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Creation *stricto sensu*

Stephen Theron

Abstract

Informed study of Aquinas suggests that absolute idealism and realism do not differ about the relation of created and uncreated freedom (*praemotio physica*) but rather, if at all, about created *vis à vis* uncreated being generally. Both cannot *be* in the same sense. Nor, therefore, have we grounds for distinguishing divine or infinite thinking from real production, if nothing else really is. The Thomist doctrine that God has no real relation to anything outside God is thus, implicitly, absolute idealism. Positing "ontological discontinuity" denies the absolutely infinite transcendence in affirming it. We have no being as God, uniquely, has. This is the meaning of "image", while "face to face" is ultimately one face (*intimior me mihi*). Seeing and being are one. Thus Hegel should be seen as rather explicating than reducing creation, thus deepening the doctrine and not offering an alternative. R. Gildas merely assumes the latter. Infinity requires union with "alterity" *within* God and intra-Trinitarian and *ad extra* processes are thus analogous. So self-renouncement as explaining either creation (originating an origin) or incarnation (*kenosis*) is anthropomorphic paradox. God has to be "all in all".

Keywords

Aquinas, Hegel, creation, otherness, monism, analogy, theologians

There has been a tendency in Christian intellectual history (theology) to assert a doctrine of creation *against* philosophical thinking. But obviously the conception needs to be thematized philosophically in today's world, as is routinely done with all other Christian conceptions, even the conception of a revealing or teaching authority itself.

As regards our own attempt which follows here some or at least one preliminary is required. We must say something about the major role accorded to Hegel's thinking in our discussion, whether of creation or of the closely related themes of Trinity and identity in difference. For we present Hegel as a kind of continuator of Thomism, perhaps as the first "transcendental Thomist", or second after Thomas himself. Those calling themselves transcendental Thomists in our own time

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often appear as precisely *not* in continuity with Thomas Aquinas, whose name they then seem rather to borrow for extrinsic reasons, as they might and even do at times agree. Lonergan or Rahner have about as much community with Aquinas as does Grisez in the restricted area of natural law. The more traditional Thomists find little difficulty in showing that they are proposing something entirely different.[1]

The latter, on the other hand, sometimes find themselves stranded in a dogmatic time-warp, e.g. when they imagine that thirteenth century answers can be made to show an intrinsic superiority *at all points* to the "childish stuff" (Herbert McCabe on Hume) of later philosophers. Rahner was thus far right to see neoscholasticism as a nineteenth century political movement, now defunct. One was defending, rather romantically, a politico-intellectual order which was itself defunct.

It was Hegel who said that the claim of Kant to deprive the human mind of half of its patrimony would drive many back to the natural or naive attitude of common-sense realism, whereas he, Hegel, could show the philosophical vision towards which Kant, disdaining common-sense, had pointed the way. In similar vein Hegel points out that the impression is false that Aristotle reasserted common-sense claims against Platonic idealism, since on this matter of idealism the two Greeks are united (*anima est quodammodo omnia*). He himself in his philosophy very largely follows Aristotle (and therefore Plato) and this above all is the common ground he shares with Aquinas.

Scholastic philosophy did not of course die or even wane with the Middle Ages (when did they end?), to be restored by Romanticism only. There is a Protestant scholasticism with which Leibniz is in direct continuity, as he was with Nicholas of Cusa, admirer of the Dominican Eckhart. The counter-reformation scholastics, Suarez or John of St. Thomas, are well known. They above all have made Aquinas appear as a particular Roman Catholic figure. Aquinas, we claim, gathered into himself Aristotelian and patristic wisdom, a universal man as Goethe was, differently, after him. Within philosophy, however, the next great "universal" figure is Hegel, also, we claim, a Christian thinker. Such an eminence can appear as much among Protestants as anywhere else, just as in principle Avicenna (or indeed Augustine or Descartes) might have risen to the same heights. These are commonplaces of "ecumenism".

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What was the deeper reason for Leibniz's claim that this creation we are considering is the best of all possible worlds? Not mere "optimism" surely, nor even a reflection upon divine absoluteness to

[1] E.g. Robert M. Burns, "The Agent Intellect in Rahner and Aquinas", *The Heythrop Journal*, Vol. XXIX, No. 4, pp. 423-450.

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the detriment of divine freedom, since God can create any world he chooses, as Hobbes emphasised and Leibniz would not have denied.

Rather it was a more vivid sense that the world proceeds, quite naturally but not therefore determinedly, from the divine thinking, in effortless since absolute possibility or power, as a kind of exteriorisation, a *processus*, which has no internal or sufficient reason for being partial or less than the best.

It is not that there might be choice between alternatives of equal value, as if they already existed in idea, as in human finite thinking. For the ideas are not merely uncreated, but identical each and every one with the divine essence, says Aquinas.

All the same the doctrine of the best of all possible worlds signals a different relation between God and world to that found in the popular way of viewing creation. For this resembles nothing so much as Plato's myth of the demiurge or workman, the *ex nihilo* qualification merely making of this First Cause some kind of magician. Leibniz's dictum looks forward rather to Hegel's view of nature as the objectification of spirit, with roots in the older doctrine of process-emanation and *reditus*, to where "God shall be all in all". Emanation indeed was always an open enough notion to which the teaching of creation did not need to be opposed.

The world seen thus approximates more closely to God's word, to what he speaks. We can think of those more "economic" doctrines of the Trinity, again, which stress how the procession of the Word derives, as it does in our thought, from the "coming out" (*kenosis*) which is the Incarnation, this Word in whom and through whom "all things were made". This Word had no literal pre-existence but is eternal, i.e. beyond before and after. This notion of the eternal sweeps up the dialectical development of history too as a whole. "All times are his", alpha and omega.

