

Hegel, Eschatology, and Space for the Secular

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Karl Barth once asked why Hegel's system of philosophy was rejected in modern thought.¹ His answer was that Hegel showed modern, Enlightened thinkers that philosophy led to God, and particularly the Triune God of Christianity.² This end was not acceptable to the modern project, (particularly to the post-Revolution Left), and thus Hegel was superseded in the 1840s by his own heirs: Strauss, Feuerbach, and Marx. Yet Barth also notes that Hegel's Christian philosophy was not long embraced by the Church. Why? Chiefly, Barth argued, because of Hegel's failure "to recognize that God is free"—and not bound by the necessity of the dialectic of Logic.³ This double rejection of Hegel by secular philosophers and Christian theologians highlights the greatest strength and weakness of his philosophical system from an orthodox Christian point of view: his view of Christian eschatology—i.e. how orthodox Christian doctrine understands God's completed goals for human history in the future. At the same time, Hegel's *own* ambiguous stance on what many post-Enlightenment intellectuals referred to as the "chimeras" of Christian eschatology, e.g., Christ's resurrection and return, sheds light on the threats such doctrines posed—and continue to pose—to Modernity's project of liberal, secular societies.

Christian theology and modern philosophy's inability to be reconciled over the issue of eschatology can be seen in part III of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. Here, in the conclusion to his lectures, Christian eschatology—particularly the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—is *central* to Hegel's philosophy of religion. Yet I shall argue that Hegel's *dialectical approach* to Christian eschatology leaves him in an infelicitous "no man's land" between modern philosophy and Christian orthodoxy.

1. Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Brian Cozens and John Bowden (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 393.

2. *Ibid.*, 399–400.

3. *Ibid.*, 406.

For his eschatological critiques of Western philosophical and political systems estranged him from nineteenth century secularists on the one hand, while his dialectical conceptions of Christ's resurrection alienated him from orthodox theologians on the other. And it is in this "in between" space that, from an orthodox point of view, Hegel's philosophy enables the continued dominion of "the secular" in modern philosophy and the world. To demonstrate this, the first part of my analysis will deal with Hegel's insights into Christian eschatology's positive contributions to philosophy and politics. In the second part I shall examine the limitations of Hegel's philosophical conception of Christian eschatology from an orthodox point of view. Finally, in the conclusion I shall consider the philosophical and political implications of Hegel's eschatology.

Hegel's *Christian* Eschatology: Reconciliation, Resurrection, and Freedom

In part III of the *Lectures* on the "Absolute Religion," Hegel demonstrates that Christianity is the eschatological religion of world history, and that Jesus Christ is *the* eschatological Idea—the absolute unity of divine and human nature.⁴ Here Hegel makes some positive contributions to thinking about Christian eschatology in three critical areas: 1. the reconciliation of the opposites of "Infinite" and "Finite," "God" and "Man;" 2. the problem of evil within human nature; and 3. the creation of the condition of the possibility of human political and social freedom.

For Hegel, Christianity came closest to reconciling one of the perennial problems of Western philosophy—the dichotomy between the Universal and the Particular, between God, the "absolute eternal Idea," and the finite—the "other-Being" of "the World."⁵ This ultimate reconciliation—which Hegel saw as an ontological reconciliation—was made possible because of God's own nature. Hegel argues that "It belongs to God's essential nature... to reconcile to Himself this something which is foreign to Him, this special or particular element which comes into existence as something separated

4. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, trans. E. B. Speirs and J. Burdon Sanderson (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co., 1895; reprint, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 72–73.

5. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, 1.

from Him... ”⁶ Yet the reconciliation of the Universal with the Particular achieved through Christianity not only solved an ontological problem, it also overcame the problem of evil in human nature. Here again Christianity demonstrated itself to be the eschatological religion of world history, for it alone posited the *universal* evil of human nature—the *apparent* ontological disunion and separation between Divine and Human, Infinite and finite.⁷

Hegel posits that Man is simultaneously by nature both good and evil; both whole in his inner life, good in his *substantial universal essence*, and yet his “potential Being,” his natural Being, is also evil.⁸ Man can be called essentially good because Man is *potentially Spirit/Rationality*,⁹ having been “created in the image of God” which is “the Good”; “Man as Spirit is the reflection of God, he is the Good *potentially*.”¹⁰ Man’s potentiality makes his reconciliation possible; but it is also his potentiality that makes his reconciliation necessary. For to be only “potentially” good means that Man is good only “inwardly,” only in his “notion” or “conception,” and not in *actuality*.¹¹

Thus humanity’s reconciliation with “the Good” for Hegel necessitates a reunification of Man’s physical/actual nature with his spiritual/rational essence. In other words, Man’s “Notion” must be able to realize its “Independent Being,” its “Being-for-self” *in the world*.¹² However, in so far as Man is subject to the laws of Nature—particularly those which constrain

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., see 45–59.

