12</sup> Or we may say that the immanent Trinity is the movement of the Spirit considered in abstract, not yet fulfilled; the economic Trinity is the actuality of that same movement; creation is also that movement,

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more radical because of a different philosophical point of departure and, consequently, a different notion of God.

<sup>11</sup> Hegel, *Lectures*, 434. Cf. also *ibid.*, 454: “God, as truth, is not just abstract identity with himself, but on the contrary the other, negation, the positing of oneself otherwise, is God’s own essential determination, and the proper determination of spirit.” It seems to be also Findlay’s understanding of the numbers 772-774 of the *Phenomenology* (cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, page 587). Findlay also says: “God is God only by departing from himself in Nature, and returning to himself in Spirit” (*ibid.*, page 588). Cf. Hegel, *Lectures*, 184-185, 417, & 430.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 185: “As spirit or as love, God is this self-particularizing. God creates the world and produces his Son, posits an other to himself and in this other has himself, is identical with himself.” Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 776, where Hegel speaks about quaternity, quinity, etc. by the addition to the Trinity of different features of creation as belonging to the Spirit’s process of otherness.

insofar as it is a religious notion representing the “ex-sistence” or externalization of Spirit in the finite (moment of substance, evil or Nature<sup>13</sup>); the Incarnation is based in the moment of substance, insofar as the humanity of Jesus is simply one expression of the diremption of the infinite in the finite;<sup>14</sup> but Incarnation also represents the moment of self-consciousness insofar as this particular man Jesus arrives to the consciousness of being himself divine. In Hegel, Spirit is all-embracing, the whole of reality, in such a way that everything is included in the movement of Spirit and nothing escapes its logic.<sup>15</sup> If philosophy is the search for unity,<sup>16</sup> here is one of the most grandiose attempts in history,<sup>17</sup> one in which not only a rational unity or explanation of reality is attained, but one in which the rational unity becomes the unity of reality itself, and logics become metaphysics.<sup>18</sup>

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13 On the connection between evil and Nature, cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 782; Hegel, *Lectures*, 126, 414, 438-440.

14 On the concept of diremption, cf. *ibid.*, 415-416; Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 585: “What made the Notion into an existent *object* was its diremption into separate *subsistent* spheres.”

15 Cf. Hegel, *Lectures*, 115: “The highest point [of philosophy] is that God is, or in other words that this universal, which is in and for itself, embracing and containing absolutely everything, is that through which alone everything is and has subsistence—that this universal is the truth”; *ibid.*, 114-117 & 415; Hegel, *Phenomenology*, page 588.

16 Cf. Hegel, *Lectures*, 127: “The whole of philosophy is nothing else but a study of the definition of *unity*.”

17 Von Balthasar says: “The most grandiose attempt to master the realm of fact in history through reason was undertaken by Hegel; he interpreted the whole sequence and constellation of facts in nature and in human history as the manifestation of an all-embracing rational spirit, rational precisely in his factual manifestation. This may in one sense be regarded as the highest tribute of reason to the realm of fact and history, since the latter is then no longer mere phenomenon, outside the scope of law-giving reason, but a meaningful presentation of reason itself—which indeed requires this manifestation in order to be reason, so as to communicate itself to itself”. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 7.

18 As Professor Comay suggests, this is just one conventional interpreta-

For Hegel, as has been said, Spirit is the all-embracing reality and everything belongs to Spirit's movement of self-expression and re-union with itself. Let me now relate three concepts to Spirit's movement, so that we may better see their place in Hegel's doctrine. These three concepts are world, Trinity and Incarnation.