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The question concerns absolute idealism in general. In a recent exchange in the journals "factual idealism" (as of Sartre, Heidegger, Schopenhauer, Merleau-Ponty) is judged coherent but false whereas absolute idealism (as of Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Bradley, Royce) is both "false and incoherent".[2] Smith argues for realism and, incidentally, considers it "not a helpful move" to imply by redefinition that Aquinas was an absolute idealist. Yet this move would put Hegel in succession to Aquinas as the latter succeeds to Plato and Plotinus while Eckart, Nicholas of Cusa, Leibniz and even Kant provide links in what then becomes a chain. The move, that is, is called not

[2] Quentin Smith, "Reply to Vallicella: Heidegger and Idealism", *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 231-235, New York 1991.

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helpful as seeming to unify a temporally coherent opposition to Smith's atheism. In other contexts it would clearly be helpful, provided there is anything in it, as we have argued here.

McTaggart's would be an example of factual idealism, not mentioned by Smith, implying the sole reality of a state he calls heaven consisting of a number of finite spirits who love each other. There is no other absolute or God. Smith, anyhow, considers absolute idealism incoherent because finite beings, as thoughts of the absolute mind, could not themselves be thinkers as many of them are. They cannot instead be parts of that mind since an infinity cannot be the sum of such parts, nor can it include them as having something over as proper to it alone. For then they are not posited by that mind as idealism requires. McTaggart has a similar argument against our being parts of God, whose existence he accordingly rejects.

Smith thinks to refute Vallicella's claim that absolute idealism fulfils classical theism, since this too requires "that every non-mind be posited by the absolute mind." Smith retorts that free choices (and representations) of finite minds are not (continuously) created by the infinite as are these minds themselves as substances.

But here he is simply wrong, misinformed. A large body of theists, principally the Thomists, teach that God creates and pre-moves the free choice.It is free insofar as God determinatively knows it as free, rather than otherwise caused, say. Where absolute idealism and theism then would differ, if at all, would be not over this point of created freedom *vis à vis* creator, but on different views regarding created *vis à vis* uncreated being in general.

But here Smith himself seems prepared to assimilate continuous creation to a divine thinking, as I would myself be inclined to agree. For just as the status of created being *vis à vis* divine being is problematic (both cannot be truly being in the same sense), so we have no grounds to assert that divine thinking, the ideas produced, should be negatively distinguished from real production as is our creaturely or human thinking (intentionality). This applies whether we call such thinking speculative or practical; the application of this distinction to infinite intellect seems anyhow on the face of it unwarranted anthropomorphism.

One feels sympathy for Hegel's claim that idealism is *the* philosophical posture. It is in us, not in God, that there is a discrepancy between thinking and reality, that a logic of instruments of understanding (of the *res*) is needed, using "materials" painfully abstracted from the senses in a way that proclaims our animal ancestry. All this bespeaks finitude.

We are quite clearly not parts of an infinite being, since such a being would have to be *simplex* if it is possible at all. Aquinas shows this well enough. On the other hand Smith has no reason for claiming that a particular human mind cannot be a consciousness if it is nothing

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but a "posit" in the Absolute Mind, nor does he know the degree of similarity between that and supposing, inconsistently as he claims, a humanly fictional character with a real, i.e. non-fictional mind. Suddenly we have never heard of analogy.

In reality the *same* difficulty exists with created being as Smith highlights with created freedom, and which Aquinas resolves by appeal to divine omnipotence and omniscience combined, doctrines at one with that of God as "pure act". Our freedom never surprises God. He makes it to be what it is by "knowing" it in just that way. The free act is a created act; otherwise there is no infinite being. Aquinas is as uncompromising as any Calvinist here, but less rationalist and univocal. It was of course too much for the Jesuits, or many of them, such as Molina, when the theme became highlighted in connection with sixteenth century discussions about grace, a factor inhibiting the Pope of the time (*De auxiliis*) from explicitly reaffirming the Thomist (and Augustinian) view. This view though leaves created freedom unhindered since uncreated freedom can never be in competition with it. The Sartrian dilemma, that either God exists or man does, just cannot arise. Development of the more robust view, as distinct from simply reasserting the antique version of it (Bañez, Del Prado), was left to Hegel, in the line of Eckhart, Cusanus and Leibniz.

Similarly, our being adds nothing to God, for the obvious and inescapable reason that we *are not* in the same sense. For this is the sense, not merely quantitatively arithmetical, in which divine and created being are incommensurate. Therefore theists must freely admit that divine being too is not being in the normal human sense of the term (just as we are not real as God is real and he can, says Aquinas, have no real relation with us). "God is not being; God is freedom," says Berdyaev accordingly, with plenty of precedent in Pseudo-Dionysius and elsewhere. "My God and all things", affirms St. Francis, while for John of the Cross God is simply the All. There is no proportion; that is the common denominator. There might be merely an "analogy of proportionality" where we wish to *talk* about God, a theory systematized more by Cajetan than by Aquinas.

All this applies to any possible God, that is the point. The at first sight bizarre notion of the identity of any of the divine ideas, countless in number, of both actual and possible things, of all parts of all wholes, individually with the divine essence and *hence*, it would seem, with one another (the basis for love and mutual coherence, system, actually no more than the Parmenidean insight that being has no parts) can only be meant as a reflexive treatment of our thought about God, inasmuch as we feel bound to say, with Aquinas, that simply as being a knower he has ideas.