8. Ibid., 45–46; 47.

9. Hegel states “To say that Man is by nature good amounts substantially to saying that he is potentially Spirit, rationality... ” (46.) “*Geist*”—“Spirit” is central to Hegel’s philosophy. It is being *in itself*; it is substantial and *has* being in itself and is therefore *consciousness*. But it is also being which relates itself *to itself*, and is thus also *self-consciousness*, or “being *for itself*.” “Absolute Spirit” is the universal whole which knows and *relates* itself and everything else—“all otherness”—all particularity—*within itself*. “Finite Spirit” *naturally* recognizes “otherness” as existing *outside of itself* and thus finds itself limited and un-free. As Peter C. Hodgson puts it, “Spirit is free, pure, rational relationality, which presupposes sense as the soil of objectification and difference but is itself metasensual.” (See Peter C. Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology: A Reading of the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 19.)

10. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, 46, with my emphasis.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 1, 46.

his “Notion” and which give him the idea that he is a mere animal—Man *is not free*. In this state Man’s will is, like other animals, only motivated by “impulse” and “inclination,” and though the possession of will marks him off from the animals, the end goals of his willful actions are still only natural, like those of other creatures.¹³ Rather than obeying universal, *rational* laws, Man’s natural will is driven by his particular, selfish *needs*, which are not actual decisions of free will, but are only driven by necessity and arbitrariness. In this bare life Man denies his essence as Spiritual—and to remain in this condition is evil.¹⁴ Yet Hegel maintains that it is Man’s nature and the nature of Spirit to move beyond this *potentiality*; but this movement of Spirit within Man is the first sign of disunion and division within Man’s nature. It is a revolt against “immediacy,” against “potential Being,” and it points to the problem of Man’s nature as being evil. As *essentially* Spirit, Man is separated and divided from his natural Being which is evil, for it means a lack of wholeness, of integrity.¹⁵ Thus Man’s evil lies in the contradictions between Notion and reality; between Notion and particularity, between Good and Evil.¹⁶

According to Hegel, Man became conscious of his divided and evil nature through knowledge. This knowledge is “the source of all evil,” and yet is necessary for humanity (and hence Spirit) to realize itself as “Being-for-self.”¹⁷ Hebraic religion expressed this *self-revelation* of humanity’s evil—but also the reconciliation with Absolute Spirit—“pictorially” in Genesis 3 and the story of Man’s Fall through the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Hegel reads Genesis 3 eschatologically to show that humanity has the promise and certainty of returning to its original state of unity with God through knowledge itself:

...the Adam referred to is to be understood as representing the second Adam, namely Christ. Knowledge is the principle of spiritual life, but it is also, as was remarked, the principle of the healing of the injury caused by disunion [i.e. the alienation of Man from God brought about by obtaining knowledge].¹⁸

13. Ibid., 47–48.

14. Ibid., 49, 50.

15. Ibid., 48.

16. Ibid., 48–49.

17. Ibid., 52–53.

18. Ibid., 54.

Hegel's exegesis—or perhaps his *eisegesis*—of the role of the serpent in Genesis 3 gets to the heart of his philosophical conception of the nature of Man's evil. The serpent represents the “principle of knowledge” as existing *outside* of Man; “Adam”—i.e. Christ in Hegel's reading—represents the other truth of the *intrinsic*, “concrete” knowledge which exists *in* Man. In the process of reconciliation *this* knowledge will “bruise the head of the serpent.”¹⁹ Hegel continues:

Man is immortal in consequence of knowledge, for it is only as a thinking being that he is not a mortal animal soul, and is a free, pure soul. Reasoned knowledge, thought, is the root of his life, of his immortality as a totality in himself. The animal soul is sunk in the life of the body, while Spirit, on the other hand, is a totality in itself.²⁰

For Hegel, *only* Judeo-Christianity, (but more specifically Christianity), diagnosed the problem of Man's evil correctly because only it understood Man's *universal nature*²¹ as spiritual. And only Judeo-Christianity understood the *universality* of the condition of evil in Man represented pictorially in Adam's fall.²² Thus Hegel affirms Christianity's eschatological presentation of the problem of evil as universal and complete for all of humanity.

And Hegel also affirms Christianity's eschatological solution to the problem of evil—the universal reconciliation of God and Man made possible through Christ's death.²³ Hegel argues that through Christ's life, and supremely in his *death*—in his *individual* and *concrete* example of the Idea in practice—that Christianity proves itself to be the absolute religion.²⁴ Indeed, it is precisely Christ's death which separates him from other historical teachers of the truth like Socrates. The world and humanity were not essentially changed with the death of Socrates, but they were with Christ's death:

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 58.

21. Hence the Hebrew “Adam” which can mean “humanity” as a whole.

22. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, 59.