### 1. Spirit and World (or Infinite and Finite) in Hegel

For Hegel, the movement of Spirit is necessary; even more, the Spirit is movement, a movement of externalization or "othering": "For Spirit is the knowledge of oneself in the externalization of oneself; the being that is the movement of retaining its self-identity in its otherness."<sup>19</sup> "[T]he movement through its own phases constitutes its actuality. What moves itself, that is Spirit; it is the Subject of the movement and is equally the moving itself, or the substance through which the Subject moves."<sup>20</sup>

If we wanted to express this doctrine in epistemological

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tion of Hegel and would need to be justified. A case could be made if, following Fabro (cf. Cornelio Fabro, *Introduzione all'ateismo moderno*, 3rd, ed. Marcelo Lattanzio, vol. 21, Opere Complete (Segni, Italy: EDIVI, 2013); English trans. Cornelio Fabro, *God in Exile: Modern Atheism*, trans. A. Gibson (Westminster, MD: Paulist Press, 1968)), we understand Hegel's system as putting together Spinoza's principle of *appartenenza* (inter-belonging of infinite and finite as Substance and its attributes and modes) and the Kantian transcendental principle. This belonging of the finite to the infinite, this dissolution of the finite in the infinite by means of a *dialectical* process is what I understand by an "all-embracing" Absolute.

19 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 759; Cf. *ibid.*, 780: "The difficulty... stems solely from clinging to the 'is' and forgetting the thinking of the Notions in which the moments just as much *are* as they *are not*—are only the movement which is Spirit"; Hegel, *Lectures*, 416: "These [God in his eternity, creation and reconciliation] are not external distinctions . . . rather they are the activity, the developed vitality of absolute spirit itself. It is itself its eternal life, which is a development and a return of this development into itself"; *ibid.*, 417: "God is the creator of the world; it belongs to his being, his essence, to be the creator; insofar as he is not the creator, he is grasped inadequately."

20 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 786.

terms, we could say that what appears to be object (the world) is nothing but the position of the universal Subject.<sup>21</sup> The original externalization of Spirit in the otherness of the object is the Spirit's very life and constitutes a true unity, since this otherness is the Spirit itself in its movement. In metaphysical terms, instead, we could say that Nature is the diremption of Spirit, that is, the externalization of the abstract-universal-infinite in the multiplicity of the finite (be it finite spirits or finite natural beings). For Hegel, this universal does not exist in abstract, precisely because "to exist" means "to be finite."<sup>22</sup> Spirit does not "ex-sist" (*i.e.*, it is not out of itself) except in its limited manifestations. According to this doctrine, we could say that God "is," we could talk about the "objectivity" or "actuality" of Spirit, but not of its "existence."<sup>23</sup> This inextricable communion between Absolute Spirit and Nature resembles in a certain sense the Aristotelian principle, "the universal exists only in the particular," insofar as, for Aristotle, that which truly exists is only the concrete, not the universal in a state of abstraction.<sup>24</sup> In any case, for Hegel, the actuality of Spirit is its movement: "[Spirit] is at

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<sup>21</sup> I had originally written "what appears to be object is no more than the position of the subject", which for Comay was "misleading as formulated, since this would reduce Hegel to a traditional idealism." She was probably thinking in terms of Berkeley's or Fichte's idealism, and I hope my new phrase comes across to her concerns. I do not want to make Hegel a solipsism, but I understand that the dynamic of Spirit, even as all-embracing and including in itself the finite subjects, is a dynamism necessarily conceived according to the pattern of human subjectivity.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Hegel, *Lectures*, 165: "[E]xistence [*Dasein*] is determinate, finite being—and *Existenz*, too, is used in a determinate sense. But God's being is in no way a limited being. It would be better to say, 'God and his being, his actuality or objectivity.'"

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, quoted above.

<sup>24</sup> The similarity between the Aristotelian and the Hegelian universal is not perfect, to be sure. Cf. *ibid.*, 122, speaking about God as substance: "It is also not an inert, abstract universal, however, but rather the absolute womb or the infinite fountainhead out of which everything emerges, into which everything returns, and in which it is eternally maintained."

the same time not merely the content of self-consciousness, and not merely object *for it*, but it is also *actual Spirit*. This it is because it runs through the three elements of its nature; the movement through its own phases constitutes its actuality.”<sup>25</sup>

Spirit’s movement is one of externalization and existence. Spirit is like the ground of everything that exists, a ground not distinct from but one with the finite, or distinguishable only as a “logical” moment. Spirit is like the position that constitutes the posited.<sup>26</sup> The finite (*i.e.*, human) spirit must realize that this is so and, in this way, the movement of Spirit can be completed in self-consciousness.<sup>27</sup> The implicit unity of Spirit and Nature is made explicit in finite self-consciousness.<sup>28</sup> God becomes *actually* Spirit only through the finite spirit,<sup>29</sup> as Findlay

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<sup>25</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 786.