In reality, in divinity, that is to say, there are no such things. There is God and the world related to him, we suggest, as his thought. The doctrine, inescapable, that God has no real relation outside of himself

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is in fact the doctrine, in unconscious form, of absolute idealism. Yet whereas Aquinas makes each divine idea identical with the divine essence he is very clear that the divine act of being is unique and apart from the acts of being he ascribes to each and every creature.

Indeed we talk in terms of being, including our own, but this being is, has to be, "in God", not absurdly as a part of God on the divine level but as a form of divine knowledge, self-knowledge, refracted though rather than in imitation. For why should God imitate himself? It is refracted rather as a kind of self-analysis, extensionally[3] so to say, *in verbo*, which is then put together again (*reditus*), this process being itself an analogue or maybe an even closer reflection of the Trinitarian processions.

In declaring himself, his (her, its) Word, by a necessity of nature, this being the essence of mind as such, God freely *ex*plicates himself, by an exercise of love and wisdom, in the manifold we experience as the creation of which we form part but which is really the divine *exitus*, experienced under the forms of time and space as thinking, a dialectic.

But in the world's becoming aware of itself in us as thinkers God comes to birth in us human beings. The identity of each reality with divine being is closer, more personal, in our case. We are one with him and with one another, the totality existing in our consciousness alone, it might seem. All this is foreshadowed by the Incarnation doctrine, however literally true or not it might be considered to be in itself.

We can talk of created being, the cardinal glory of Thomism, but we can talk too, more truly, of the nothingness of creation apart from God's own manifestation of himself. Glib talk of analogy veils the stark actuality here. To come upon God is to come upon total reality.

Now we call God Mind, as somehow more absolute than if we spoke of his being and ours. But mind too is a notion taken from human life. God cannot be denied to know, but his way of knowing cannot be pinned down. All *our* knowing is limited by the object, with which at best we identify. Nothing corresponds to this in the divine case. Therefore absolute idealism cannot either literally represent divine reality. Talk of the Word too was taken from a contemporary philosophical stream, of the Son from contemporary patriarchy.[4]

[3] Hegel comments on Spinoza that "he does not define God as the unity of God with the world, but as the union of thought with extension . . . not Atheism but Acosmism" (*Encyclopaedia, Logic* 50, Wallace p. 105–6).

[4] That it is Son and not daughter poses a potential problem for Christian development. A massive favouring of the male sex seems inescapably involved to which Marian devotion makes no difference at all, unless to stress the disparity, easily leading to a questioning of the historic incarnation in respect of its uniqueness, not in principle necessary as Aquinas for his part makes clear in the *Summa theologiae* IIIa. A line for the future may well

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Spirit-talk is a Homeric or Hebraic analogy with human breath. Our most solid ground is that of infinity, since there is nothing outside to limit it, and the properties infinity must have, such as no parts outside parts, all being together and at once. It must be ultimate reality, but such ultimate reality, the history of philosophy shows, need not be absolute being. Absolute freedom and unity are less dismissible candidates, as are power and freedom from ignorance. Maybe even love is in the choice of this freedom. Being quite thinkably comes in with the dialectic we have for centuries called creation, which we then project back on a First Cause. Being might be the especial mark of what depends upon this infinite reality.

In McTaggart's system, again, there exist only spirits, presumably finite, in love. One can protest at the absence of a "reason of being", such as infinite reality postulates as within itself as "self-explanatory". Of course the only reason for postulating this infinity is as condition for our own awareness of life. This might seem at first contingent to our understanding, but we have already stated an identity of each of us with infinite reality. The conclusion, that "all are one", seems plain. Our true self, the true self (*atman*), is necessary. This is the only answer to the question, raised previously, why do just I exist? One has a lot to remember, the Platonic intuition being thus far correct. Time is illusory, whatever the nature of the dialectical series it reflects. Nor, as is widely just assumed in philosophical writing, does denial of time destroy freedom on the Thomist pre-motion view.

It is worth noting the consequences of thinking of our acts as being free because God makes them so, knows them to be so, wills them in just that way, as opposed to the idea that free action is action in complete independence of God. Such a belief, which we also find throughout the Bible, where it is God who works in us, who even hardens Pharaoh's heart, implies the total and continuous ontological nearness of God as our own deepest reality in its ultimate explanation. He is intimately involved even in a simple game of dice with all the choices he *moves* us to make, thus causing our defeat or victory, with all the social or human or domestic consequences. We feel him just at our side, or too close to see, all the time, and this is the root of a very special confidence or hope we may have, as Job had.

By contrast the other doctrine, born of a metaphysically insensitive and brutishly authoritarian theology historically, signals loss of this

be open here. However, Aquinas adds that such a plurality of individual human natures would all be united to the same divine person, if we prescind from possible incarnations (allowed by him) of the other two divine persons, in which case the Holy Spirit, for example, might fittingly assume a female human nature. Aquinas though considers it more fitting that fewer rather than many such incarnations would occur, whereas it is clear that here we have already envisaged a general coincidence, convergence rather, of human and divine.

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sense[5], a withdrawal from or, some might perversely say, of God, though we can always return. It is perhaps the dialectical anti-Christ moment, a move into extrinsic ideology. But Christianity may have embraced even this within its dialectical historical development, for a time.