23. Ibid., 59–60.

24. Ibid., 85.

With the *death* of Christ, however, there begins the conversion of consciousness. The death of Christ is the central point round which all else turns, and in the conception formed of it lies the difference between the outward way of conceiving of it and Faith, i.e., regarding it with the spirit, taking our start from the spirit of truth, from the Holy Spirit.²⁵

Both Christ and Socrates were moral teachers who opened the path to human self-consciousness; but Socrates was not divine, he did not reveal the truth of Divine and Human nature that is known by Faith. Hegel writes, “... Faith by its explanation of the death of Christ lays hold of [the true nature of the Trinity]; for Faith is essentially the consciousness of absolute truth, of what God is in His true nature.”²⁶ God in his Essence is “the life-process, the Trinity, in which the Universal puts itself into antithesis with itself [i.e. the “Other”—the Son, the World] and is in this antithesis identical with itself.”²⁷ Christ’s death is the concrete praxis of this process in the world—and this is what Faith knows and is conscious of.²⁸ On the other side, Hegel asserts that to die is the essence of human finitude; and Christ’s death, as also the death of God, shows that Divine and Human nature are one. He writes,

...the death of Christ is truly understood by [Spirit] to mean that in Christ God is revealed together with the unity of the Divine and human natures... Christ’s death primarily means that Christ was the God-Man, the God who had at the same time human nature, even unto death.²⁹

However, Christianity does not stop at the death of the “God-Man” in Jesus Christ. It also proclaims the resurrection of God and Man through the resurrection of Jesus and his return to the Divine.³⁰

For Hegel, Christ’s death, resurrection, and exaltation is the central “mediating element”—*the* divine moment in the reconciliation of God and humanity, God and the finite.³¹ He explains that just as the Incarnation was the end of the stage in which the Divine is thought of as “abstract universality,” or the abstract “Essence of Essences,” so too Christ’s death ended the

25. Ibid., emphasis in the original, 86.

26. Ibid., 87.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., 89.

30. Ibid., 91.

31. Ibid., 98.

“abstraction of humanity, the immediacy of existing particularity.”³² Yet because of Christ’s resurrection, this is also the “negation of the negation,” the “death of death” itself.³³ For through Christ’s death and resurrection God killed death by negating the finitude and frailty of human nature, and at the same time *accepted* the Otherness of the finite into His own Being. “[Christ’s] shameful death,” Hegel writes,

as representing the marvelous union of these absolute extremes, is at the same time infinite love. It is a proof of infinite love that God identified Himself with what was foreign to His nature in order to slay it. This is the signification of the death of Christ. Christ has borne the sins of the world, He has reconciled God to us, as it is said.³⁴

In sum, Hegel viewed Christ’s crucifixion as God’s plumbing of the absolute depths of human estrangement, alienation, and finitude. And in Christ’s resurrection Spirit reached the heights of *absolute reconciliation* between the Infinite and the finite.³⁵

Yet Christ’s death and resurrection was not merely of spiritual or intellectual import for Hegel; these events had changed real, concrete existence in the world. They had made possible, for the first time in history, the necessary conditions for the realization of *actual* human freedom, for Jesus’ crucifixion was, along with a spiritual death, also a political and social death. It is perhaps here that Hegel’s *Christian* understanding of eschatology is most apparent. Hegel points out that the cross, the most shameful and despised form of political and social execution in the Roman world, was the distinct form of Christ’s death. His unjust execution at the hands of the degraded imperial state became the ultimate critique of the Empire, and, one might add, *all* empires.

Hegel saw in the shame of Christ’s cross a *positive* and radical revaluation—contra Nietzsche—of imperial values.³⁶ He states that “...the

32. Ibid., 92.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid., 93.

35. Ibid.

36. See for instance Nietzsche’s critique of the Jewish “revaluation” of virtue and morality in the Hellenistic world: “It was the Jews who, rejecting the aristocratic value equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = blessed) ventured, with awe-inspiring consistency, to bring about a reversal and held it in the teeth of their unfathomable hatred (the hatred of

cross is transfigured, what according to the common idea is lowest, what the State characterizes as degrading, is transformed into what is highest.”³⁷ The decadence and tyranny of the Roman Empire had degraded and debased the subjective freedom of Rome’s citizens and Senate to such a degree that the only refuge that intellectuals could find was in the individual, abstract worlds offered by Stoicism and Skepticism. Hegel believed that the Cross presented a two-edged critique of Roman society, the one negative, and the other positive. Negatively, Christ’s death on the cross symbolized the ultimate decay of Roman freedom, reason, justice, and truth through the execution of the one truly free subject of the Empire. Positively, Christ’s cross represented truth, virtue, and the Kingdom of God on earth—it became the banner of what is highest and most estimable in human history—the absolute Love and Reconciliation of God and Man—against which the *abstract* and inward subjectivity of pagan philosophies could not stand.³⁸ And significantly for Hegel, Christ’s crucifixion had overcome the last imperium of the Roman state—death. He writes:

Everything established, everything moral, everything considered by ordinary opinion as of value and possessed of authority, was destroyed, and all that was left to the existing order of things, towards which [Christianity] took up a position of antagonism, was the purely external, cold power, namely, death, which life, ennobled by feeling that in its inner nature was infinite now, no longer in any way dreaded.”³⁹

Thus the rise of Christianity had produced “a new consciousness on the part of men, a new religion, it is for that reason the consciousness of absolute

the powerless), saying, ‘Only those who suffer are good, only the poor, the powerless, the lowly are good; the suffering, the deprived, the sick, the ugly, are the only pious people, the only ones saved, salvation is for them alone, whereas you rich, the noble and powerful, you are eternally wicked, cruel, lustful, insatiate, godless, you will also be eternally wretched, cursed and damned!’... We know *who* [emphasis in the original] became heir to this Jewish revaluation...” (*On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed., Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans., Carol Diethe, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 19.) The “*who*” is Jesus of Nazareth. (see pg. 20 and following.)

37. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, 90; cf. Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology*, 170, although I think that Hegel is much more positive in his assessment of Christ’s death as a criminal than Hodgson seems to admit.

38. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, 90–91.

39. *Ibid.*, 91.

reconciliation; this involves a new world, a new religion, a new reality, a world in a different condition... ”⁴⁰ Hegel maintains that through Christ’s death individuals in the spiritual community—the Church—were able to understand their own infinite subjective worth as *spiritual* beings, and in so doing were able to abandon “all [*external*] distinctions of authority, power, position, and even race; before God all men are equal.”⁴¹ And through the other side of Hegel’s Christian dialectic—faith in Christ’s resurrection and in God’s reconciling love—the Church realized the foundations for the possibility of “truly universal Right, of the realization of freedom.”⁴²

In sum, Hegel argues in the conclusion to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* that Christianity had fundamentally and irrevocably changed the world. It offered deliverance from what Hegel termed “Jewish misery”—which sought to assuage the anguish of alienation from God through an un-spiritual and un-free adherence to ritual and law—what Hegel describes as the “humiliation” of Man from “above.”⁴³ On the other hand Christianity also offered deliverance from the escapist and sad philosophies of Stoicism and Skepticism, which Hegel saw as “abstract” and ultimately “self-centered.”⁴⁴ Both taught that man *is* independent and must rely on himself—in an inner life that remains abstracted from the world.⁴⁵ Hegel also noticed that both Skepticism and Stoicism lent themselves to collusion with Rome’s imperium: “We saw how this formal inwardness which finds satisfaction in the world, this *dominion* as being the aim or end of God, was represented, and known, and thought of as *worldly dominion*.”⁴⁶ Thus for Hegel, Christianity had absolutely conquered Evil—the evil of the alienation between God and Man, and Man’s own self-alienation from his true nature as infinite Spirit. In so doing Christianity superseded both ancient and modern religions and philosophy, from Zoroastrianism and Stoicism, to Enlightenment Deism and the philosophy of Kant.⁴⁷

40. Ibid., 79.

41. Ibid., 105, with my addition and emphasis.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid., 63.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid., 63; 65–66.

46. Ibid., 63, with my emphasis.

47. Ibid., 129.

The Limits of Hegel's Eschatology

Before considering the limitations of Hegel's conception of Christian eschatology vis-à-vis Christian orthodoxy, it is helpful to remember the historical context in which his philosophy is situated. As Wolfhart Pannenberg, Walter Jaeschke, and Peter Hodgson have pointed out, Hegel by the 1820s was fighting a two-front war in his philosophical defense of Christianity, and this is reflected in his Berlin *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*.⁴⁸ On one front, Hegel was battling against the "reflective philosophy of subjectivity" espoused by Kant which placed strict limitations on human reason and what can be known of God and reality.⁴⁹ Kant had proposed that human reason can only know the mind's *category* for "god"—i.e. the category of "Supreme Being" or "Essence of Essences"—but never the reality of *God* Himself.⁵⁰ Hegel found this philosophy, and the god it posited, as vacuous and in direct opposition both to true philosophy and to the Christian conception of the Triune God.⁵¹ On another front Hegel strove against a purely inward, subjective form of faith exemplified by pietism.⁵² Hegel did maintain that reconciliation first involves an inward, spiritual reconciliation of the heart—but this reconciliation cannot remain merely inward and therefore abstract—(there lies the fault of pietism)—but must become actual in the "objective" world.⁵³ Spiritual reconciliation as Hegel conceived of it produced the free subject, and a free subject related to the real world.⁵⁴ Hegel's position was a difficult one to be in, and one that was compounded by the decline of Natural Theology and its attempted replacement by a new Philosophy of Religion.⁵⁵ It is also important

48. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Significance of Christianity in the Philosophy of Hegel," in *Basic Questions in Theology*, Vol. III, (London: SCM Press, 1973), 144–177; Walter Jaeschke, *Reason in Religion: The Foundations of Hegel's Philosophy of Religion*, trans. J. Michael Stewart and Peter Hodgson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), and Hodgson's *Hegel and Christian Theology* cited above.

49. Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology*, 6–7; 56.

50. *Ibid.*, 7.

51. See Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, 139–140; 144.

52. See Pannenberg, "The Significance of Christianity in the Philosophy of Hegel," 155–159.

53. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, 135, 141.

54. *Ibid.*, 136.