<sup>26</sup> Hegel expresses the same idea in epistemological terms in Hegel, *Lectures*, 184: “the concept. . . is immediately this universal that determines and particularizes itself—it is this activity of dividing, of particularizing and determining itself, of positing a finitude, negating this its own finitude and being identical with itself through the negation of this finitude.”

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 65: “The human vocation is not to remain in the condition of implicitness. If it does, if it chooses to do so, to exist according to nature, then it is evil.”

<sup>28</sup> For this implicit unity as made explicit in Jesus’ self-consciousness, cf. *ibid.*, 452-456; as made explicit instead in the community’s self-consciousness, cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 788: “This totality of its determinations establishes the object as an *implicitly* spiritual being, and it does truly become a spiritual being for consciousness when each of its individual determinations is grasped as a determination of the Self, or through the spiritual relationship to them that was just mentioned.”

<sup>29</sup> Cf. the last verses of the *ibid.*, 808 (cf. also *ibid.*, 800); Hegel, *Lectures*, 38: “God takes on finite, worldly, determinate being (*Dasein*) in and through the process of self-diremption and self-return by which God becomes absolute spirit”; *ibid.*, 61: “the elevation of the finite to the infinite is at the same time the return of the infinite to itself”; *ibid.*, 66: “Because other being or difference is already present within the divine idea (indeed, is what makes it *spirit*), ‘the other being, the finitude, the weakness, the frailty of human nature is not to do any harm to that divine unity which forms the substance of reconciliation’”; 69: “the community of faith is the Spirit of God ‘as existing and realizing itself’”; *ibid.*, 397 (Editro’s note): “The Spirit of God witnesses

suggests: “God must know God... in the religious person .... To be conscious of himself in a finite, sensuous, human individual does not represent a descent for God but the consummation of his essence... he is only fully and completely himself in an instance.”<sup>30</sup>

Hegel’s system portrays the relationship between infinite and finite as the substantial unity between two moments of a movement of self-finitization. In this sense, it could be called a monistic system. The finite is expression of the infinite, the infinite is the substantial ground of the finite.

## 2. Spirit and Trinity in Hegel

When we consider *abstractly* both the necessity of “othering” in Spirit and the unity of the Spirit’s “other” with Spirit itself—that is, when we consider the unity in the difference of Spirit’s movement—then we are referring to the *immanent* Trinity: the Father is Spirit externalizing itself in the Son, and the Holy Spirit is their bond of union.<sup>31</sup> Now, if we consider instead the *actuality* of this “othering”, then Nature (or creation) and Incarnation necessarily enter the scene.

In fact, the real, *actual* other of the Father (*i.e.*, of Spirit as infinite source of its own movement) is the world, both of finite spirits and of natural beings.<sup>32</sup> In this sense we can say that creation, for Hegel, is part of the Trinity as the *actual* other of Spirit.

When, subsequently, the finite spirit realizes that the “In-

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only in and through our spirits: there is no divine witness apart from the activity of human spirit.”