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So now, after these preliminaries, when we return to considering Hegel's philosophy of creation we have to decide whether he is reducing the affirmation of creation as found in Christian doctrine, for example, or simply explicating its sense in relation to all other truths, such as that of the creator's infinity. Really this dilemma, if it is one, applies to the project of theology as a whole, be it Aristotle's *theologia* or Rahner's investigation of themes such as the inspiration of scripture. The underlying assumption, or conviction rather, is that the teaching of religion is not a final penetration as to what things really are. This assumption, however, does not entail that any existing or even possible theological insight could be final. Thus the positing of the Trinity is the positing of ceaseless process.

So it is a weakness of the interesting article by Richard Gildas[6] that he does not make this key question explicit. He assumes, rather, that Hegel has offered an alternative account of finite reality, giving it less of an "alterity" from God than does the traditional doctrine. The prior assumption to this is that one can unreflectively understand in full what in fact this traditional doctrine has to tell us, in which case no analysis would be needed at all, or at least not on certain points. The roots of this attitude, when not merely naive, lie in a conception of belief according to which each ecclesiastical definition or pronouncement closes off a given area for speculation or meditation once and for all, as if everything there were now fully understood. But the spiritual man judges all things, it was said, and such an attitude is indeed unspiritual, unecumenical and, I would judge, unpatristic. One might call it the ideological mode, into which good and loyal people can fall out of fear of losing what they have.

Gildas's first paragraph, indeed, breathes a more positive spirit, showing Hegel as wanting to make "the rational content" of the doctrine appear "in its truth". Creation, he points out, is engendered neither out of God, by an "alienation", nor out of some pre-existing matter. It is another being, in "ontological discontinuity", not, he says

[5] As is brought out in a study of Western Christianity by Rudolph Steiner where he connects this loss with the person of Pope Nicholas I, the "Great". The near-contemporary *Libri Carolingi* might also be cited, however.

[6] Richard Gildas, *Examen critique du jugement de Hegel sur la notion de création ex nihilo*, on the Internet at http://philo.pourtous.free.fr/Articles/Gildas.

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surprisingly, to be equated with an effect as such unable to decide its own characteristics and manner of being. Nothing is imposed on the creature since it is "without reserve given to itself". In no way the origin of its own being, it is fully "the origin of what it will make of its being." Creation is the manner of origin of radically autonomous, free beings, for it "originates an origin". At this point Gildas asks what is wrong with *creatio ex nihilo*, as if assuming Hegel to have faulted what Gildas himself has just presented in "philosophical discourse". In this discourse, however, no account is taken of any idea of an analogy of being. Yet apart from this analogy God alone IS. Therefore, again, he has no real relation with creatures (as they have with him from their viewpoint), not even in his knowledge of them, since he knows them exclusively in his ideas of them, each of which is identical with his essence.

But as there is an analogy of being, so there must be an analogy between divine and created freedom. They cannot be the same, and on the Thomist analysis, we repeat, an act is free because and only because God, as omniscient, determiningly knows it as free. Part of our purpose here, indeed, is to demonstrate the continuity between Hegel and these Augustinian and Thomist perspectives. Thus for Augustine "there is one closer to me than I am to myself", indicating God as my intimate self almost, or the *atman* of Hinduism, in whom we live and move and have our being, again. There is not much "ontological discontinuity" here. For that, indeed, one must go to the Molinist theologians, historical precursors of deism and related untenable positions, rooted however in late medieval notions of the *libertas indifferentiae*. Thus Gildas writes that "le créateur . . . donne à la créature le pouvoir se tourner *ou non* vers lui" (my emphasis).

He appeals for support to Lévinas, who, with the Hegel scholar C. Bruaire, is claimed to be a "notable exception" to the tendency after Hegel to reject creation *stricto sensu*:

> La limitation de l'Infini créateur, et la multiplicité – sont compatible avec la perfection de l'Infini. Elles articulent le sens de cette perfection.[7]

What has to be shown though is why Hegel's theory does not "articulate" the sense of this compatibility, asserted merely here, or why it should be seen as rejecting creation *stricto sensu*. Is not this phrase being used merely to assert the received doctrine, held unreflectively rather than strictly, in any philosophical sense of this term. To make a comparison, - there is a strict or absolute sense of moral obligation which however, after analysis reveals that "every precept is given for some end" (Aquinas, ST Ia-IIae 99, 1), is yet found to be lacking in

[7] E. Lévinas, *Totalité et infini, essai sur l'exteriorité*, Paris, 1994, p. 107.

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sense, this being precisely the Hegelian critique of ontological discontinuity, a phrase simply mirroring the popular unreflected notion of transcendence, with sociomorphic roots in ideas of sovereignty and royal power. In fact nothing is discontinuous, not a sparrow falls to the ground, the hairs of our heads are numbered and so on.

C. Bruaire is cited as finding Hegel insufficiently "alert to the alterity of created being". Yet Bruaire acknowledges that Hegel in his philosophy of religion "resolutely defends the difference between the Son and the created world", while in an earlier work not cited by Gildas he shows how what Hegel sets forth is not pantheism but an analogy between intratrinitarian life and divine *ad extra* activity. Both are "necessary" in their respective ways and somehow circular or returning on themselves, the Word belonging to God's essence, the creation manifesting that essence.[8] Aquinas, similarly, treats both under the rubric of a *processio*. The creation, for him, is destined to return to God in *reditus* matching the *exitus*, while for St. Paul the point of the proces is that "God shall be all in all". This is straight prefiguring of Hegel on the part of both writers, the only difference being that what they treated historically he treats dialectically, believing that from the viewpoint of eternity history becomes a dialectic or, we might say with McTaggart, a *series* only misperceived or misjudged by us as absolutely temporal, since neither God nor his knowledge and will change.