55. See Jaeschke, *Reason in Religion: The Foundations of Hegel's Philosophy of Religion*, especially Chapter I.

to remember, as Jaeschke has pointed out, that Hegel did not intend his philosophy to *replace* Christian praxis or piety with an academic system of logic, but rather to demonstrate philosophically the *inner content* of the truth of the Faith.⁵⁶ In many ways the Modern project had *already* determined the field and terms of battle, and perhaps thereby delimited Hegel's strategic and tactical options—particularly in combating Kant's philosophy.⁵⁷ This presented particular problems for his defense of Christian eschatology, as Karl Barth and Wolfhart Pannenberg have pointed out.

Pannenberg has argued that Hegel's notion of the "absolute concept" is not an adequate philosophical support for the Christian idea of historical contingency—the possibility of God's *absolute* freedom to "make all things new" in a yet *unrealized future*.⁵⁸ Both Barth and Pannenberg point out what appears to be a significant problem in Hegel's philosophy concerning God, freedom, and the future. Basically they argue that Hegel's God is *determined* by the logical necessity of the Trinity as a dialectical process that culminates in the self-realization of mind as Infinite Spirit for *both* God and Man, which is to say that both God and Man *must* realize their true natures as "Infinite Spirit."⁵⁹ However, it could be argued that neither Barth nor Pannenberg took seriously enough Hegel's conception of an *inaugurated eschatology* as embodied in the "Spiritual Community" of the Church. Speaking of the souls of individuals within the "Spiritual Community" of the Church, Hegel writes that

The... individual soul, has an infinite, eternal quality, namely, that of being a citizen of the Kingdom of God. This is a quality and a life which is removed beyond time and the Past; and since it is at the same time opposed to the present limited sphere, this eternal quality or determination eternally determines itself at the same time as a future.⁶⁰

56. Ibid., 359. Jaeschke also notes that Hegel apparently never made this clear to his contemporaries.

57. Ibid., Ch. I, is particularly insightful here.

58. Pannenberg, "The Significance of Christianity in the Philosophy of Hegel," 176.

59. Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, 406; Pannenberg, "The Significance of Christianity in the Philosophy of Hegel," 174–175.

60. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, 105.

Hegel's use of "infinite" and "eternal" with "the individual soul" appears, on the surface, to suggest a fully realized eschatology through the Church. Yet in the same passage Hegel continues:

The infinite demand to see God, *i.e.* [italics in the original], to become conscious in spirit of His truth as present truth, is in this temporal Present *not yet satisfied* so far as consciousness in its character as ordinary consciousness is concerned.⁶¹

And speaking earlier of the three forms of Absolute Spirit in regards to Time, Hegel says of the third form, the Church, that having been essentially reconciled through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, that it has been raised to a

perfection or completion, which however, *does not yet exist, and which is therefore to be conceived of as future*. It is a Now of the present whose perfect stage is before it, but this perfect stage is distinguished from the particular Now which is still immediacy, and it is thought of as future.⁶²

Here Hegel's philosophy seems to be in agreement with Paul's theology of the "already" but "not yet present" fulfillment of God's kingdom on earth through Christians who are "perfect" (τελειος), and yet who also "strive to lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus also laid hold of me." (Philippians 3:10–16, NET) Read in this way, Hegel is more in line with the theology of Oscar Cullman than Rudolf Bultmann.⁶³

Still, taken from an orthodox point of view, Hegel's eschatology is suspect. First, Hegel's ambiguous attitude towards "externality"—particularly the "externality" of the Son—is very problematic. Hegel's views of physical nature are complex, particularly when it comes to the *bodily* resurrection of Jesus as proclaimed by the New Testament and Christian orthodoxy. Writing of Jesus' resurrection, Hegel states, "God comes to life again, and thus things are reversed." The footnote to this statement, which was taken from notes from Hegel's mss. of 1821, adds:

This is the meaning of the resurrection and ascension of Christ... this elevation of Christ to heaven outwardly appears for the immediate or natural consciousness

61. Ibid., 105, with my emphasis.

62. Ibid., 3–4, with my emphasis.

63. I am grateful to Dr. Johannes Hoff of the University of Wales, Trinity St. David for valuable insights into Hegel's eschatology here.

in the mode of reality. ‘Thou wilt not leave Thy righteous one in the grave; Thou wilt not suffer Thine Holy One to see corruption.’ [Psalm 16:10] This is the form, too, in which this death of death, the overcoming of the grave, the triumph over the negative, and this elevation to heaven appear to sense-perception.”⁶⁴

Hegel seems at once to affirm and deny the *bodily* resurrection of Jesus. On the one hand he affirms it in *appearance* and in the *mode* of reality or nature. Hodgson notes that “nature,” or, for the purpose of this study, “physicality,” was important in Hegel’s system as the form in which Spirit appeared in the mode of “particularity” and “externality”⁶⁵—but Hegel, unlike the ancient Jewish authors of the Old and New Testaments, does not seem to emphasize the *essential goodness* of physicality *in and of itself*. Hegel’s ambivalence can be seen when he writes on the importance of the “externality” or physicality of Christ’s Incarnation. He states,

But externality, otherness—in short, finitude, or imperfection as it may further be defined, is degraded to the condition of something unessential, and is known as such. For in the Idea the otherness, or Other-Being of the Son, is a passing, disappearing moment, and *not at all a true essential, permanent, and absolute moment*.⁶⁶

If Hegel does not *explicitly* deny Christ’s bodily resurrection, he also does not see it as essential.