<sup>30</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, page 586, cf. also *ibid.*, page 587.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 769, 776; Hegel, *Lectures*, 418 (here Hegel explains the Trinity by the notion of love), 420-430, 453-454.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 532-533; Hegel, *Lectures*, 417: “Insofar as [God] is thus within himself, it is a matter of the eternal idea, which is not yet posited in its reality but is itself still only the abstract idea. But God is the creator of the world; it belongs to his being, his essence, to be the creator.” For Hegel’s working out of the meaning of the distinction in the finite world between spirits and natural beings, cf. *ibid.*, 435-436; 414.

finite Otherness” belongs to its own inmost self, then the finite spirit moves to the stage of self-consciousness and (Holy) Spirit: this stage implies the sublation (negation and preservation)<sup>33</sup> of the distinction between finite and Infinite. The Son incarnate, the God-man, is only a man (even though he is somehow “unique”) who actualizes this third moment or stage of the process: by becoming self-consciousness, the God-man realizes his unity with the divine. In Hegel’s mind, what Jesus intends to say when he speaks about his own divinity is “I, as a man, am God”. Thus, Hegel’s “Trinity” is *actually* realized (in this third moment of Spirit) only through the Incarnation, that is, only through human being’s moving to self-consciousness.

Thus, for Hegel, the “immanent Trinity” of religious language is the abstract consideration of Spirit’s movement and of its necessary three stages, whereas the “economic Trinity” corresponds to the actuality or reality of Spirit’s movement in Nature and History. Clearly, in both cases the finite is part of the Trinity, and the only “real” Trinity is the “economic Trinity”, which is the Spirit’s movement of self-manifestation in the finite *as realized* in Nature and History.

### 3. Spirit and Incarnation in Hegel

Therefore, and for Hegel, the union of the human and the divine in Jesus is not the union of two distinct and “coexistent” principles (two natures or essences) in one divine person, as is professed in Catholic dogma. For Hegel, “The divine nature is the same as the human, and it is this unity that is beheld.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Hegel defines sublation (*Aufhebung*) in Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 113.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, 759 (cf. the whole paragraph). This confusion between the two natures of the Christ can be seen in other places as well. Cf. *ibid.*, 760, especially: “The absolute Being which exists as an actual self-consciousness seems to have come down from its eternal simplicity, but by thus *coming down* it has in fact attained for the first time to its own highest essence”; *ibid.*, 761; *ibid.*, 780: “we find first of all the declaration that the divine Being takes on human nature. Here it is already *asserted* that *in themselves* the two are not separate”; Hegel, *Lectures*, 462: “It is the Son of Man who speaks thus, in whom

The union of the divine and the human is portrayed by Hegel as something similar to the union of the universal and the particular in the individual.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Thomistically speaking, one could consider the particular as the concrete “existence” of the (abstract) universal, or as the universal’s “expression”, or as the concrete shape that the universal takes in order to be. One could also see how, as abstract, the universal does not exist in the world of nature and, however, the universal “exists” in the particular (and only in the particular) because the particular is an instance of precisely this universal. Similarly, for Hegel, human being is the existence or otherness of God, God’s finite expression, and God does not exist (and does not become Spirit) except in human being.

For Hegel, God is not something over against human being: rather, God is his own movement of *both* becoming human being (and nature) by externalization *and* then sublating this externalization by self-consciousness.<sup>36</sup> God as Universal is a movement of self-determination or self-finitization, a movement of determining itself to be the other (the finite). Thus, in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel says: “Spirit is *this movement* of the Self which empties itself of itself and sinks itself into its substance.”<sup>37</sup> And this is very clear in the *Lectures* also, where Hegel affirms that the concept of God is “this universal that determines and particularizes itself—it is this activity of dividing, of

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this expression, this activity of what subsists in and for itself, is essentially the work of God—not as something suprahuman that appears in the shape of an external revelation, but rather as [God’s] working in a human being, so that the divine presence is essentially identical with this human being”; Hegel, *Lectures*, 68: “everything human, fragile, and finite is a moment of the divine”; *ibid.*, 454: “the substantiality of the unity of divine and human nature comes to consciousness in such a way that a human being appears to consciousness as God, and God appears to it as a human being.”

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 415.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 122, already quoted.