One might therefore parry the critique by saying that the Molinists, or Gildas and other protagonists of the *libertas indifferentiae* are insufficiently alert to divine infinity, seen by Gildas as somehow exceeding its human "concept", to which he finds Hegel too exclusively attached. He is of course right that one should progress from knowledge of things in our notions of them to knowledge of those things in themselves[9], which however is precisely what Hegel strictly attempts in his treatment of creation. Why then should he not do it in the case of the infinite being?

This tendency to explain creation *stricto sensu* as a kind of self-limitation on the creator's part can look like a mere flat importation of religious paradox into philosophy:

> L'origine, en créant, ne perd pas son être-origine, mais renonce à son être-cause, ce qui est tout différent (Gildas, p.7).

Here we have the denial of *praemotio physica* correspondingly preparing a statement of the *libertas indifferentiae*. So we have God as *être-origine* of our own *origine* or originating power in freedom, achieved by God's *renoncement* of his universal causality. But it is

[8] C. Bruaire, *Logique et religion chrétienne dans la philosophie de Hegel*, Paris: Ed. du Seuil 1964.

[9] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* VII-IX.

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just this which is totally impossible, which is why the Thomists assert that divine and created freedom are analogous, not univocal, a divine motion preceding or encapsulating every motion of mine, inclusive of my willing, *thus* making me act freely. This is what Gildas is objecting to, rather than to anything specifically Hegelian. God does not in creating renounce anything, an anthropomorphic notion if ever there was one, inspired though it may be by kenotic notions of the Incarnation, though these have always been kept strictly apart from any idea of "patripassianism", i.e. that God as "origin" suffers, renounces.[10]

The Pauline liberty in which Christ shall have made at least believers free is anyhow for Hegel a discovery of what we really are. To this extent the previous Law was imperfect, given by God or not, and this is in fact the position represented in the Gospels, "You have heard . . . but I say unto you." The Incarnation, that is, is no more a historical contingency than is the Fall of Man.[11]

Gildas seems to relate Hegelian necessity to some kind of logical determination of concepts, ultimately of "the concept", and some kind of relation there may be. One has however, again, to be sensitive to the analogies of necessity, *vis à vis* freedom, for example. Thus there is the necessity of propriety, aesthetic almost, of what is becoming (*condecet*) to the divine goodness, such as "that other things should be partakers therein".[12] For either thinker God does not create by arbitrary decree. In Van Riet's words,

> As soon as you are in the world of love or goodness, there is hardly any sense in opposing freedom and necessity. Furthermore, the human notion of freedom cannot be transposed to God without correcting it . . . .

Divine freedom, that is, is not a *libertas arbitrii* but absolute, also a Thomist Augustinian position.

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We mentioned religious paradox. This is a kind of admission of rational defeat which Hegelian dialectic, with its identity in difference, goes some way towards overcoming. It seems that Gildas's notion of creation goes no further than to assert just this paradox, such as we find it in many professions of faith. Behind it though lies the inadmissible idea that in creating God somehow works against himself. This is the same as the Molinist idea of freedom, as a kind of divine abdication rather than the closest imaginable divine union

[10] "this . . . in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God . . . emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . . Wherefore God has exalted him . . ." *Philippians* 2.

[11] Hegel, *Encyclopaedia,* Logic 24.

[12] Aquinas, ST Ia 19, 2.

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with human nature. God, the origin, univocally and hence impossibly shall have set up the creature as origin.

This set of notions can be found taken a step further in many of the theologians considered in, for example, Hans Küng's *The Incarnation of God*[13], Excursus V. They are not found in Hegel who, again, develops independently the view of divine and human freedom in ordered relation as it is found in Augustine and Aquinas. By this view, as found either in Hegel himself or in prominent Hegelians, every created entity is known divinely in the divine idea, which in every case is identical with the divine essence. This is also pure Thomas Aquinas. In the case of the rational creature a genuine identity with the divine action (motion) has to be placed as the natural term aimed at, as the true self or *atman*, again. It is in this sense that he or she is *capax Dei*, there being no other way such a capacity can be envisaged than by becoming what one is thus capable of. So there is no conflict or irreconcilable opposition between divine and human freedom in Hegel, as if God has to die so that man may live, i.e. not sacrifice himself so much as just disappear, as more than one of these theologians sees it. Hegel's view is the Augustinian "closer than I am to myself" rather. The possibility of that and of God, plus their compatibility with the reality of individual finite personality, belong and must be judged together.[14]

> Christianity is the religion of freedom. Not of man's freedom without God or against God, but with God and by God. Freedom of God and freedom of man are complementary.[15]

Regarding any questions about grace, this notion is thus one of intensification of the original notion, a kind of special friendship with God, as Aquinas rather dualistically puts it. One might also speak of eventual individual identification with the absolute or deification, participating the divine life. What else can be meant by *in*dwelling? Certainly more than friendship, though it include it.

[13] Herder, Freiburg, 1970.

[14] Insofar as McTaggart's finite but timeless spirits are bound together by absolute reason, in consequent mutual love, his denial of God might not be thought to amount to much. This is a question we will leave open for the present, merely remarking, with Aquinas, that God is but the preferred name we give to the ultimate reality or first cause, which Aristotle had already called *nous*. If "I am the absolute source" (Merleau-Ponty), then indeed I will be God, as many Sufis would cheerfully agree. It is a dizzy prospect, however, and insofar as I am finite pure untruth, in Hegel's words. Regarding dizziness, however, we should add that just as some wish not to characterize the infinite as God, so some would not wish to put Hegelian reason as absolutely first, finding Dionysius superior to Apollo. This is perfectly allowable and well illustrated in the music contemporary with Hegel, "a greater revelation than the whole of religion and philosophy", said its greatest practitioner. The dialectic is material to all these forms of the ultimate, divinity, reason, ecstasy, dance, as names taken from human life. For in the infinite Apollo and Dionysus are one.

