

## Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was born on August 27, 1770 in Stuttgart. His father was an administrative official in the Württemberg ducal bureaucracy. Hegel attended the Protestant seminary (Stift) at Tübingen for 5 years beginning in 1788, most likely with plans to enter either the clergy or the civil service. On graduation from Tübingen, he worked as a private tutor in Bern (1793-1796) and Frankfurt (1797-1800). His father died in 1799, leaving Hegel an inheritance that allowed him to pursue what had in the meantime become his chief interest, philosophy. In 1801 he secured a teaching position at Jena and taught there until 1806. Friedrich W. J. Schelling (1775-1854) was teaching there as well and the two collaborated on the *Critical Journal of Philosophy* until Schelling departed Jena in 1803. In 1801 Hegel published a book on the difference between Fichte and Schelling. As a result of their collaboration on the *Critical Journal* and the 1801 book, Hegel was publicly regarded as a disciple of Schelling; however, in 1807 He published *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which marked an intellectual and personal break with Schelling and set Hegel on the path of becoming one of the premier philosophers of Germany. In late 1806 Hegel lost his position at Jena when the University was shut down in the wake of the Battle of Jena. From 1807 until 1808 he supported himself by editing a newspaper in Bamberg. From 1808 until 1816 he was rector of and professor at a gymnasium (i.e., school) in Nuremberg. While at Nuremberg he published the *Science of Logic* (volume one in 1811-1812, volume two in 1816). He married in 1811. From 1816 until 1818 he was a professor at Heidelberg. There he published, in 1817, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline*, his 'system'. From 1818 until his death, on November 14, 1831 (from cholera), he was a professor in the philosophical faculty in Berlin. During his Berlin years Hegel published only one new book, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (1821). However, he also prepared second and third editions of *Encyclopedia* (1827 and 1830) and at the time of his death was nearly finished with a second edition of the *Science of Logic*. After his death his lectures on the philosophy of history, history of philosophy, philosophy of religion and philosophy of art were published by his followers.

In order to grasp Hegel's relation to and importance for Protestant thought, it is necessary to see him in his intellectual and political context. Hegel's era was a time of heightened theological tension. In the previous generation, Christian theology had been shaken to its roots by the combination of historical criticism of the Bible and creeds and rationalism. In addition, the 1780s witnessed the so-called pantheism controversy, when Friedrich H. Jacobi published his account of conversations he had had with Gotthold E. Lessing. In this account he revealed Lessing's sympathies with Benedict Spinoza, who was commonly thought to have been a pantheist. Lessing's declaration seemed to be an endorsement of this pantheism. In the next decade, Johann G. Fichte was forced to resign his teaching position at Jena because of accusations that his philosophy supported atheism. In Hegel's day most theological responses to these issues took one of three forms. First, there was a resurgence of confessional orthodoxy, buttressed by the support of a militant and doctrinally conservative pietism and emphasizing a traditional conception of the supernatural. Leading representatives of this direction include Friedrich A. G. Tholuck and Ernst W. Hengstenberg. Second, there was an accommodation to the deistic critique of Christianity. This resulted in a rationalistic and reductionistic form of theology in which the supernatural was largely if not totally eliminated. Julius A. L. Wegscheider and Karl G. Bretschneider represented this option. Third, there was an attempt to rethink theology in the light of romantic tendencies. In practice this meant reinterpreting doctrines as verbal expressions of a non-cognitive intuition of God. Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher was the outstanding representative of this tendency. The theological tensions were exacerbated by related political issues. Hegel's adult life spanned a revolutionary era, from the

beginnings of the French revolution in 1789 to the European-wide uprisings in 1830. For the most part, these revolutionary movements aimed at introducing liberal-democratic reforms, which Hegel supported. Between these revolutions stood the reactionary Congress of Vienna (1815) which, upon the final defeat of Napoleon, restored to power the feudal aristocracies that had been dethroned as a result of Napoleonic reforms. The result of this political ferment in the Germany of Hegel's day was an increasingly conservative political climate that sought to return to the union of church and state that characterized the pre-revolutionary era. The effect was a renewed emphasis on orthodox theology and on the suppression of politically dangerous ideas. These trends meant trouble for Hegel in particular, because he supported and was supported by the liberal reformers of politics, church and education who increasingly found themselves out of step with the aristocratic power structure.

Although Hegel proposed a philosophical resolution to the theological problems of the day, he believed that his philosophy was nonetheless grounded in the central convictions of Lutheran theology. This conviction is illustrated by an event in 1826. In the course of a lecture, Hegel made some disparaging remarks about the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist. Called to account by the educational authorities, Hegel responded in a letter that justified his views on the basis of their faithfulness to Lutheran theology. Further, he declared his pride in having been baptized and raised a Lutheran and professed his intent to remain one. That Hegel's remarks were not merely defensive posturing in order avoid trouble can be seen from his affirmative remarks about Lutheranism and, more generally, Protestantism in his lectures on the philosophy of history and the history of philosophy.

However, in spite of his professed loyalty to and admiration of the Lutheran tradition, Hegel did not present his philosophy as simply a restatement of that tradition's theology. On the contrary, the relation between theology and Hegel's philosophy is complex and subtle. On the one hand he believed that Christian doctrine is based on revelation and contains the truth about God. The content of theology and philosophy is the same, that is, the truth. On the other hand, he held that there are grave problems with the usual exposition of these doctrines, which conveys the true content of religion in a highly unsuitable and misleading form. The key to grasping Hegel's view is to understand the distinction he made between conceptual thinking (*begreifen*) and imaginative thinking (*vorstellen*) in theology.