<sup>37</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 804.

particularizing and determining itself.”<sup>38</sup> Further in the same *Lectures*, where Hegel is explaining the main features of the doctrinal content of the Trinity, we read:

The second moment, other being, the action of determining, self-determining activity as a whole, is, according to the broadest designation, *λόγος*—rationally determinative activity, or precisely the word .... This is not something contingent but rather an eternal activity, which does not happen merely at one time. In God there is only one birth, the act as eternal activity, a determination that it-self belongs essentially to the universal.<sup>39</sup>

I emphasize this notion of self-determining activity because it appears to be Hegel’s very definition of God and the expression of Hegel’s resolution of the relationship between finite and infinite.

In Hegel’s doctrine, as long as God’s return to himself in (human) self-consciousness is implicit or not yet achieved, being a human is being only implicitly divine, and there is evil in this implicitness.<sup>40</sup> Human being needs to realize explicitly what he or she is. What is human is divine, at least implicitly, and human being needs to overcome “evil” (this state of untruth, this “lack” of truth, this existing only according to nature) and become “good” by being reconciled with his or her own divinity. Reconciliation is thus the overcoming of the difference

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<sup>38</sup> Hegel, *Lectures*, 184.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, 430. Cf. also *ibid.*, 62; *ibid.*, 185: “God is this self-particularizing”; *ibid.*, 414: “The determinate being that God gives himself for the sake of representation is, in the first instance, *nature*”; *ibid.*, 417: “His creative role is not an *actus* that happened once; [rather,] what takes place in the idea is an *eternal* moment, an eternal determination of the idea”; *ibid.*, 420: “The divine idea is the pure concept, without any limitation. The idea includes the fact that the concept determines itself and thereby posits itself as what is self-differentiated”; *ibid.*, 432-435.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 437-440.

between the human and the divine in self-consciousness. This overcoming of difference preserves the previous moments, in such a way that “evil” and “good” coexist in Spirit.<sup>41</sup> This overcoming of difference is also a progression by means of negation, the negation of human being’s otherness in relationship to God.<sup>42</sup> For Hegel, that which is negated is preserved in the negation itself, as negation’s object.

Hegel would not deny that Jesus is somehow “unique”.<sup>43</sup> However, for Hegel, Jesus’ uniqueness does not consist in his being a happy “event”, a product of God’s “favour”: Jesus’ uniqueness does not imply for Hegel that the Jesus-event is not necessary. Instead, Jesus’ importance and uniqueness lie in the necessity that self-consciousness (which is human being’s awareness of his substantial unity with God) becomes something over against consciousness, something visible to the rest of humanity. In this way, the content of self-consciousness (“I, as a man, am God”) can enter the realm of consciousness: other human beings can see that *this* man is God and so they are initiated into the idea of the unity of God and man. True, they still consider this unity something over against consciousness, something happening before them, something happening in this particular man and not in themselves.<sup>44</sup> However, thanks to this “appearance” of the God-man and to human beings’ consequent initiation to the idea of the unity of God and human being, consciousness becomes able to sublimate (overcome) its dis-

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41 Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 777, 780, & 782. I think that in this sense Comay suggests that man’s overcoming of evil is a “reconciling himself with his own ‘evil’ particularity.”

42 In my view, these notions of progression and reconciliation are related to finite spirit’s “ascent” from immediate consciousness to self-consciousness.

43 Cf. Hegel, *Lectures*, 458-459.

44 This is what Hegel calls “picture-thinking”: considering the content of truth (the unity of finite and infinite) as something happening before our eyes and not essentially in ourselves.

inction from self-consciousness.<sup>45</sup>

The substantial unity [of God and humanity] is what humanity implicitly is; hence it is something that lies beyond immediate consciousness, beyond ordinary consciousness and knowledge. Hence it must stand over against subjective consciousness, which relates to itself as ordinary consciousness and is defined as such. That is exactly why the unity in question must appear for others as a singular human being set apart.<sup>46</sup>

According to Hegel's *Phenomenology*, the death of Jesus, who lived as self-consciousness before other people's consciousness, is important as the disappearance of God-man's *otherness* (regarding other people's consciousness); this disappearance is in turn God-man's "resurrection" in the community, insofar as the community realizes now its own union with the divinity.<sup>47</sup> Jesus "is risen" and "lives" in the community insofar as the community now enacts Jesus' self-awareness of being God's child. God's child is no longer "over there", as someone distinct from the rest of the community, but is the community itself.