[15] For Aquinas, cf. CG III 149; S.T. Ia 105, 4; Ia-IIae 10, 2; also Ia 14, 13 ad 3; Ia-IIae 10, 4 ad 3 and D.V. 23, 5 ad 3.

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The idea of grace as the perfection of freedom was first systematically developed by Pelagius, who need not have been the Pelagian Augustine saw him as. That grace is everywhere or even that all is grace is a commonplace for many theologians today, from Rahner downwards. Thus for Hegel not even the Incarnation is a special revelation as if by some extrinsic prerogative, as if not corresponding to any discovery made by humanity, he might as well say made by God in man, at that stage of its development as manifested in time on man's side. Yet for Hegel Christianity is the one absolute religion, demonstrating that man as man was always *capax Dei.* Thus de Lubac concurs that it is not a religion but "religion itself".[16]

It is because Christianity first reveals man as man, in the "son of man", that it has served as the historical basis for a universal democracy, for what are called the rights of man as man, as well as for universal freedom and love:

> Only in Christendom is man respected as man, in his infinitude and universality. What the slave is without, is the recognition that he is a person: and the principle of personality is universality.[17]

Here is Hegel's reply to the charge of belittling the individual, who for him is fulfilled and liberated in the universal, in respect for man as man.

The doctrine of the timeless Trinity arose, by way of interpretation of earlier written records, from consideration of the phenomenon or appearing of Christ and the subsequent sending of the Spirit as it was experienced, viz. as an inward witness as of another person. The two aspects, immanent and economic, are seen by Hegel as one. How could they not be? The otherness which is in God, and there negated, is the determinate otherness of finite humanity. This is what the Incarnation, as believed in, *shows* or declares. A man is (was) kept hidden in heaven, in the scriptural metaphor. This is what it means, what alone it can mean, to say that Jesus is God with us, showing

> that the human, the finite, frailty, weakness, the negative, is itself a divine moment, in God himself . . . in its character as otherness it does not hinder unity with God.[18]

[16] H. De Lubac, *The Drama of Atheistic Humanism*

[17] Hegel, *Encyclopaedia, Logic* 163. Maritain makes the same point in *Christianity and Democracy*. On this view the tension with secularism or atheism is as endemic, as belonging *within* Christendom, the West, as was the medieval conflict between Church and state. The United Nations is a European or Western creation.

[18] Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion,* SW (German text) Vol. 16, pp. 306-7. J.N. Findlay, Walter Kaufmann, and some other interpreters exhibit a Procrustean ignorance of this and the corresponding texts in *The Phenomenology of Mind* (tr. Baillie, pp. 750-785).

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This otherness though is to be transcended, as the eternal truth of resurrection shows. Trinitarian life and encounter with and overcoming of otherness are thus one and the same:

> *In* this truth the relation of man *to* this truth is also posited.[19]

This is the significance, the secret, of man's natural desire for the infinite, eternal and universal, as intrinsic to his intellectual nature. For upon these exchanges intellectuality itself is founded, the evolutionary emergence of the abstractive power assured as the infinite's internal finding of itself in the other. Otherness, that is, has to be intrinsic to it as infinite.

Thus one reason that the angels of scripture are amazed and puzzled by this is that it undercuts the very *raison d'être* of non-human finite spirits. Man, endlessly negating himself, comes here to see that such contradiction in self-transcendence is constitutive. Identity in difference is spirit, as in the Trinity. Thus one finds oneself at home in God, not a slave but free, meeting oneself in God. This, it is claimed, is freedom.

> So far as this subject which is inherently infinite is concerned, the fact of its being determined or destined to infinitude is its freedom, and just means that it is a free person, and thus is also related to this world, to reality as subjectivity which is at home with itself, reconciled within itself, and is absolutely fixed and infinite subjectivity.[20]

What dies on the Cross is everything particular, every distinction. What counts is man as man, and it is as such that men are united to one another in love. We have here a kind of rationale of the liberty, equality, fraternity, slogan coined in Hegel's lifetime, and which Maritain insists we cannot go back from without "great scandal to humanity".[21]

> This is the revolutionary element by means of which the world is given a totally new *Gestalt*.[22]

What this means is that the Incarnation is not to be understood as a paradoxical divine abdication but as the full revelation of God and man together. It is as if for Hegel this revelation has come about through the Christian event in history, true enough, but is now itself understandable independently in consequence.

> This incarnation of the divine being, its having essentially and directly the shape of self-consciousness, is the simple content of

[19] *Ibid.* P.324.
[20] *Ibid.* P.341.
[21] J. Maritain, *op. cit.* pp. 36-37.
[22] Hegel, *op. cit.* P.298.