And this understanding of physicality in general and Jesus’ in particular goes against the entire tenor of the Old and New Testaments. It is hard, at least from a *prima facie* reading of Hegel’s views of the body, to square his *philosophy* with the *theology* of the Psalms—“Thou wilt not leave Thy righteous one in the grave; Thou wilt not suffer Thine Holy One to see corruption.” (Psalm 16:10) The early Church applied this Psalm and specifically this verse to refer to Jesus’ resurrection. Both Peter and Paul in the book of Acts emphasize Jesus’ bodily resurrection—and particularly that Jesus did not suffer the real, physical decay that follows real, physical death. Paul in his sermon at Antioch states:

For David, after he had served God’s purpose in his own generation, died, was buried with his ancestors, *and experienced decay* [καὶ εἶδεν διαφθοράν], but

64. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, 91.

65. Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology*, 11, 19.

66. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, 123, with my emphasis.

the one whom God raised up *did not experience decay* [’οὐκ ’εἶδεν διαφθορὰν].
(Acts 13: 36–37, NET)⁶⁷

For Paul it is precisely Jesus’ *bodily* resurrection that distinguishes him as the *eschatological* Messiah promised in Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 55:3:

Therefore let it be known to you, brothers, that through this one [i.e. Jesus] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by this one everyone who believes is justified from everything from which the law of Moses could not justify you.
(Acts 13: 38–39, NET)

It is even more difficult to reconcile Hegel’s philosophy of the body with an orthodox reading of the resurrected Jesus’ words to the disciples in Luke 24:39: “Look at my hands and my feet; it’s me! Touch me and see; a [spirit-πνεῦμα] does not have flesh and bones like you see I have.”⁶⁸ Ironically, for all of Hegel’s attempts to overcome “one-sidedness” and dualism in philosophy, his own philosophy of physicality does not appear to escape the ancient Hellenistic dichotomies between “body” and “spirit.” When Hegel writes that “Man is immortal in consequence of knowledge, for it is only as a *thinking being* that he is not a mortal animal soul, and is a free, pure soul... The animal soul is sunk in the life of the body, while Spirit, on the other hand, is a totality in itself,”⁶⁹ he is decidedly Greek, and not Hebraic, in his understanding of the *unity* of body and spirit. For in Hebrew thought—and this is the thought-world that the authors of the New Testament came out of and which they continued and expanded—there could be no “person” *without* the *integration* of both body and spirit.⁷⁰ This is also the reason why the hope of ancient Jews and early Christians

67. See also Peter’s sermon in Acts 2, particularly 2:29–32.

68. NET, slightly modified by the author. The NET translates πνεῦμα as “ghost”; I have modified the verse in light of Hegel’s emphasis on Spirit, or “*Geist*.” Geist captures the Greek sense of πνεῦμα as “blowing, breathing, wind, spirit,” but also can mean “mind”—which is where Hegel places much of his emphasis for understanding “Spirit.” The problem, as discussed above, is that Hegel seems to emphasize the latter meaning of Geist in a dualistic and Gnostic sense. (see William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 680ff., and Hodgson, 19).

69. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, 58, with my emphasis.

70. This is the *leitmotif* of N. T. Wright’s *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

was *ἁναστασις*—"resurrection"—*and not* *ἁποθεωσις*—the flight of the *soul*—and not the body—to live with the immortal gods.⁷¹ The latter was, at least in (and for) the New Testament era, the one-sided hope of pagans.

Even more problematic is Hegel's explicit rejection of Christ's Second Advent, which he links with the Understanding's obsession with sensuous, "historical" knowledge. Indeed, he argues in part III of the *Lectures* on the "Kingdom of the Spirit" that this is *the* major problem with the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church has never been able to get beyond the "historical Jesus"—beyond his immediate existence and appearance in time. Hence, according to Hegel, the Catholic Church still relies on "sensuous knowledge" (which was really the same epistemology of the Enlightenment) to try to understand God. For the sensuous perception, however, the Present contains "Past" and "Future" as "moments" within itself and thus looks for Christ's *Second Coming* as the completion of reconciliation. Hegel states:

The sensuous idea... integrates the Past, views it from the point of view of the whole, for it the Past is a one-sided moment; the Present contains the Past and the Future in it as moments. Thus the sensuous idea finds the *completion* of its representation in the Second Advent...⁷²

Yet the Spiritual Community, (represented most notably within Protestantism; it is helpful to remember that Hegel was a Lutheran), in its *spiritual apprehension* of Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension to Heaven understood that "the essentially absolute return is the act of *exchanging externality for what is inward*: this is the Comforter who can come only when sensuous history as immediate is past."⁷³ Christ's return to the Father had enabled the coming of the Holy Spirit, and it is the coming of the Holy Spirit into the world—into Man's consciousness—that represents the *eschaton* to Hegel.

71. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 57. *ἁποθεωσις* *never* occurs in the New Testament; though this is not to deny that there were significant tributaries of Jewish practice and thought (e.g. Philo of Alexandria, the Saducees)—and later Christian communities—e.g. the Gnostics, that differed from this *mainstream* hope. I am also bracketing out the Eastern Orthodox Church's doctrine of *theosis* for discussion in this article.

72. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, 104.

73. *Ibid.*, 104.

Conclusion:**Hegel's Eschatology and Space for the Secular**

As Barth, Pannenberg, and a host of other commentators have shown, the harvest that is to be reaped from Hegel's Christian philosophy is not un-mixed with tares. This is particularly so of his eschatology. There seem to have been two main stumbling blocks for Hegel in translating orthodox Christian eschatology into modern philosophical thought; stumbling blocks which he shared with both the ancient and modern world.⁷⁴ First, the Christian conception of bodily resurrection and a post-mortem "*transphysical body*"—(i.e. a *transformed* physicality)—of a body that is incapable of dying and putrefying, that can be touched, felt, handled; that can eat fish and drink wine,⁷⁵ but at the same time does not appear to be bound by the same limits of space and time as our bodies⁷⁶—simply defies *most*⁷⁷ ancient and Modern ontological categories. The Gospels' rather *apophatic* portrayal of the resurrected Jesus' body—his resurrected body

74. See for instance Acts 17:31–32 and the reaction to Paul in Athens when he mentions the resurrection from the dead. Cf. Celsus' critique of the Christian hope of *bodily* resurrection:

...Which body after its complete decay could return to its original nature and to that same first composition from which it was dissolved? Having nothing to answer, they have recourse to a most absurd retreat: 'All is possible to God.' But God can do no shameful things, nor does he will anything contrary to nature. If you were to desire something disgusting in accord with your depravity, God could not do this, and it is not necessary to believe that it will immediately happen... For God is not the originator of wrongful desire or wandering excess but of right and just nature. He could grant everlasting life but as Heraclitus says, 'Corpses should be cast out even more than dung.' Therefore a body, full of things it is not pretty to describe, God would not against reason either will or be able [δυνήσεται] to make everlasting. For he is himself the reason [λογος] of all things that exist; therefore he can do nothing against reason or against himself.

(From John Granger Cook, *The Interpretation of the New Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 17). For a modern view, see Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*—"On Miracles." See also Wright's analysis of both ancient and modern rejections of bodily resurrection, which is exhaustive.

75. See Luke 24:39–43; Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 477–478; 605.

76. See John 20:26 and Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 605.

77. Wright argues that the Jews were the only people in the ancient world to believe in the bodily resurrection of the dead, and that the first century Christian belief in bodily resurrection

is decidedly *not* like our empirically verified physicality—proved to be beyond the limits of Hegel’s *ontotheology*. Hegel also seems to have shied away from embracing the orthodox belief in Jesus’ bodily resurrection in order to defend himself against Humean empiricist attacks against the Church’s apologetic emphasis on the historicity of the miracles recorded in the New Testament. Epistemologically, Hegel warns, “...some objection can always be brought against the material facts.”⁷⁸ However, in the Jewish conception of salvation—which the New Testament follows, though in remarkable new ways⁷⁹—there is no salvation if there is no saving of the body—whether from Egyptian slavery, or from the moldering decay of the grave. Yet Hegel’s view of the Incarnation as *only* “a passing, disappearing moment” in the Trinity undercuts the orthodox understanding of Christ’s *bodily* resurrection as God’s “Amen!” to the creation and human physicality.

The other major stumbling block to Hegel—and Modernity—is the Christian hope of Christ’s physical return at the “end of the age” to rule as Lord of the world. In some ways this is understandable. Christian “apocalypticism” and “millennialism” has, taken out of context and to extremes, led to terrible events in world history—the Crusades immediately come to mind. The young Hegel was correct to point out that in the history of Christianity the terrifying images of the book of Revelation had often been used to *coerce* faith through fear, and this is not the freedom offered in the Good News of Jesus Christ.⁸⁰ And yet, Hegel’s rejection of Christ’s return ultimately negates Christianity’s de-limitation of the Secular and its use of what Foucault identified as “power-knowledge systems” and the coercive force available through technology (e.g. “drones,” “smart

was a continuance of a particularly Jewish and not Hellenistic hope. (*Resurrection of the Son of God*, passim.)

78. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, 110. The New Testament actually anticipates Hume and Hegel here—and seems little troubled by empirical doubts—see Matthew 28:17.

79. Wright argues that in the Christian hope of bodily resurrection the specific, *nationalistic*, and *political* hopes of ancient Jewish salvation become sublated to the hope of the resurrection and redemption of all who are saved by the gospel; that rather than focusing simply on the “promised land,” after Jesus’ resurrection, God’s focus is now to redeem the entire world. (Cf. John 3:16; *Resurrection of the Son of God*, passim.)

80. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, 113. See also Peter Fuss and John Dobbins, ed. and trans., *Three Essays, 1793–1795: The Tübingen Essay, Berne Fragments, The Life of Jesus by Friedrich Hegel*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 77.

bombs,” etc.) to maintain order.⁸¹ As John Milbank has pointed out, Hegel’s philosophy—and I would argue especially his conception of eschatology—leaves too much space for the secular to continue to operate unchanged and unchallenged by Christian orthodoxy.⁸² One wonders, for instance, how Hegel’s view of the body as “*unessential*” might be brought to bear philosophically and theologically to combat “enhanced interrogation” by the State? It would appear that this is one of the “realms of indifference” identified by Milbank within Hegel’s philosophical system.⁸³ From the view of Christian orthodoxy Hegel is too indifferent to the radical evil of mortality—and to God’s radical solution to this evil. Christian doctrine presents the phenomena of death not as something *neutral*, or benignly *natural*—but rather as something *accidental* resulting from the Fall (cf. Gen. 2:17, 3:19, 22; Romans 5:12, I Cor. 15:26)—and something which will ultimately be *undone* with the return of Christ (cf. I Cor. 15, I Thess. 4:16–17,⁸⁴ Rev. 20:14).

In sum, Hegel’s philosophical eschatology may be seen as a part of the modern transformation of pre-modern orthodoxy’s understanding of the *saeculum* as a *time* between the Fall and Christ’s return, into the “secular,” a *domain* and *space* where god/religion is not present.⁸⁵ I am not arguing that this was Hegel’s intention, but rather that Hegel’s understanding of philosophy as “*its own time comprehended in thoughts*”⁸⁶ had so imbibed the modern conception of the *secular* that it undercut the key political insight offered by pre-modern, orthodox Christian eschatology: Governments’ use of coercive force to maintain justice was a consequence of the Fall and *temporarily*

81. Michel Foucault famously referred to the relationship between power and knowing in modernity as “*pouvoir-savoir*” in his 1975 history of modern prison systems, *Discipline and Punish*. See Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la prison* (Gallimard, nrf, 1975), 32.

82. See John Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2006), “For And Against Hegel,” pgs. 147–176.

83. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, especially 160–161.

84. Wright’s exegesis of these dense verses is very helpful; he argues that Paul is using apocalyptic echoes of Daniel 7 to describe Jesus’ *parousia*—and not suggesting that Christians would actually become space cadets when Christ returns. See pgs. 214–218 of *Resurrection of the Son of God*.

85. See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Chapter 1.

86. G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed., Allen W. Wood, trans., H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21.

necessary to restrain the evil effects of sin.⁸⁷ In this sense, government and the sword were a grace in the *saeculum* (cf. Romans 13:1–7). Yet on the orthodox view, Christ’s Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection was and is the beginning of the end of the *saeculum* and the inauguration of the reign of the Kingdom of God on earth. The world—the universe—have been irrevocably changed, and henceforth the *saeculum* can no longer be simply a time of punitive justice and negative freedom from evil. For God’s Kingdom works *positively* through grace, love, and sacrifice—the exact opposites of the kingdoms of the *saeculum*. The pagan world had no conception of an “end” to the *saeculum*—theirs was a cyclical conception of time. And thus pagans could also not conceive of an end to the coercive use of power and force by the State. It is the Christian good news of the resurrection and return of the “Son-of-God-in-power,”⁸⁸ Jesus Christ, and His victory over Sin, Death, and Hades—that makes peace among the nations not only possible, but an actuality obtainable in the present. Thus Christian eschatology proclaims the end of Empire. It was and is a dangerous message to Caesar both then and now.⁸⁹

Perhaps ultimately Hegel’s failure to achieve a lasting rapprochement between secular philosophy and Christian eschatology is not solely attributable to his dialectic, but rather to the very nature of eschatology *itself*. For eschatology lays bare the *essential* teleologies of secular and Christian self-conceptions. Historically these essential teleologies have refused reconciliation. For the former proclaims that the eschaton *has arrived* with the Enlightenment, through scientific rationality, through secular conceptions of politics and economics. The latter proclaims that the *status quo* of this “present age” (cf. Luke 16:8)⁹⁰—even with its remarkable intellectual and scientific progress—can never be a substitute for the “Kingdom of God” *on earth*. Despite a heroic effort, Hegel could not reconcile these two self-conceptions and thus his philosophical project satisfied neither modern philosophers of the 19th century nor their orthodox

87. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 9.

88. Romans 1:4, NET; see also Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*.

89. A point that N. T. Wright makes powerfully throughout *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.

90. Jesus uses the Jewish idiom of the “two ages” to distinguish the people of “this age” (οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου) from the people of the eschatological “age to come”—cf. Luke 16:9.

Christian contemporaries. Yet Hegel's failure may not be simply attributable to a refusal of secular and Christian thinkers to allow their eschatological visions to be harmoniously reconciled. It may be that these two visions *are* irreconcilable.