Summarizing, for Hegel, revealed religion has the right content (self-consciousness) but the wrong form (picture-thinking): that is, in revealed religion, the unity of human and divine (which is the right content, the truth) is represented as something over against consciousness (as if this unity were something belonging only to this particular man,

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45 Cf. Hegel, *Lectures*, 453-457; Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 758 and page 586. See also texts in footnote 6 of this paper.

46 Hegel, *Lectures*, 455.

47 Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 763, 779, & 784. It would be important to spell out in more detail how we go from Incarnation in the singular to Spirit in the community, but it is not possible in this paper. On the community's supersession of the antithesis with Jesus, cf. *ibid.*, 781.

Jesus). Philosophy needs to supersede this distinction (between self-consciousness and consciousness) and give to self-consciousness the form of Spirit,<sup>48</sup> in such a way that the unity of human and divine is recognized by the whole community as something belonging essentially to it.

### III. THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL TURN TO THE SUBJECT AND HEGEL'S SPIRIT

Following my interpretation of Hegel's text in the previous pages, I would like to offer also my thoughts regarding Hegel's relationship with Kantian epistemology and what this means for theology today.

#### 1. Hegel's Doctrine and Kant's Epistemological Turn

In my view, Hegel's doctrine regarding this substantial unity of human and divine in Spirit's movement<sup>49</sup> is a consequence of Kant's Copernican revolution in epistemology.<sup>50</sup> After Kant, an infinite spiritual God can no longer be placed "behind" the sensible material world: we cannot have access to anything beyond the sensible and therefore we cannot say anything about it. However if we consider, with Kant, the subject as

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48 Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 765-766, 795; Hegel, *Lectures*, 396 & 430-431.

49 This is not to say that there is no distinction in Hegel between the human and the divine; but his distinction is neither the distinction of two things over against each other nor the distinction of two essentially different principles, like two distinct natures. Hegel's distinction is rather like the one between the universal and its concrete expressions in the particular, or like the distinction between thinking and thought, or between the movement itself and its particular shape at every different moment. Hegel's universal Spirit could be considered abstractly (and it is only then that it can be considered in its "immutability": cf. *ibid.*, 120; Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 533), but it *actually* is its own process of self-determination, in such a way that the finite becomes precisely a *moment* of that universal process. Cf. Hegel, *Lectures*, 116: "But the beginning of the content is to be grasped in such a way that, in all the further developments of the content, inasmuch as *the universal itself will show itself to be something absolutely concrete*, rich, and full of content, we never step outside this universality" (my emphasis); cf. also *ibid.*, 117.

50 Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 99-101; Hegel, *Lectures*, 186-187.

the origin of intelligibility, in such a way that something in the subject is able to intelligibly determine and inform experience's raw material, and if we consider this subjective ability something "open-ended" (that is, not determined to this or that result but open to *infinite* possibilities), then we may be able to see the rise of a different notion of "transcendence", of that which is beyond experience's sensible material. That is, we may pass from the notion of a *transcendent* God, as a concrete real infinite being, distinct from the subject and efficient cause of all beings, to the Kantian *transcendental*, as human understanding's subjective formal a priori. Both the Kantian transcendental and the transcendent God are infinite, both are source of (intelligible) being... but because of a different epistemological point of departure, the meaning of these characterizations is completely different, despite the similar terminology. In any case, after Kant and for those influenced by his Copernican revolution, the only possible notion of God is one grounded on human subjectivity.<sup>51</sup>