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> Absolute Religion . . . In this form of religion the Divine Being is, *on that account*, revealed. Its being revealed obviously consists in this, that what it is, is known.[23]

The Biblical text (we cannot be sure of the author's identity) speaks, of course, of a divine emptying, *kenosis*, as part of showing that God's power has *made* things to be so, by a *taking* of the manhood into God as a later Church document has it (Athanasian Creed), rather than, more profoundly, that it reveals that things *are* so. Thus we get the appearance of a somehow contingent labour, resulting from man's sin in some versions, though the *felix culpa* can be differently interpreted, as the frailty (falsity for Hegel) of finitude, for example. This is in fact the difference between religion and philosophy, which means that those theologians who would thematize just this *kenosis*, of the "pre-existent" Christ, in their theologies *ipso facto* fail to offer a theology, remaining at the level of paradox and unilluminated mystery. Our vision of the world is not transformed. Thus the pre-existence notion builds upon an unreflected notion of eternity as temporal duration. For Hegel this *kenosis* of God is one with his speaking of his Word as *other*, already a negation, in which all that goes to make up this world is spoken, so as also to be reconciled again in the Spirit, as in the Trinity the "negation of the negation". The Trinity is in fact reconciliation *in itself* and this is the significance of the ecumenical movement of our times. This, anyhow, is the process of assigning meaning, which is the task of philosophy, to this paradox of a contingent *kenosis*.

Those theologians, again, who prefer to give a brute emphasis to this *kenosis* merely see man and God as opposed, just as the Molinists, or the earlier proponents of a liberty of indifference, saw human and divine freedom as in essential conflict, preparing the way for Sartre's dictum that if God exists then man does not and *vice versa*. But man exists *in* God.

****

The theologian Hans Küng, in his engagement with Hegel[24], holds a kind of middle position here. In the later *Existiert Gott?* he seems to understand and accept the Thomist solution regarding human freedom's relation to divine omnipotence. But in the book on the incarnation he simply assumes that the Incarnation is a change in God. Thus he had wanted to argue that change is not *forbidden* to God. He is right there of course, but God will know the change he chooses in advance, so to speak, so that in his simple incomposite being, which is one with his knowing, there will not be change. This will apply

[23] *Phenomenology of Mind* (Baillie), pp. 758-9 (my emphasis).
[24] Hans Küng, *Menschwerdung Gottes*, Herder, Freiburg 1970.

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a fortiori to any eternally foreknown change of himself, supposing that that were consistently thinkable. He is not in time and so does not enter time at some temporal point in his own life. But Küng is similarly doubtful about the necessary finiteness of compositeness, in the teeth of reason, so to say, the result it seems of a residual crass Biblicism still keeping this theologian from a genuine philosophy of religion.

Our immediate way of imagining time in relation to eternity, that is, is simply assumed here and Küng is pleased to exhibit K. Rahner's complicity in this approach.[25] Historicity is then suggested as an extra transcendental predicate. One can indeed say that our history has to be analogous to something like history in eternity (the Trinitarian reconciliations), though this, for Hegel, rather makes us rethink history as a kind of dialectical series not, as rational, essentially temporal.

Immutability does not mean that God is already fully actualized and therefore is impotent to do more. He actualizes himself in the eternal present in which he is forever uttering his Word, *actus purus* therefore. For a theologian to disregard this as profane assumption is not legitimate. God is not now living in a time *after* the Incarnation, whereas once he lived in a time before it. One says the same, after all, about the act of creation, viz. that it entails no change in God. All times are his, it is said in the liturgy, and a breviary hymn, more fancifully, describes Adam's face as fashioned to the likeness of Christ's, taking the latter as first, as having priority. The divine deeds and the divine intentions are not distinguishable. Nor does recognition of this render God incapable of distinguishing *our* past from *our* future. In this sense he knows what time it is now, as I type. Yet it could also be that we ourselves make our present *now* too absolute in relation to our past and future nows, as if it were univocal with the divine now. It at least includes all past nows, something the Nietzschean eternal return might help to bring out and which is certainly required by the Hegelian notion as the perfect state of consciousness.

Thus Hegel would be right to make the agony of Jesus in some way eternal (the "lamb slain before the foundations of the world") in the sense that also that moment is more primarily known by God in his eternal idea of it, if things get their reality from God's knowledge of them. Its negation though would also be eternal.

We have our being in God not as sharing in the eternal divine being, totally incommensurate with us. Change is but an extended analogy of the changeless as fully actual. Extension is the composite analogy of spirit. One can ask though if spatial extension, parts outside parts, is the uniquely necessary expression of potentiality or finitude as such.

[25] Küng, *op. cit., Excursus V*.

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Or is matter a contingently separate divine invention? As against this, we have had the tendency to accord matter to angels, because they are finite.

That the divine *kenosis* is purposed and done eternally would be compatible with seeing it as a response to sin, all being contained in the divine originating knowledge. Thus philosophy too might include it, getting behind talk of the "foolishness" of God. Man is the mystery. God's eternal involvement with man, with men and women and, surely, children is reflected in our minds and experience as historical, since infinite transcendence brooks no restriction. This is why philosophy must transmute our naive perception of the historical and not the other way round, imputing change to God.

Küng, anyhow, is not merely saying that all history centres upon Christ, but rather that this centre is the centre of divinity, that God speaks his eternal Word with a view to or as existing and suffering as man in one and the same act. Man is not some contingent afterthought, even though we are God's free creation. In fact one should not find God unfree regarding even his own existence, as if finding himself "given", and this is the point of the *causa sui* doctrine.

So insistence on divine immutability has nothing to do with "fear of change", though if even God were different in the past we would lose the past. There is no connection with rigidity, as with a changeless object in this world. Immutability follows from infinity, *actus purus*, totality of act in one inclusive present, i.e. one eternity. The present here is analogy for eternity, and not like our present, which hardly exists.