Imaginative thinking is the typical form in which theological doctrine presents its subject matter. Although it is a genuine form of thought, in it we think by means of images drawn from sensation. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity employs the familial relation between father and son. In this case, the eternal divine life is portrayed with images drawn from daily experience. However, these images are wholly inadequate to the task of knowing the truth. The only possibility for obtaining knowledge, he believed, was to give doctrine a scientific form attained through pure conceptual thinking, that is, through philosophy.

To understand why only conceptual thinking provides the adequate form for truth, it is necessary to come terms with Hegel's view of dialectics. Hegel was convinced that actuality is marked by movement that embraces unity and diversity. Organic life, for instance, is a process whereby (for example) a seed becomes a plant. There is a dialectical relation between the seed and the plant, for while they are in an important sense distinct there is also an important sense in which they are one. The oneness consists in the fact that seed and plant are two steps in a movement that encompasses them both. In our ordinary thinking we distinguish the seed from the plant as two things. That is,

we focus on the distinction between the two; however, we miss the underlying movement (seed-to-plant) that is their unity. However, if we think dialectically (i.e., conceptually), then we grasp the unity as well as the distinctions (seed, plant as well as the movement of seed-to-plant). Conceptual thinking is therefore itself a dialectical movement. In conceptual thinking we think according to the pattern of actuality. In it, the form of our thinking is identical with the form of actual being. In ordinary understanding and imaginative thinking, however, the form of our thinking does not match the form of actuality and therefore is inadequate to the truth.

What is true of organic life is true of all actualities, including God. (Hegel typically wrote of absolute spirit and not God. God is not identical to absolute spirit in Hegel's philosophy; however, for the sake of exposition, 'God' will be used.) The eternal divine life is a dialectical movement. The doctrine of the Trinity, with its affirmation of relations of origin among Father, Son, and Spirit, is a theological statement of that dialectical movement. Accordingly, the doctrine of the Trinity possesses the truth about God. Unfortunately, theologians employ imaginative thinking and not conceptual thinking when they expound the doctrine. Just as, in the case of seed and plant, ordinary understanding puts the emphasis on distinctions and misses the movement that is the unity, so in the case of the Trinity theologians normally emphasize the distinctions of the Trinitarian persons (in so far as they regard them as individually existent personal beings) and miss the dialectical and unifying movement that encompasses the persons. So, while the doctrine of the Trinity contains the truth about God, its theological exposition has always been wholly inadequate. An adequate form for this doctrine requires conceptual thinking. Only this form of thinking is identical with the dialectical character of the divine life and can be said to state the truth in a scientific form.

Hegel's views about conceptual thinking help explain his irritation with the theological tendencies of his day. Although sympathetic with the rational approach of the Enlightenment, Hegel scorned the proclivity of rationalistic theologians to reject doctrines such as the Trinity because of their supposedly irrational character. In doing so, Hegel charged, they were emptying religion of all content and thus forsaking the truth. They could do so only because the reasoning they employed was not conceptual thinking but instead merely ordinary understanding. Hegel was likewise dismayed by Friedrich Schleiermacher (who lectured in the theological faculty at Berlin and with whom Hegel carried on a running public controversy) and the pietistic theologians. By emphasizing feeling and intuition and making them the source of theology, they too had emptied religion of content. In addition, they gave the cause of science a bad name by deprecating human reason. Not surprisingly, Hegel believed that he was rescuing the truth of religion from the depredations of contemporary theologians. As he once stated, not only was philosophy in his day orthodox--only philosophy (i.e., his philosophy) was orthodox.

Hegel's estimate of his own orthodoxy was not universally shared. In particular, his tenure in Berlin was marked by charges of pantheism and atheism. The basis of these charges was Hegel's understanding of God's relation to the universe. Hegel understood this relation dialectically. Just as seed and plant are best thought of, not as distinct things, but instead as two aspects of a larger movement, so God and the universe are not distinct entities but are dialectically related. The universe is, in some sense, an aspect of the divine life. God attains actuality through the world-process. Although Hegel was clear that God is not simply identical with the world, the qualified and dialectical identity he affirmed was still too much for conservative theologians.

However, not all theologians were opposed to Hegel. There were two influential theologians in particular who converted to Hegel's views and formed an important part of the Hegelian school of

the 1820s and 1830s. They were Philipp Marheineke (1780-1846, professor in Berlin) and Carl Daub (1765-1836, professor in Heidelberg). It was Marheineke who, after Hegel's death, produced the first edition of Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of religion in an attempt to fix Hegel's meaning and settle differences in interpretation. Unfortunately, in the judgment of his peers Marheineke's editorial procedures were deficient; however, a revised edition by Bruno Bauer also did not settle the disputes. Daub, Marheineke and, initially, Bauer emphasized the side of Hegel's philosophy that affirmed the identity of content between theology and philosophy. In other words, they were, within the confines of Hegel's school, conservative. A radical application of Hegel's thought to theology emerged after Hegel's death when David F. Strauss (1808-1874), Ludwig Feuerbach, (1804-1872) and others began emphasizing the inadequacy of theology's imaginative thinking. It was the atheistic conclusions of this group that induced the Prussian government to call Schelling to Berlin in 1841 in order to combat the pernicious effects of Hegel's philosophy. At length it was not Schelling's lectures that diminished the influence of Hegel's philosophy but instead shifting philosophical tendencies as in the next generation Germany experienced the rise of scientific materialism and a revival of interest in Kant's philosophy. Nonetheless, vestiges of Hegel's philosophy can be seen in such contemporary Protestant theologians as Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg.

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