Another way to portray the relationship between Hegel and Kant could be as follows: Hegel's universal subject is a transposition or absolutization of Kant's subjectivity. Kant's subjectivity is source of intelligibility for the raw material from experience; Hegel's Spirit is source of the finite's being; thus, in both cases the subject is principle of the determination of the finite. Kant's subjectivity does not possess innate ideas but only functions of thought which become actual on the sensible material; Hegel's Spirit is also undetermined (this is the Spirit's "infinity") and becomes (fully) itself only in the finite; thus, both are fully actual in the finite and towards the finite only. How we go from Kant's epistemological principles to Hegel's "Spirit" is beyond the scope of this paper. In my view, however, it seems clear that, after Kant and following his principles, subjectivity

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<sup>51</sup> In my view, however, Hegel does not consider human subjectivity as "solipsistic" but as necessarily implying other human subjects.

becomes like a “groundless ground” of intelligibility and perfection (that is, an undetermined principle of determination) and that this notion of subjectivity is the pattern of Hegel’s notion of universal Spirit.

## 2. Hegel and Modern Philosophy’s Notion of Being

This Kantian understanding of subjectivity leads to a notion of actuality which is identical with movement. Because the subject is nothing but its own thinking, or nothing (determinate) before thinking, the subject must necessarily be its own action, that is, its own actualization in thought. In a similar way, for Hegel, the actuality or being of Spirit is its own movement of self-determination. Indeed, the notion of movement appears to allow for the extremes to coexist, for contradiction to hold together, because movement is “logically” a contradiction:<sup>52</sup> movement is a concept that includes both indetermination and determination, origin and direction, but nothing stable or static. Thus, the notion of movement or becoming seems fitting to describe Spirit’s being.

Moreover, the notion of movement seems to capture the essence of being insofar as being is “alive:”

This resolving of the essence into individuals is precisely the *moment* of the action and the self of all; it is the movement and soul of substance and the resultant universal being. Just because it is a being that is resolved in the self, it is not a dead essence, but is *actual* and *alive*.<sup>53</sup>

This view of being as “alive” is one in which I would partially agree with Hegel. Indeed, being is not the dead form but the position of that form in reality or, better said, the principle by which the form is posited. Hegel’s consideration of be-

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<sup>52</sup> Or better said, with Comay, “the overcoming of contradiction.”

<sup>53</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 439.

ing as action seems to be better than Aristotle's consideration of being as form, but I think that the best characterization of being is Aquinas' "*actus*" or "perfection."<sup>54</sup> In any case, Hegel's notion of Spirit's actuality as movement is clearly incompatible with the Catholic doctrine of God's immutability in the Incarnation<sup>55</sup> and requires that God, by necessity, be engaged with creation.<sup>56</sup>

## 2. Conclusion: Hegel, Philosophy and Theology

For a theologian, what Hegel does might be considered a reduction of the mystery of faith to pure reason, but what Hegel intends is to *promote* Christian doctrine's "picture-thinking" to its profound and truer meaning, that of philosophy. Thus, to take a stance with regards to Hegel's doctrine on the Incarnation seems to be more a philosophical issue than a theological

<sup>54</sup> This consideration of being (*esse*) as not the "fact of being" (Scholasticism's *Existentia*) but as *actus essendi*, in the sense of a perfection proper to the creature which is the creature's principle of "being there" and is distinct from the creature's *essentia*, is the originality of Aquinas' *esse* as rediscovered by Cornelio Fabro. Cf. especially Cornelio Fabro, *La Nozione Metafisica di Partecipazione secondo San Tommaso d'Aquino*, 4th ed., ed. Christian Ferraro, vol. 3, Opere Complete (Segni, Italy: EDIVI, 2005); and Cornelio Fabro, *Partecipazione e causalità secondo S. Tommaso d'Aquino* (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1960). On Hegel's notion of being, cf. also Hegel, *Lectures*, 183ff.