God knows my death eternally, so he can know his own death in Christ thus, causing the temporal reality to which he himself has no real relation. God knows things as changing without himself changing, and the Trinitarian relations and the act of salvation are the same, as indeed every divine idea is one with the divine essence. Christ had glory with the Father before the world was, as John has it, and obviously never lost or left it. This is the reality behind the no doubt legitimate, even inspired *kenosis*-discourse.

Time though is more an image of eternity than its negation, as one series, say the passage of minutes, mirrors another, such as the series of numbers (though number is rather the principle of series as such). For Scotus Eriugena creation, as a theophany, actually is God's (one) act of knowing himself. This is the thrust of saying that God does not know himself apart from his creation, which seen thus would not be a denial of God's inherent self-luminosity as a thinking of thinking. God's knowing here, correctly, is not separated from his acting and making, is as such causative. Aquinas will add that this is so only where God knows things (chooses to know?) as being, but we can question whether he knows things in any other way, as if

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placed before a shopwindow of possibles he did not himself create. He is aware of his omnipotence simply.

Küng goes on to consider recent attempts in theology, all sharing his own blind spot to just Hegel's strengths, though Küng's book purports to be an introduction to Hegel's thought as "prolegomena to a future Christology". He starts out from Paul Althaus, for whom acceptance of "God himself in the Son" simply entails that "of course the old version of God's immutability breaks down."[26] Karl Rahner merely confirms this, fideistically, despite some subtlety:

> The Word *became* flesh. And we are only true Christians when we have accepted this . . .

As if there no possibility of ambiguity on "became" here, such as not just Hegel but Aquinas is alive to. Rahner adds that

> It still remains true that the Logos *became* man, that the changing history of this human reality is *his* own history . . . .

This insistence in no way alters the classical position Rahner has just, with some irony, stated. He wants to make of the assertion of the lack of any real relation of God to the world a "dialectical statement", one not envisaged in the Hegelian dialectic though, perfected as it is in the absolute.

The impression given by Rahner's words is that God is constrained by infinite love to a for him highly unnatural action, of *kenosis*, just as his creation of a free creature is, except on the Augustinian-Thomist hypthesis, an unnatural abdication. For Hegel things are simpler; the Incarnation, the coming of Christianity as the absolute religion, are necessary and thus, ultimately, congruent with all else. The "kingdom of the Father" or Trinitarian life, and the "Kingdom of the Son", its phenomenal representation by the incarnation, death and resurrection of the God-man, are neither separable nor distinct. The same applies to the "Kingdom of the Spirit", which is this life as subjectively at home with itself in the community. As essence of the Trinity, so identity in difference, reconciliation, infinite love, the *magnalia Dei*, are supremely natural to him.

Von Balthasar too, also in this Jesuit post-Molinist tradition, takes *kenosis* literally as a kind of choice of God against himself. He speaks of a doctrine of immutability "such that the incarnation is regarded as exceptional" (by whom, though?). But for Hegel God was always human, man eternally known. Yet Balthasar even speaks of an "eternal aspect of the historically bloody sacrifice of the Cross".

Certainly Karl Barth too is right to point to the difference between Jesus and the false gods imagined by man but we see that these theologians have somehow all missed the mark. The tradition

[26] References to be found in Küng's text.

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of Aquinas is continued and better integrated with other knowledge in Hegel, as theology as a separate, sacred system yields place to philosophy of religion, something already done by these theologians but done less well. Their witness culminates, for Küng, in the noble figure of Bonhoeffer, in whom however the idea of an overcoming of an original conflict of importance between God and the world is most pronounced:

> What a strange harmony he found between the ejection of God from the world come of age, the autonomous secular world, and the revelation of God in Christ, in which God permits himself to be thrust out of the world and on to the Cross.[27]

Yes it was strange, as if the whole business of Christianity was to free men from a falsely servile religiosity merely, rather than essentially to perfect them, a process of course involving rejection of that:

> We cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*. And this is just what we do recognize – before God! God himself compels us to recognize it . . . God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him.[28]

There seems, with respect, deep misunderstanding here. There is nothing paradoxical about our relation to God, rightly understood. God is the absolute consciousness to which we are ever approximating, and we all find our unity there, *in Christo*, who had to be "buried in the grave of the Spirit" (Hegel), negating all finite value in favour of the infinite and universal, thus affirming man as man, more fundamentally than any representation of this as "bloody sacrifice".

In a word, we are witnessing a kind of side-show here, derivative, we claim, upon Molinist-type imaginings. The question raised by this controversy in the early seventeenth century was precisely that of the absoluteness of God, and this is the aspect under which Hegel treats of him, with more clarity as to the issues involved than was shown by the religious authority at the time of the *De auxiliis* dispute. If it was fear of offending the Jesuits which stayed the Pope's hand then (he needed their help against the nascent Protestant movement in Venice), then let us not repeat the error. Hegel, anyhow, continues the Dominican tradition, whether or not Dominican stalwarts, defenders of *praemotio physica* such as Norbert del Prado, have always or even often been aware of this. "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things and so to have entered into his glory?" asked the stranger on the road to Emmaus. It is the stranger Hegel's merit

[27] Küng, *op. cit.* p. 552.
[28] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, London 1971.

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to have laid bare the internal necessity implied here, not a mere fulfilling of arbitrarily inspired texts, but a necessity reaching into these texts themselves as bearing upon how God, man and the world are.

Dr Stephen Theron
Calle Santiago Guillén Moreno 35
San Fernando de Maspalomas
E 35100 Las Palmas, Spain
Email: pindarth@yahoo.se

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