<sup>55</sup> On the doctrine of divine immutability and the Incarnation, cf. Leo the Great in Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: A Compendium of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations of the Catholic Church*, 43rd ed., ed. Peter Hünermann et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 294 (from now DH and paragraph number), (it is actually Leo's *Tomus ad Flavianum* assumed by the Council of Chalcedon, 451 AD); on divine immutability, cf. I Council of Nicea (325 AD) in DH, 126; the modern Magisterium repeats this doctrine for example in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), 202 (quoting the IV Lateran Council, 1215) and in many other documents.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Hegel, *Lectures*, 38: "The proof of this sort of divine existence does not involve some illicit logical trick (existence as something 'plucked' from the concept of the most perfect); it is rather provided by God's self-involvement in world-process. God, who is utterly actual being (*das Seiende*), takes on worldly, determinate, "existential" being (*Dasein*)."

one. Hegel's doctrine on the Incarnation depends on his notion of God, and his notion of God depends on Kantian epistemology. In Aquinas' doctrine, instead, we arrive at a God who is distinct from human being and is perfect in himself because we depart from an object of knowledge which also is over against human consciousness and perfective of our faculties.<sup>57</sup> Now, if Hegel's concepts are present in modern theology, then one of the most important challenges for a theologian today is to expose the errors of Kantian epistemology and to solidly establish an epistemology allowing us to do true theology.

Theology, as interpretation of the content of Revelation (or *intellectus fidei*, understanding of the faith), cannot avoid being engaged with philosophy. Three reasons for this could be mentioned here. First, theology presupposes Revelation, and the fact of Revelation presupposes, in turn, God's existence and a particular notion of God (that is, One who can "speak" and "reveal"). These presuppositions of Revelation are the concern of philosophy. Second, theology's concepts come from Scripture, where they are expressed in human terms. The Church is not afraid of saying that "God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion."<sup>58</sup> Philosophy, as the highest of human sciences, can therefore help us in understanding the meaning of those terms. Finally, and most importantly, a true epistemology is crucial in order to defend theology against relativism. Those philosophies questioning or even denying human reason's ability to reach objective truth, certain knowledge or metaphysical knowledge make it impossible to do true theol-

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<sup>57</sup> For a Thomistic theory of knowledge, cf. Cornelio Fabro, *La Fenomenologia della Percezione*, Opere Complete 5 (Segni, Italy: EDIVI, 2006); Cornelio Fabro, *Percezione e pensiero* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1962); I have some of these issues in Andres Ayala, "The Weaknesses of Critical Realism: On Lonergan's Cognitional Theory," *The Incarnate Word* 7, no. 2 (December 2020): 61–109 and Andres Ayala, "Reflections on the Possibility of Perceptualism," *The Incarnate Word* 6, no. 1 (May 2019): 33–48.

<sup>58</sup> Vatican II, "Dei Verbum" (November 18, 1965), 12.

ogy.<sup>59</sup> Thus, though in a simple approach to the content of Revelation the critical problem could be evaded, this is no longer so when theology becomes science, and as far as theology intends to remain a science.<sup>60</sup>

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59 This is because theology's object is God (i.e., the real transcendent God) and these philosophies do not have access to Him as transcendent cause of the finite extramental metaphysical being: in fact, these philosophies have denied the extramental metaphysical being *as being*. They may still speak about God and pretend to do theology, but what they actually do is false theology: that is, they say they study God, but what they study is not God but something different, such as an a priori element of human understanding. This is why modern philosophy closes—in principle—the door to true theology.

60 Is theology a science? Of course, for me, there is no question. However, in order to answer this, the first question is, "What is science?" This question and the discussion of the same is purely philosophical, and no specific science (other than philosophy) can claim to define science itself, because that specific science would be stepping out of its boundaries. In truth, any scholar who tries to define science becomes a philosopher in doing so. One could argue that everyone has the right of making philosophy or of using it, but this in itself does not necessarily make someone a good philosopher. I say theology is a science because it has an object (God), certain principles (the articles of faith) and proceeds to certain conclusions by way of a rational method. Of course, in true theology we depart from principles we have not demonstrated: however, so do all scholars to the extent of their accepting conclusions provided by more fundamental sciences and in their believing the data obtained from the work of other scholars, even in their own fields. The classic treatment of theology as a science is in Thomas Aquinas, ST I, q. 1, aa. 1-10.

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